

## Quality Assurance in a University Library

Elizabeth Jordan

Manager, Quality Assurance, University of Queensland Library.

**Australian Universities Quality Forum, Hobart, July 2007.**

### Abstract

Libraries are significant cost centres in Universities, and in the current climate of economic pressures and outcomes assessments, cannot rely on a general perception that they are a “good thing”. This paper reviews the range of quality assurance practices employed in a large university library which put it in a position to demonstrate value. An annual quality assurance cycle of planning, implementing, reporting and reviewing is supplemented by quantitative measures of key indicators which are analysed for trends as well as benchmarked with cohorts of other university libraries. Qualitative assessment takes the form of external client satisfaction surveys, (also benchmarked) and internal staff perception surveys, conducted in alternate years. Through this program, a culture of quality service and continuous improvement has been fostered for more than a decade.

**Keywords:** university libraries; quality assurance; benchmarking; surveys; statistics;

### Introduction

Libraries in tertiary institutions in Australia share with their parent bodies the challenge of continuing to deliver top quality services in an increasingly stringent economic environment. The business of libraries is to provide extensive information resource access to their client communities. For libraries, an additional challenge lies in the fact that the information industry is at a critical point in its history. As one leading practitioner commented:

In recent years and with the development of networking technologies, the familiar and traditional roles of libraries have been called into question and greater calls for accountability have emerged. Library goodness was never a self-justified outcome, but it becomes even less so in an environment that is highly competitive with multiple information providers. How do we know that the library is serving the needs of its users? That it is a highly valued resource? And that it is making a meaningful and positive contribution towards improving teaching quality, research productivity and life-long learning? (Kyrillidou, 2005)

An additional consideration from 2007 onwards for the University of Queensland Library is a shift in the University to a new budget model. The method by which the library receives funding from the University is changing from the previous system of “off the top” funding from the overall University budget, (8.8% of the University Operating Grant plus a percentage (6.2% in 2005) of all student fees), to a system whereby all funding is dispersed to the seven Faculties, and all service providers in the University, including the Library, will receive their funding from the Faculties. It would be too easy for a Faculty to siphon off a million or two from the Library allocation and channel it into more teaching staff or funding for the researcher who is about to discover the cure for cancer.

The library with a culture of quality assurance and a continuous cycle of renewal is in a better position to demonstrate its value in the teaching, learning and research outcomes of the university than otherwise. For the quality cycle requires regular scans of the operational environments (political, economic, industrial and local organisational), planning in the light of the information gained from such scans, enacting the plans, and finally reviewing the actions. Such a program means that the Library is constantly striving to be responsive to shifting client needs and expectations and optimally to be anticipating them.

At the same time, the Library needs to know that its practice is comparable to the best in the industry, and therefore needs to be continually assessing its performance and benchmarking with other libraries.

The University of Queensland Library has a history of conducting both quantitative and qualitative assessments, and of benchmarking the results against those of other academic libraries in Australia and New Zealand. The Council of Australian University Librarians has for many years coordinated the collection of statistics from university libraries, with the result that a rich database of statistical measurements can now be mined to situate a Library's performance for a range of indicators on ranked lists. Similarly, many libraries have participated in a series of client satisfaction surveys conducted over the last eight years, and this provides another set of benchmarking data. This benchmarking shows the University of Queensland Library at or near the top of the rankings across a range of significant indicators, and also demonstrating continuous improvement. Internal staff satisfaction surveys are also conducted biennially, to keep a finger on the pulse of the organisation itself in a climate of constant change.

This paper reviews the Library's quality assurance practice over the last decade and explores how this history positions the Library in the accountability stakes of the current environment. Three major planks in the quality platform are discussed: an annual quality management and assurance cycle, statistical indicators, and qualitative data.

### **Quality Management and Assurance Cycle**

Quality management and assurance in the library is embedded in its cycle of planning, reporting and reviewing. The elements are the annual planning process in which all staff participate, to produce a Library Operational Plan and a set of Operational Plans for each of the branches and sections of the Library; annual reporting on performance against objectives in the operational plans; and regular reviews of outcomes to inform the next cycle of planning. These framework elements are the responsibility of the University Librarian and Executive Managers to implement.

Accountability consists of appraisal of the performance of individual managers, oversight by the governing body of the Library, reporting quarterly to the Library Committee of the Academic Board, University Librarian reporting regularly to the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic) and Reporting on Reviews to the University Senate.

