Self and peer assessment as a method of improving quality

The National University of Ireland (NUI) Maynooth library experience

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Introduction

While quality has always been a concern of universities, the formalisation of Irish university quality assurance procedures was implemented under the 1997 Irish Universities Act. The Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) was established in 2002 to oversee the process and to provide relevant supports.

The Irish system is now regarded as an exemplary model, as evidenced by the 2005 European review:

> This systematic organization and promotion of quality assurance at the initiative of the universities themselves is, in the opinion of the EUA teams, unparalleled in any other country in Europe, or indeed in the United States and Canada. The system would appear to strike the right tone and combination of public interest, accountability and university autonomy. It encourages a greater focus on quality and improvement than some systems worldwide, while at the same time being less intrusive than some other systems in Europe. (European Universities Association Review of Quality Assurance in Irish Universities, p. 14)

While there are broad similarities between the quality review processes in different Irish universities, each university customises its own procedures, taking into account local considerations and culture. There are three main elements to

the quality review process: the preparation of an internal self-assessment report, a peer review visit and report and the development and implementation of a quality improvement plan that is aligned with the University Strategic Plan. Following some background information about the Irish university system, each of these is explored in turn.

The Irish context

There are seven universities in the Republic of Ireland. There are also fourteen institutes of technology focusing on applied research and a number of other higher and further education institutions. Student numbers are relatively small by international standards. The Irish Higher Education Authority (HEA) Statistics for 2010–11 give total student numbers (part- and full-time) for the universities and institutes of technology as 196,187 (HEA, 2012). Currently there are 8400 students attending the National University of Ireland Maynooth. There is a modern library (John Paul II), which underwent a major extension in 2012, and the Russell Library, which houses the pre-1850 collection. In addition to the two libraries on the NUI Maynooth Campus, the library also supports, in collaboration with the Office of Public Works (OPW), an archive relating to historic houses, at the nearby Palladian mansion Castletown House, and a small library at the NUI outreach campus in the city of Kilkenny, about 100 miles from Maynooth.

Self-assessment report

In late 2009 the library was advised by the Quality Promotion Office (QPO) that a quality review (QR) was due during 2010–11. Following consultation with the library management, it was agreed that November 2010 would be the optimal month for this as construction of the new library building was expected to start in late 2010 / early 2011.

In early May 2010 the QPO requested the names of six potential reviewers for consideration for appointment by the University President. The expectation was that at least one reviewer would come from a library outside Ireland. It was important to consider the profile of our reviewers in the context of our buildings, services and collections. For example, at least one reviewer needed to have an in-depth knowledge of issues relating to pre-1850 collections, including housing, organisation, preservation and promotion; and both needed an in-depth understanding of the needs of a modern university library and a vision of a library service that was relevant to the Irish context. Following

consultation with library managers a shortlist was prepared. In late May 2010 the library was given the names of the external reviewers and the date of the peer review visit. The external reviewers were Jon Purcell – one of the authors of this paper – the Director of Library Services at Durham University; and Debby Shorley, Director of Library Services at Imperial College London. In addition to the external reviewers, two internal reviewers were selected from a panel within the university. In this case the internal reviewers were the Dean of Arts, Celtic Studies and Philosophy and the Vice-President (Research).

Confirmation of the date for the peer review visit dictated the timeframe of the preparatory process. The QR guidelines included a timeframe for the preparation and submission of the Self-Assessment Report (SAR) to the internal Quality Promotion Sub Committee (QPSC) and subsequently to the peer reviewers in advance of the peer review visit. This meant that the SAR was due to be submitted to the QPO by 6 October 2010, in preparation for a November visit. However, preparations began much earlier. In 2010 the library ran the LibQUAL survey in late March / early April. This proved a useful exercise in gathering feedback and also helped to raise awareness amongst library staff of the forthcoming QR. Library preparations for the QR, and particularly for the SAR, began in earnest once the submission date was confirmed. The library management agreed that the Deputy Librarian – the other of the two authors of this paper – would project manage the process and draft the SAR. Having one person draft the document helped with consistency, both in terms of content and writing style.

It was vitally important to engage all staff in the process and for them to view the QR as a positive process, rather than as a type of examination. They were alerted by email, and a presentation was made at a subsequent all-staff meeting which covered the SAR and the QR process in general. The project structures were also explained. Staff were asked for their suggestions for items and issues for inclusion in the SAR.

