
How do we compare? The experience of benchmarking a smaller university college library in the UK higher education sector



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BACKGROUND

In 2004 the library and information service at the Royal Agricultural College (RAC) in Cirencester, England, underwent a benchmarking exercise and evaluative review, the effects of which are being felt in a positive way even now.

Initially the driver for the review came not from library staff but from senior management at the college, who were seeking reassurance that investment in the library and information service was appropriate and effective. Both the college and its library and information service were undergoing considerable change, and it seemed an apposite time to review the service as a whole before making some significant decisions regarding its future. In fact, the library was one of the very first departments within the college to be 'audited' in

this way, though a programme of similar audits has subsequently been rolled out to other departments.

One of the main drivers for the review was a growing awareness within the college of the need to compare itself with other higher education institutions, and that others outside the college would, in turn, be scrutinising us. This was something relatively new and therefore challenging. Since its foundation in 1845 the college had operated on an independent basis, largely free from government control. However, on becoming part of the public sector of UK higher education in receipt of Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funding in 2001, it became much more publicly accountable and subject to scrutiny. At around the same time the library and information service became a member of SCONUL and began completing the annual statistical return for SCONUL's annual library statistics-gathering exercise. In addition, for the first time ever we had a college principal who was aware of the existence of the SCONUL statistics and who was able to use them to challenge certain aspects of the library service, including staffing and resourcing.

So it can be seen that it was a culture change within the college as a whole that led to a penetrating look at the library and information service as it then existed, and while at first there may have been some doubt about the value of the exercise on the part of library staff – recruiting to fill a professional librarian vacancy seemed much more of a priority – they co-operated fully and the outcome has undoubtedly been positive.

CONTEXT

Before proceeding to look at the benchmarking exercise and evaluative review itself, and its effects on the RAC library and information service, it will be helpful just to provide a little bit of background to the Royal Agricultural College, which is one of only two HEFCE-funded colleges that specialise in agriculture and the land-based industries.

The Royal Agricultural College, founded as a seat of learning in 1845, was the first agricultural college in the English-speaking world. This was a time which saw the stirrings of the application of science to agriculture and the college made a considerable impact on farming practice and agricultural education, staffed from its first days with innovators and pioneers in agricultural sci-

ence. Sometimes referred to as the 'Oxbridge of the countryside', the RAC was subsequently the model for a number of other agricultural colleges worldwide.

The first modern degree course, started in 1985 in co-operation with Reading University, was a BSc (Hons) degree in rural land management. The college now offers undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in disciplines such as business and management, agribusiness, equine management, land and property management and international rural development, with an extensive choice of research areas at masters and doctorate levels. Graduate employability is very high, thanks in part to the college's strong links with industry in the UK and abroad. It attracts students from as far afield as China, Malaysia, India, Zimbabwe, Canada, the USA and South America. The college has also admitted students from Greece and Cyprus, both recently and in the past. Although female students were only admitted as recently as 1979 they now make up around half of the student population. Student numbers continue to grow slowly but steadily, and are anticipated to increase to 1,000 fte (full-time equivalents) by 2015 (they are currently around 900 fte and were 600 fte at the time the review was conducted).

THE REVIEW (METHODOLOGY)

The review was led by Dr J Eric Davies, who was director of LISU (the library and information statistics unit, based at Loughborough University) from 1999 to 2007 and who is currently a consulting senior research fellow. Besides collecting, analysing and interpreting and publishing statistical information for and about the library domain in the UK, LISU also operates a consultancy service and undertakes specific research projects for a wide variety of commissioning bodies (see <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/lis/lisu/>). It was thus ideally placed to provide the type of information and analysis that the college was seeking.

Meetings initially took place between Dr Davies and the Principal, the Vice Principal (who line-manages the Librarian), the human resource manager and the head of library services to decide on the scope and anticipated timescale of the review. Sadly, fairly early on in the course of the review the Librarian was diagnosed with a life-threatening illness and her role in the process was taken on by the Deputy Librarian, who was subsequently made acting Librarian and, later, head of library services.