The key features of the process are:

- Focus on attaining the Library's goals and objectives through annual reporting on performance in relation to the University's Strategic Plan and the Library's Operational Plan.
- Annual review of the Operational Plan to reflect current priorities in a dynamic environment.
- Monitoring key indicators for Information Services provision to assist in assessing performance against strategic objectives.
- Appraisal of individual staff and managers in terms of their annual objectives.
- Surveying and benchmarking of results against either Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) members, Libraries of the Group of Eight Universities, or the Australasian members of Universitas 21.
- Allocation of resources to areas of identified strategic importance and to promote improved performance

The key principles underlying the process are:

- Commitment to clear identification of strategic objectives and priorities for action
- Support for redirection of resources to meet recommendations for change emanating from reviews and to support strategic objectives
- Support for staff development to ensure continuous improvement and excellence
- Devolution of responsibility to its most effective organisation level, with clear lines of accountability

The Review process reflects the Library’s commitment to achieving improvement and excellence through:

- A regular cycle of policy and planning review
- Benchmarking of performance against external organisations
- Collection and analysis of stakeholder feedback and the incorporation of results into future planning
- A regular whole-of-library review conducted by a review panel, in accordance with the University’s rolling seven-year program.

The cycle is represented in the diagram below. (Figure 1)



Figure 1: UQ Library Quality Assurance Framework diagram

## Statistical Indicators

The Library has been collecting, recording, analysing and reporting on statistics for key indicators for many decades. These have informed internal management decision making, as well as being forwarded to the CAUL database, which has been collecting statistics from all University Libraries since 1953 and publishing comparative tables.

The Library has recently moved from collecting statistics using Excel spreadsheets to an online tool, developed in-house during 2006. *LibStats* is highly configurable, licensed under GNU GPL, for collecting and reporting on statistics in the academic library. The reporting module allows for the selection of reports on totals, comparatives over time and between library branches, time series, cumulative and percentage change reports, all of which can be graphed. Produced within seconds, these reports provide valuable information for management decision making. A report can also be generated which meets the annual reporting requirements of the Council of Australian University Libraries. (CAUL)

CAUL statistics now provide a rich database of statistical measurements which can be mined to situate the Library's performance for a range of indicators on ranked lists. This shows the Library at or near the top of the rankings across a range of significant indicators and also demonstrating continuous improvement. The Library for example, provides more classroom seats with workstations than any other Go8 Library, and teaches more Information Skills classes to more students than any other in the country. (Figure 2) It also spends the highest amount on periodical subscriptions, and the highest amount on e-resources (\$9.2 million). The quality of its collection is reflected in the fact that it supplies more items on inter-library loan than any other tertiary Library.

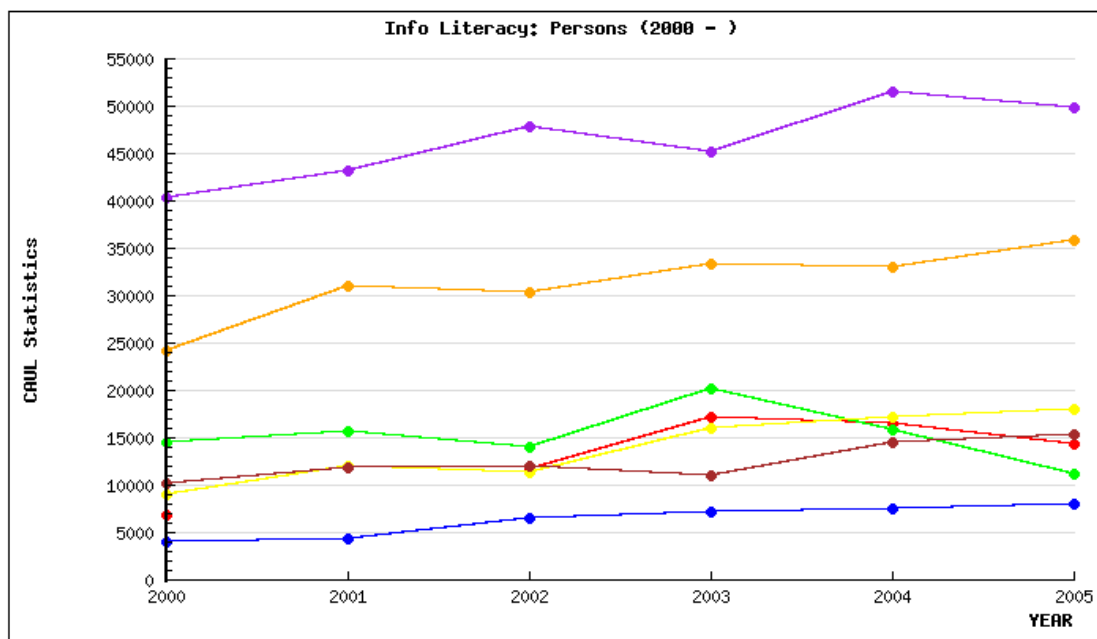


Figure 2: Information literacy class attendees, Go8 Libraries, 2000 – 2005. UQ is purple (top) line)