The SAR was aligned to the University Strategic Plan and was divided into three main sections representing the key objectives of the University Strategic Plan. These sections were:

- support for learning and teaching
- support for research and knowledge creation and dissemination

- support for social, political and economic development, collaborations and other external activities

The library, in consultation with the Director of the QPO, decided to highlight other areas where we in the library felt we had a very strong track record. We included sections dealing with exhibitions and advocacy, staff development and library organisation and leadership. A requirement of the process was the development of a quality improvement plan, which was included in the SAR, as were a number of appendixes. The document, excluding appendixes, came to 25,000 words.

The SAR was drafted by the Deputy Librarian during the summer months. Qualitative data were obtained from the library annual report, the LibQUAL survey, schedules of library training programmes and a range of statistics gathered on a routine basis. Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered from the library Strategic Plan and a range of other documents. The time period covered by the review was the previous three years.

Parallel to the preparation of the SAR a number of other processes were ongoing. All staff were invited to submit suggestions for the quality improvement plan (which formed a section of the report) and 30% did so. Individual members of staff were contacted for details about activities in specific areas. A number of staff made a significant contribution through the preparation of text, images, charts, statistics and editing and proofing. This staff involvement helped make the SAR and the QR process as inclusive as possible, in keeping with the participatory philosophy of the library. Because of the shortness of the site visit – two and a half days – it was decided that the reviewers would not visit the Kilkenny Outreach Campus or the Castletown OPW / NUI Maynooth Archives. A media company on campus was charged with the task of creating a DVD of key activities relating to both offsite locations and activities at the NUI Maynooth campus. This required quite a lot of input from the library as the company needed guidance on what to highlight. For example, serving the needs of part-time students at the Kilkenny Outreach Campus is a key task for that library, and interviews with non-traditional students at the Kilkenny campus formed part of the DVD. In the case of the OPW / NUI Maynooth Archives at Castletown, the Director of the Masters Programme on the Study of Historic Houses was interviewed.

In August 2010 the Deputy Librarian circulated the outline document to all library staff. Heads of sections were charged with the task of gathering feedback from colleagues and additional information and content in response to this draft. In early October 2010 a draft of the final document was circulated to all staff for information and comment. The final document was submitted to the internal QPSC, shortly after that. The QPSC made some suggestions for improvement and the document was sent to the external reviewers two weeks before the site visit. The library Strategic Plan and the DVD created for the review were also forwarded at that point.

The QPO liaised closely with the library on the schedule for the site visit, with the library taking responsibility for timetabling and contacting the relevant groups. It was imperative that department heads, individual lecturers, researchers, postgraduate and undergraduate students and members of the wider community all participated. Fortunately the library is highly regarded on campus and people did so enthusiastically.

Site visit and peer feedback report

Both Debby Shorley and Jon Purcell were delighted to be invited to be the external assessors. Both had some knowledge of the Irish library environment – Debby having held senior posts in the University of Ulster and Jon having worked initially in the Northern Irish public library service. The role of external assessor is essentially that of a 'critical friend', able to exercise informed and detailed analysis of the operations and services of the library under review. From their experience of being involved in other external reviews both reviewers understood the importance of trust and confidence, which they hoped would enable them to be seen by the university and the library as informed expert practitioners, impartial, fair and professional. They hoped for and expected full disclosure from the library and the university in the form of adequate and detailed qualitative and quantitative data and information; their expectations were fully met in the excellent Self-Evaluation Report.

In preparation for the visit both external assessors read the SAR, Annual Report and the other documentation provided in advance. The university and library websites were also analysed, they looked for YouTube information and viewed the extremely helpful informational DVD supplied. This array of data allowed a number of lines of enquiry to be formulated to explore on the visit,

gave a sense of the institutional culture from both a university and a library perspective and set the scene for the visit.

The visit itself was extremely well organised and over the course of two and a half very long but enjoyable days the reviewers met a whole range of Maynooth University, library and external representatives together with representatives of the undergraduate and postgraduate student body. Over copious cups of coffee they were able to obtain a very thorough, open and honest evaluation of the university, academic and student perspectives of the library together with those of what seemed like every possible member of the library staff. Encounters with various focus groups within the university were balanced by site visits to the two library sites in Maynooth. An interview with the president of St Patrick's College Maynooth – to which the library also provides a service – helped place the modern day university in its historical, academic and cultural context. During the visit two internal assessors were able to provide valuable contextual information and answer a number of initial questions. Several meetings with the University Librarian and Deputy Librarian were also helpful in answering questions, providing explanations and amplifying information or data gained from the SAR.

