
Quality assurance in higher education: mission (im)possible

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Earlier this year, I was invited, as Chair of the Working Group on Quality Assurance, to represent SCONUL at the second FOTIM (Foundation of Tertiary Institutions of the Northern Metropolis) International Quality Assurance Conference held in Pretoria, South Africa in June 2006. This second conference, titled *Quality assurance in higher education: mission (im)possible*, was being arranged in partnership with CHELSA (Committee for Higher Education Librarians of South Africa), SCONUL's equivalent body in South Africa. A wonderful opportunity and not one I was likely to turn down, though the event did clash with SCONUL's own conference in Newcastle upon Tyne!

The conference was planned to focus on two themes in parallel:

- quality assurance in higher education with sub themes of managing quality assurance, national reviews, surveys, Institutional Audits, Programme Reviews, and community engagement;
- quality assurance and quality management in higher education libraries.

I was invited to present a keynote paper to the whole conference (a challenging prospect!), as well as lead a workshop for the library strand.

A key event in South African higher education was the Higher Education Act of 1997, which aimed to regulate higher education and which led to the establishment of a Council on Higher Education and provision for the establishment,

governance and funding of public higher education institutions, with related quality assurance mechanisms. HEQC (Higher Education Quality Committee), a sub committee of the Council on Higher Education, was set up with a mandate to promote quality assurance, audit quality assurance mechanisms and accredit programmes of higher education. These were significant changes for South African higher education institutions, which had not been subject to the same kind of funding and quality assurance processes we have grown used to over a prolonged period in the UK. Allied to the whole agenda of transformation in South Africa, this has represented a very significant change agenda for South African universities and their library services.

The South African university sector is much smaller than the UK and, following some recent mergers of institutions, there are only 16 universities and 6 universities of technology. CHELSA is therefore also a much smaller body than SCOUNL with currently only volunteer input.

The conference was attended by approximately 170 delegates, including approximately 60 library staff, mostly from South Africa, but with representation from other African countries and a small number of international delegates. With new Institutional Audit processes having only been recently introduced (very similar to those in England), the conference organisers from FOTIM and CHELSA were keen to get perspectives from other countries.

In my keynote paper, *Engaging with key stakeholders: the UK experience of quality assurance of learning resources*, I provided an overview of SCOUNL's past and current activities in this important area. Since 1993, SCOUNL has worked closely with its ICT partner body UCISA (Universities and Colleges Information Systems Association) to respond to the need for engagement with quality assurance bodies in the UK, particularly the QAA (Quality Assurance Agency), and to provide practical help and advice to SCOUNL and UCISA members. I described the wide ranging and successful activities of the SCOUNL Working Group on Quality Assurance, which has aimed to engage with these key stakeholders. This has included in depth liaison with the QAA and other bodies to ensure that there is appropriate emphasis on quality processes in services as well as resources and that auditors and reviewers are appropriately trained so that they can fully understand the nature and role of library and ICT services.

I highlighted the benefits that have resulted from the production of aide-memoires for auditors and reviewers, as well as guidelines for learning resources and academic staff, which have been agreed or endorsed by the QAA or its predecessors. Documents produced by the Working Group have included:

- Aide-memoire for assessors when evaluating library and computing services (for Teaching Quality Assessment, produced in 1996)
- Aide memoire for reviewers evaluating learning resources (for Academic Review, produced in 2003)
- Guidelines for QAA Institutional Audit in England (produced in 2004).

A more recent development has been the collection of documentation to help SCOUNL members in their preparation for quality assurance events. These documents, held in a password protected area on the Working Group's website, have included narrative descriptions of members' experiences of events and examples of documents produced by institutions for Institutional Audit and Collaborative Audit in England, and Institutional Review in Scotland and Wales.

In the workshop I led later that day, attended mostly by library staff, I helped the delegates develop the content for some initial guidelines for librarians to use with their own staff and with academic staff when preparing for Institutional Audit. CHELSA will develop this work for use across the sector.

The library strand of the conference was well attended and papers concentrated on a number of topic areas:

- the role of CHELSA in the quality assurance of higher education libraries in South Africa
- practical experience of quality management frameworks used in libraries;
- the role of the library in the preparation for institutional audit and compiling the library section in the institutional portfolio
- practical experience with the application of LibQUAL in libraries.

There was a particular emphasis on the use of LibQUAL in South African university libraries and, given the relatively small size of the sector, some interest in using the approach in all universities to help with benchmarking.

My attendance at the conference also highlighted some further potential areas for SCONUL-CHELSEA collaboration, particularly for the Quality Assurance and Performance Improvement Working Groups in the areas of providing guidelines for institutions preparing for quality assurance visits and the application of LibQUAL.

I would like to record my thanks to CHELSEA, and particularly Joyce Gozo, for their hospitality and for funding my attendance at the conference including travel. It was a very worthwhile experience and has pointed the way for some further SCONUL-CHELSEA collaboration. I even began to accept the very early start to the conference day in South Africa, with registration beginning at 7.30 am!