It was agreed that the review should be wide-ranging, not only looking at 'comparative benchmarking data but also exploring service policy and strategy, resource utilisation, processes and procedures as well as taking account of user perspectives'.¹

The raw benchmarking data was readily accessible to Dr Davies by means of the LISU / SCONUL statistics, and much other information about the service was submitted to Dr Davies by e-mail attachment. He also spoke directly with library staff and submitted a questionnaire to academic staff via e-mail. The initial concerns of library staff that their role in the data-gathering might be onerous therefore proved unfounded.

THE FINDINGS

The review found that the library service was doing well in some respects, namely:

- The service was judged to be good by many users.
- Staff were committed to providing a good service.
- Operational aspects of the service (methods and processes) were sound.
- Information sources appeared to be adequate, with evidence of investment in e-resources.
- Serials provision was good.²

However, there were also aspects of the service that gave rise to some concern. These were:

- staffing provision, especially at senior level
- ability to meet the demand for longer opening hours
- ability to afford the cost of the service (economies of scale)
- overly ambitious aspirations of the service (i.e. was the desired level of provision appropriate in the light of the financial resources available?).³

The LISU review also offered some recommendations regarding the RAC's library and information service. There were thirteen recommendations in total, and of these a number had implications for the way the library was to be managed. The most significant were those that suggested a different approach to library management from that adopted hitherto by senior RAC library staff. These were:

- The library should explore ways of gathering performance evidence commensurate with the resources available to do so.
- The library should explore systematic ways of acquiring users' views as economically as possible.
- The library should gather evidence systematically regarding the demand for, and usage of, the service during 'off peak' hours to establish the optimal level to be provided.
- The library should review its spending on information sources and materials in general and in particular it should assess the demand for current serials systematically and routinely.
- The library should undertake a thorough review of the performance evidence it needs in order to plan and deliver services, with a view to identifying a limited range of data that it can gather and use as economically as possible.
- The RAC should support the library in its endeavour to focus on service priorities through an evidence-based approach by recognising that appropriate resources need to be directed to this endeavour.⁴

There is a clear thread or theme running through these recommendations, namely the desirability of adopting an evidence-based approach to library management.

THE EFFECTS ON THE SERVICE (ACTION PLAN)

The results of the review were a catalyst for a number of changes in the RAC's library service, notably through the production and implementation of a library services action plan as drawn up by the then acting Librarian. The aim of the plan was to list each of the LISU review's thirteen recommendations, then to examine how each of these might be achieved and give a realistic timetable for their achievement. In other words, some simple SMART (specific, manageable, achievable, realistic, time-limited) goals were set. The action plan was then circulated to and approved by senior management and the LISC (learning and information services committee, a sub-committee that reports to the academic board).

Some of the recommendations were minor and it was possible to implement them almost immediately. One example was the reduction in the number of hours being worked as 'overtime' during core opening hours by part-time staff. In 2005 all overtime hours worked during core opening hours ceased, either through natural cessation or by negotiation between the then acting

Librarian and the library staff concerned, or by the revision of contracts. There were also several recommendations that were all linked to thorny staffing issues that had remained unresolved for some months, and by December 2005 these had also been largely resolved through two new appointments.

Of the remaining recommendations a clear theme seemed to emerge that was very much to do with an evidence-based approach, either to specific aspects of the service or (more significantly) to the fundamental way in which the library was managed.

In terms of specific aspects of the service the review identified:

- opening hours outside the core hours of 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday, and
- expenditure on information sources and material (with particular emphasis on serials)

as areas where a more evidence-based approach was needed.

Regarding the first, a systematic recording of gate readings and head counts began on 9 January 2006 and subsequently a full year's worth of data was acquired. This allowed us to identify meaningful patterns of use and to gauge genuine demand and the optimum level of service desired. The result of the exercise was to extend opening hours on Wednesday evenings and at weekends during term-time, and to keep the library open at lunchtimes during vacations (the practice had previously been to close for one hour at noon).