On the third and final day of the external assessment, the reviewers' findings were presented to a representative meeting of library staff, focus group participants and university senior staff. This took the form of commendations and recommendations.

The commendations included the belief that Maynooth University Library was a well-managed, effective and respected library making the best use of human, physical and information resources; that it propagated a culture of participation, openness and transparency; that it demonstrated a determination to continue service improvement and development helped by confirmation that the new library extension would be delivered by 2012. Both assessors were very impressed with what they found during their external review and both commented that they would be taking exemplars of good practice back to their own libraries.

The external assessors made fifteen recommendations for service, operational and strategic improvement and developments. These were designed to be pragmatic, supportive and to maximise the potential of an already good library.

Recommendations related to the staff structure and in particular the role and functions of the subject librarians, working relationships with the university IT service, better integration of the Russell Library and historic collections with the University Library, extended openings hours and possible extension of self-services. The library Peer Review Report can be viewed at http://qpo.nuim.ie/quality/documents/LibraryPeerReviewReport.pdf

QUALITY IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

The development of a quality implementation plan is a key part of the quality review process. This is a short document that responded to the fifteen recommendations under three main headings: recommendations the library could implement unaided; recommendations the library could implement only with assistance from other bodies within the university and without cost implications; and recommendations the library could implement only if additional resources were provided by the university. For each recommendation, the library had to state the actions required to implement it and indicate a timeframe implementation. If the action was not to be implemented, a reason for this needed to be stated.

Quite a number of recommendations fell into category two. This included working more closely with the University Computer Centre to identify areas of service improvement and new methods of service delivery in the new building. Detailed work on planning the integration of computer support staff and services into the new building had commenced, and this recommendation highlighted to university management the need for this to continue. The recommendation that the library work more closely with academic staff in developing a shared collection development strategy, rather than allowing this to rest with the academic staff, is currently being acted upon. The Senior Librarian Collection Management Services and the Senior Librarian Learning Teaching and Research Development aim to develop an overall Collection Development Plan, which is part of the operational planning for the new library and will be developed and expanded upon in the next Library Strategic Plan. Other recommendations in this category included an expansion of accredited information literacy modules, developing the library's fundraising capacity, finding a campuswide printing solution, greater clarity on the role of subject librarians and a more active role for the library in the development of university strategic policy.

Recommendations requiring extra funding included implementing a new organisational structure, extending opening hours, a review of access control and security issues, shorter turn-around time for shelving of books and further streamlining of routine operations.

There was one recommendation the library could implement unaided. This was in further developing a culture of flexibility and adaptability, and this is something the library continues to develop.

The Quality Implementation Plan can be viewed at http://qpo.nuim.ie/quality/documents/ LibraryQualityImplementationPlan.pdf

REFLECTION

From the perspective of the external assessors, the external review was an opportunity to exercise their professional assessment of a library which they did not manage or know well. The Irish dimension was also very different from their English higher education context but there were lots of similarities, especially in relation to funding, changing academic and student perceptions of what a university library is and could be, staff development, buildings management, integration with IT, etc. We hope that our recommendations helped both the university and the library to plan for service developments, resolve some of the outstanding service bottlenecks and staff issues and to rethink their longer-term strategic plans in the light of a new library extension.

From a process perspective both external assessors enjoyed the opportunity of taking time out from their own libraries, working with fellow professionals in a library of a similar type to their own, to identify in a supportive and purposeful way and to commend existing good practice and to recommend service developments or improvements to improve an already good library.

From the perspective of the library, the quality review was a very dynamic process. It made the library look very actively at all areas of activity. It focused on the positive, such as the very high achievements in the area of professional development. It also highlighted the need for quantitative as well as qualitative data, and this is something that needs to be developed further.

The fact that the peer review endorsed the need for an organisational structure helped this to be supported at a higher level in the university and work has commenced on implementing the new structure. The Peer Review Report also helped to ensure that vacancies created by an incentivised early retirement scheme were filled. It was also very useful for the subsequent writing of a variety of documents, such as the library Annual Report, and the quality implementation plan is very much an active road map for the future.

Overall, this was a very positive process for all concerned.

REFERENCES

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