(Graph from CAUL statistics portal - <http://statistics.caul.edu.au/graphs.php> )

## Qualitative Data

Since 1999, the Library has conducted four biennial Client Satisfaction Surveys to obtain qualitative information on its performance. Developed by the Rodski Research Surveys group, (now Insync Surveys) the survey tool has enabled the Library to identify opportunities for improvement and to better respond to the needs of clients. The survey employs bivariate methodology and analyses both the importance and performance of a series of service related statements. Repetition of the survey has

allowed performance to be mapped over time. The fact that the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) and the Australasian Group of Universitas 21 have also chosen to use this survey means that the results can be benchmarked against all of those libraries, or specific subsets (eg Group of Eight libraries).

The survey looks at five areas – Communication, Service Quality, Service Delivery, Facilities and Equipment, and Library Staff. (Surveys undertaken from 2006 also include a category “virtual library”). Responses are analysed by client cohort and by library branch, so that information is obtained on what undergraduate or postgraduate students, academics, researchers or administrators want from the Library, and also what services or facilities are either good or bad in which locations. (There are fourteen branch libraries with more than twenty service points). A bivariate methodology is used, asking respondents to rate each statement twice – first to measure the importance of each of the statements to them and secondly to measure their impression of the Library’s performance on each statement. The perceived difference – or “gap” – between importance and performance scores for each variable is analysed. The gaps indicate areas of frustration or dissatisfaction for clients and thus represent potential improvement opportunities. This allows for the identification of prioritised gaps between performance and importance, and again, by client cohort and location.

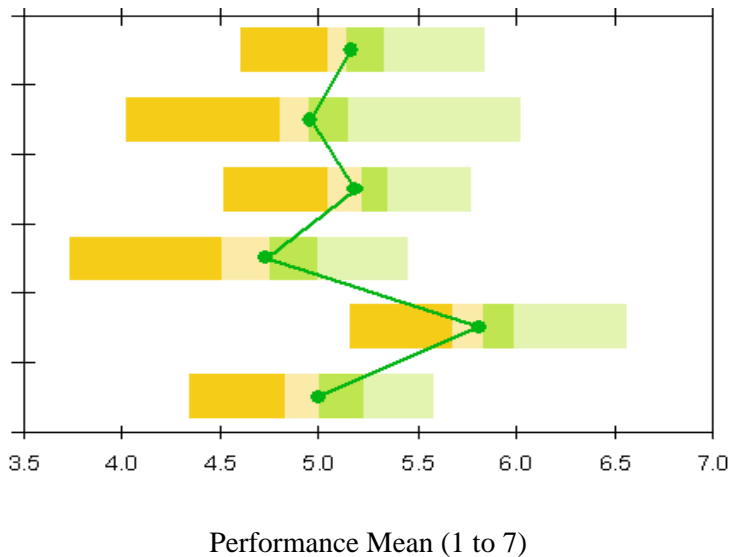
Thus the process in the 2005 survey told us that, for Academics, the main issues were around ease of use of the website and ease of access to information resources. Many academics never go into a library building, accessing resources electronically at their desks. The Library responded by conducting focus groups to obtain further feedback on the website, and redesigning for a more streamlined interface. The 2007 survey will tell us if this has been effective. On the other hand, undergraduate students, who do use the Library buildings, were most concerned about the number of computer workstations in the Library, the opening hours, the amount of seating and the space available. The Library responded by increasing numbers of computers, supplying laptops for loan, installing wireless capability in all branches, and redesigning spaces for particular types of usage (group, quiet )

Close attention to these results of each survey, and actions taken in response to improve services and their delivery, have resulted in a progressively improved performance rating overall, as shown in the table below.