With regard to expenditure on information resources (and journals in particular), the benchmarking data had been quite clear: our expenditure on serials provision appeared to be quite high when judged against the generality of higher education and (in some cases) other small specialist institutions, though the review also recognised that 'none of the advantages and economies of scale that accrue to larger institutions are apparent'.⁵ So post-review we immediately began to record the details of journal titles being borrowed, which proved helpful in informing decisions regarding subscription renewals. An assistant librarian was appointed in December 2005 with a clear responsibility for serials management. She began work at once on the RAC's serials collection, and one outcome of her review was a clear and transparent collection management policy for serials (both print and e-journals) that was, after

consultation with academic colleagues, approved by LISC and the academic board as a way of ensuring, for the foreseeable future, a balanced collection that would be cost-effective, would take account of space constraints and would meet the needs of our varied users. Implementation of the policy commenced in March 2006.

The primary intention of the serials review was not in fact to reduce expenditure but to manage and organise the collection effectively and efficiently, though as a by-product of the exercise some subscriptions were cancelled. This was due largely to the changed nature of the academic programmes being offered at the college, which had not been reflected in our collection. No subscriptions were cancelled without prior consultation with academic staff.

The more fundamental change in mindset regarding library management practice has not been quite so easy to implement (for reasons explained below). However, good progress has been made in adopting a more evidence-based approach to library management, and any obstacles have not been a result of lack of will among library staff. The library services action plan states clearly from the outset that 'The Library will adopt a more evidence based approach to management.'⁶

Subsequently the plan identifies a number of ways in which this will be achieved, including:

- setting a realistic series of service-level agreements to be revised annually
- producing an annual report that will provide a summary analysis of much of the qualitative and quantitative data that the library has collected in the course of a year
- undertaking brief but systematic surveys of users on an annual basis.

Of these three, only the last has so far been implemented, though later than we had hoped. The original intention was for one or two core members of library staff to acquire, through external training, the skills and knowledge needed to create and administer an annual user-satisfaction survey (taking into account limited staff and budgetary resources). However, the two-day course that was scheduled to take place in March 2007 was cancelled. Fortunately, in the following academic year the library was awarded some additional funding, and part of this was used to purchase 'e-inform', supplied by Priority Research (see <http://priority-research.com/einform/>), an online tool which enables users to run their own

surveys. E-inform (also known as Libra) is one of the most popular platforms for conducting surveys within higher education⁷ and should produce higher response rates and be easier to administer than the previously intended in-house survey.

We also recognise that we should be more systematically capturing anecdotal evidence of how the library has contributed to the student learning experience and using that evidence, knowing that senior managers are likely to pay more attention to 'real stories' than to data analysis. This is a first step towards not just answering the question 'How good is this library?' but also attempting to answer what Peter Brophy refers to as 'the great unknown of library services', namely 'How much good does this library do?' – in other words measuring or capturing impact.⁸ As Crawford notes, value and impact measures 'are the most valuable but also the most difficult to calculate',⁹ which is perhaps why libraries have until relatively recently placed the emphasis on inputs, outputs and efficiency.

The other two goals that relate directly to a more performance-based approach, as laid out in the action plan, have still to be implemented, having (regrettably) fallen by the wayside under numerous other pressures and demands on time and resources. In particular the RAC has been greatly affected by staff changes and staff reductions (especially at senior level) within recent years, including an extended period of uncertainty about the leadership of the library during the prolonged illness of the then head of library services. Also an inordinate amount of time has been taken up with physically organising the collections. With no real collection-management policy in place prior to 2006, the approach had basically been to 'collect anything and everything, in multiple copies, and keep it for ever – preferably uncatalogued and hidden away in inaccessible places!' This was clearly not a sustainable approach in terms of space, or staff workload, or ease of access or usefulness to academic staff and students. So it has been essential to organise, manage and rationalise our collections and make them visible in our library catalogue – and it is only now that we feel we are almost there and can therefore devote an equal amount of energy to taking the service forward in more strategic ways, such as fully implementing a more evidence-based approach. We have begun the process, but progress has been slower than we would have wished.

This academic year should, nevertheless, see the production of both a published set of service-level agreements and an annual report to tie in with our submission of statistics for the annual statistical return to SCONUL.

THE BENEFITS OF THE REVIEW

So what were the benefits of the review? In brief, it was a catalyst for change. Some changes were simple to implement and were carried out relatively quickly. Others are ongoing, but there is no doubt that nothing has been ignored or 'swept under the carpet'. The review in some cases stated things that we already knew, at least subliminally, but as is so often the case an extra push is necessary for something to be done about it systematically. Dr Davies's many years of experience at various levels within the library and information domains clearly enabled him to come in and quickly identify both the strengths and the weaknesses of the service as it existed in 2004 and to map out an achievable path for change. What we have now is a service that is perhaps more aligned with and more sympathetic to the strategy of its parent institution, that recognises evaluation to be a continuous process and that willingly embraces a more evidence-based approach to library management.

It was perhaps this broader qualitative approach that was most useful to us at the time. Getting bogged down in the fine detail of a narrower, quantitative methodology that focused exclusively on benchmarking would not, perhaps, have achieved the same result. So this article supports the idea, in the end, of the benefits of inviting in a consultant or similar who has a wealth of experience in the relevant domain to take a fresh and disinterested look at the organisation. Certainly at the time concerned library staff at all levels felt they were unable to move beyond 'fire-fighting' to problem-solving and the review helped to ease us out of this undesirable state of affairs.

Nevertheless, the quantitative benchmarking aspect did prompt the RAC library to consider the SCONUL statistics afresh and to think about how we might benefit by knowing better how to interpret and manipulate the data collected. Staff have subsequently attended a CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) course on comparing and contrasting aspects of their service against published national information and a SCONUL statistics training day jointly run by LISU and SCONUL.

One simple example of how benchmarking proved revealing was a breakdown of total expenditure on information provision for the year 2001–2002 (the most recent year for which full statistics were available at the time of the review). From this breakdown it was obvious that, compared to the comparator group and HE college averages, the college was spending a smaller proportion of its information provision expenditure on books and more on serials. Subsequently we made successful bids for an increased books budget and ensured that it was spent by the end of the year, which was obviously our preferred way of increasing the proportion of expenditure on books, rather than significantly reducing serials subscriptions! We have also 'instantly' acquired an extra 40,000 titles courtesy of the purchase of an e-books package. The current picture is complicated by a concomitantly increased provision of full-text e-journals, though funding for the latter has come largely from a source outside the normal library budget.

It would certainly be an interesting exercise to review the library service again in the future to see where we are now in comparison with where we were in 2004. The LISU review itself states:

*'Clearly the RAC Library's future is tied to the future prosperity of the College. It may be appropriate to review service ambitions and strategies if, and when, student numbers expand and institutional research income builds up.'*¹⁰

Student numbers are indeed increasing steadily and the college is on a firmer financial footing, so that time may not be very far off.

THE DRAWBACKS OF THE REVIEW

The disadvantage of setting unrealistic timescales in our action plan in some instances has already been mentioned, though at the time they were felt to be achievable. Now we are a bit wiser and would, to quote Richard Templar, 'under promise and over deliver' in similar circumstances.¹¹

From a strictly benchmarking point of view the review provided limited useful data. This is acknowledged by Dr Davies in the LISU review itself:

*'Much of the success of the study depended upon the availability of appropriate and adequate data and to some extent the outcomes have been limited to what can readily be discovered about the service.'*¹²

This was largely due to lack of evidence systematically collected by the RAC library and to its relatively new membership of SCONUL (and therefore not many years' worth of data from which to identify trends). Another aspect that made comparison tricky was the uniqueness of the RAC, which made it difficult to identify exact comparators and therefore to draw any definite conclusions from the raw data. Again, the review acknowledges this:

*'Selection of suitable benchmarking comparators for a statistical exercise of this nature is fraught with difficulty for such a specialist institution. The comparators selected have been chosen largely on the basis of their size and specialist nature. There are areas of provision where they may not be the most appropriate match for the RAC.'*¹³

There was also a poor response to the small-scale survey of academic staff conducted by e-mail. Only twelve responses were received (around a 25 per cent response rate) – ten from members of faculty and two from PhD students – and as such they clearly did not provide sufficient data on which to base any meaningful recommendations, though of course the low response may have been significant in itself ...