<b>Library Categories</b>	<b>Weighting</b>	<b>UQ Sept 05</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>UQ Sept 03</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>UQ Oct 01</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Communication</b>	200	154	77	152	76	150	75
<b>Service Quality</b>	200	158	79	157	78	156	78
<b>Service Delivery</b>	200	155	77	152	76	149	75
<b>Facilities &amp; Equipment</b>	200	138	69	134	67	134	67
<b>Library Staff</b>	200	171	85	169	85	166	83
<b>Total</b>	1000	775	78	763	76	756	76

Figure 3: UQL 2001 - 2005 Surveys (Graph from UQL September 2005 Survey Report by Ambit Insights (now Insync))

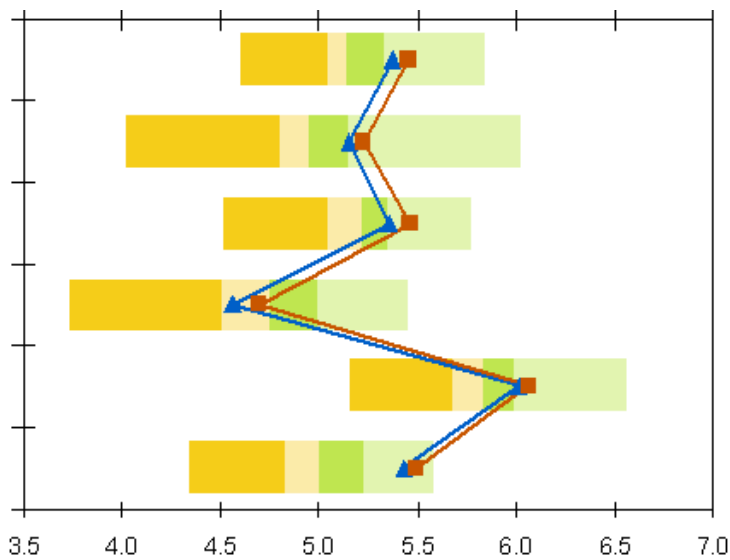
The following two graphs show (1) the average results for all libraries in the database and (2) the results for the University of Queensland Library in 2003 and 2005 surveys, showing UQL in a strong comparative position.



**Figure 4: Average of all Libraries in database (graph from Insync's CAUL portal )**

Communication  
 Service Quality  
 Service Delivery  
 Facilities & Equipment  
 Library Staff  
 Virtual Library

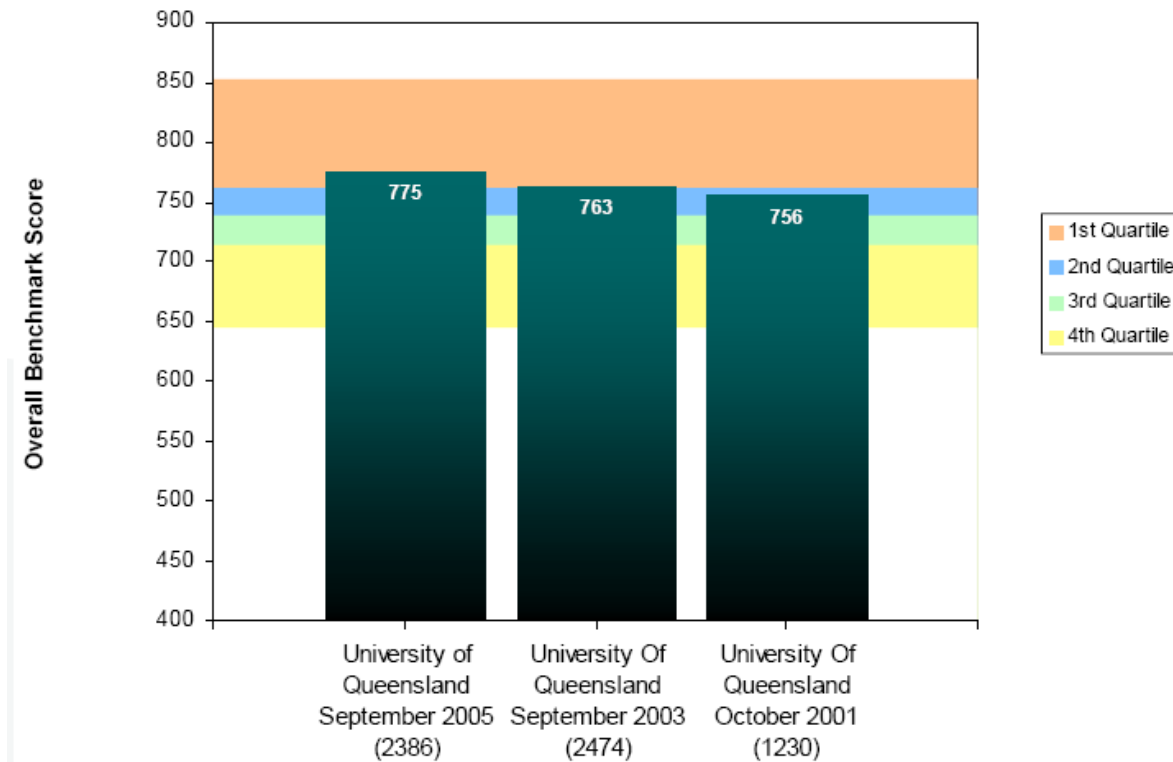
Top 25% of all Libraries  
 Libraries performing above the median  
 Libraries performing below the median  
 Bottom 25% of all Libraries  
 Average of all CAUL