Similarly the poor response rate from 'College student perception of course and college' (SPOCC) surveys that were made available to Dr Davies did not allow for any overall trend analysis of library provision, but merely stated that an overall picture emerged of general satisfaction with the library. We have, as indicated below, taken on board the suggestion made in the review that 'mechanisms to gather more detailed information from users need to be established ... Systematic but brief surveys of users may be usefully undertaken.'¹⁴

WHERE WE ARE NOW, AND LOOKING AHEAD

In summary, then, we have come a long way since 2004 – though not as far as we would have liked in an ideal world. We now appreciate the value of benchmarking data, and understand that it is prudent to be able to use this data to support a case for enhancing aspects of the service, particularly where there are budgetary implications that need to be defended to senior managers. We continue to contribute to the annual SCONUL survey and are conscientious about supplying accurate data. (One small example of an error that we discovered when completing our statistical return was that when counting book stock we had been counting

titles, rather than copies, which of course yielded a lower and inaccurate figure.) We intend to re-purpose some of this data in an annual report.

In some respects, as noted above, the economic circumstances prevailing within the college that in part gave rise to the review have eased, and this has removed some of the constraints on budgets. Nevertheless, the fundamental questions raised by the review regarding the optimum level of service that is (a) desired and (b) affordable remain valid and at the forefront of our minds when undertaking the planning of resource provision.

We are looking forward to running our first online user survey in the spring term of 2010 and analysing the results, and to producing our first annual report for many years. Thereafter there is still much to do but there will now always be an awareness of the need for an evidence-based mindset. Like Socrates, we feel that we have at least moved beyond 'not knowing' to knowing something about the not-knowing! But, as Abbott acknowledges, there are barriers to overcome when employing evidence-based practice even when the work environment is conducive:

*'Librarians need to develop the skills and a culture to effectively carry out evidence based practice. These include the skills to articulate questions, undertake research, appraise research findings and implement a course of action. Above all it requires librarians to develop a culture of questioning and reflecting on what we do.'*¹⁵

The trick, of course, is not to lose sight of this when faced with the daily pressures and challenges of the job. The LISU review recognised that this is especially difficult in a small organisation like the RAC, 'where there is, rightly, concentration on meeting the immediate needs of users, and effort which is directed towards performance evaluation may appear a distraction'.¹⁶ It may be worth mentioning at this point that the RAC library has only 4.7 fte library staff.

THE QUALITY ASSURANCE ASPECT

*'Quality assurance offers exciting opportunities ... Benchmarking in some shape or form is with us to stay. It has become embedded in institutional processes, informing academic development and business planning. The result ... justifies the effort if it leads to a service that is responsive to need, and is understood and supported by faculty and the institution.'*¹⁷

Subsequent to the review in 2004 the RAC library has been involved in institutional quality assurance processes. The first of these was an audit of the programmes run by the school of rural economy and land management (RELM). The LISU review document and an annotated library services action plan were both made available to the auditors, and the head of library services subsequently met with them and was able to clarify aspects of the service.

Similarly a team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the Royal Agricultural College in February 2007 to carry out an institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the college offers. The review and annotated action plan were submitted as before and the head of library services met with the auditing team. In the report that was finally published, the team commented favourably on the LISU review and the library's role in quality enhancement:

*'71 ... the College has been taking resource developments forward. The College is aware of the increasing demands upon library provision, and commissioned an external study of its library service. The resultant report was generally positive, and highlighted areas for development which have been earmarked for action by the College. 72 The audit team heard and read that students appreciated the quality of the library and information services, and it was noted that the library had already responded to the few issues that students had highlighted in their written submission. The library is planning to take a regular satisfaction survey of its users.'*¹⁸

The library's involvement in the institutional quality assurance processes has been important and has certainly raised the profile of the library within the organisation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, then, as a result of the review the RAC library has experienced the following benefits:

- more efficient and effective processes
- improved responsiveness to users' needs
- improved levels of management support
- accelerated change management
- better strategic direction, more 'in tune' with the parent institution's strategy
- better proof of value.

We cannot pretend that everything is perfect or that there is not still much to be done, but as a catalyst

for positive change the combination of a benchmarking process and a quality review as described in this article has much to recommend it.

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