**Figure 5: University of Queensland Library 2003 – 2005 (Graph from Insync's CAUL portal)**

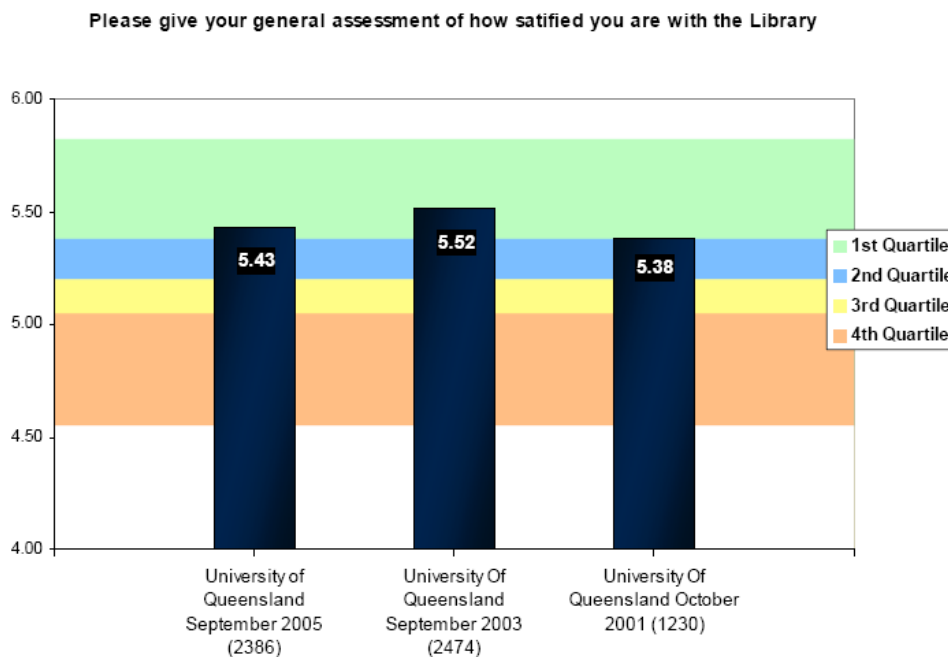
■ The University of Queensland - September 2005 - (2386)  
 ▲ The University of Queensland - September 2003 - (2474)

The Library's overall score in the survey of 775 points (77.5%), indicates a score in the first quartile (top 25%) when compared with other libraries in the database. This also reflects an increase of 1.2% since the previous survey in 2003. (Figure 6)



**Figure 6: University of Queensland Library 2005- 2003- 2001**  
 (Graph from UQL September 2005 Survey Report by Ambit Insights (now Insync))

The Survey also asks respondents to provide a general assessment of their satisfaction with the Library (see graph below). In this case, the overall average of 5.43 places the Queensland University Library in the first quartile (or top 25%) when compared with other libraries that have surveyed over the last two years. The result is a slight but insignificant decrease of 0.09 since the previous survey in 2003.



The Report of the Client Satisfaction survey is placed on the Library's public website, along with a report of the

**Figure 7: University of Queensland Library – General Satisfaction 2005 – 2003 – 2001**  
 ((Graph from UQL September 2005 Survey Report by Ambit Insights (now Insync))





information). This survey has given management the ability to monitor and respond to staff attitudes through periods of extensive change in the Library.

### **Conclusion**

All of the quality assurance and assessment practices described here have, individually and collectively resulted in changes in the Library – in collections, in services, facilities, programs and procedures. From redeveloping the website to refurbishing physical spaces to accommodate diverse learning styles, from introducing a Wellness program for staff to developing online programs in information discovery skills for postgraduates, the Library is constantly engaged in the quality cycle of assessment and response.

This history of quality assurance, of assessment and continuous improvement now means that a whole body of information is available to demonstrate the effectiveness of the Library in supporting the information needs of the teaching, learning and research enterprises of the University.

### **References**

Kyrillidou, Martha. (2005). Library assessment: why today and not tomorrow. Paper presented at the Library Assessment Conference organized by The Council of the Technological Educational Institution of Thessaloniki, June 13-15, 2005. Retrieved 19<sup>th</sup> February, 2007 from <http://www.libqual.org/documents/admin/KyrillidouGreecePapers.doc>.