

Driving Change in the Profession: Subject Benchmarking in UK Library and Information Management

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This paper starts by considering briefly the background to subject benchmarking within the overall context of the Quality Assurance Framework. It then goes on to discuss the methodology and approach of the expert panel appointed to design and develop the benchmark statement for Librarian-

ship and Information Management. The emphasis will be on the practical approach to the task of creating a subject benchmark statement for librarianship and information management, by representatives of our profession and the subsequent responses.

Introduction

The subject benchmarking project in librarianship and information science represented a bringing together of the interests of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and what were then the two major professional bodies for librarianship and information studies in the UK, the Library Association and the Institute of Information Scientists. Before describing the project that produced the benchmark statement, I have outlined the quality assurance process with higher education in the UK, within which benchmarking is located.

An overview of quality assurance in UK Higher Education

The principal responsibility for funding teaching and research in higher education, and also for ensuring the assessment of the quality of higher education teaching provision in the UK rests with the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE). The funding council has a statutory responsibility to assess the quality of education that it funds to ensure that public money is not wasted on un-

satisfactory programmes. It does this by contracting the QAA to conduct assessments. This is an independent body funded by subscriptions from universities and colleges of higher education and through contracts with the main higher education funding bodies. It reports on academic standards, the quality of learning opportunities and how the university manages standards and quality in relation to granting degrees.

Since 1990 higher education institutions (HEIs) have been subjected to two forms of external quality review. One, academic audit, was carried out between 1990 and 2001 and was a process of review of institutions' academic quality assurance mechanisms, originally established by the universities themselves in the late 1980s. Since 1997 it has been carried out by the QAA.

The second, initially called teaching quality assessment and subsequently renamed subject review, was a programme of detailed reviews at subject level. From 1993 to 1997 they were undertaken by HEFCE itself until the newly formed QAA was contracted to carry out assessments.

A third form of external quality review has, for a number of years been the accreditation by professional and statutory bodies of programmes of

study that lead to a professional title or award, such as Chartered Librarian. This type of accreditation ensures that a programme of study provides some, or all, of the competencies needed for professional practice.

The report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE 1997) proposed that benchmark information should be developed and used by institutions, as part of the programme approval process, to set degree standards.

The proposals reflected growing concerns about the rights of prospective students, parents and employers to clear information about courses and qualifications. The report called for "greater explicitness and clarity about standards and the levels of achievement required for different awards."

More detailed information on the role and operations of the QAA can be found on their Web site <http://www.qaa.ac.uk> [viewed November 15, 2002].

Subject benchmark statements

The Dearing Report recommended that "standards should be developed by the academic community itself, through formal groupings for the main areas of study." It also envisaged that "subject associations and professional bodies will play a role in developing benchmarks." It recommended that the QAA should start working "with institutions to establish small, expert teams to provide benchmark statements."

Subject benchmark statements set out expectations about standards of honours degrees in broad subject areas. They are about the conceptual framework that gives a discipline its coherence and identity, and they define what can be expected of a graduate in terms of the techniques and skills needed to develop understanding in the subject. They are benchmarks of the level of intellectual demand and challenge represented by an honours degree in the subject area concerned.

Benchmarking the task

The task assigned to the benchmark groups in all disciplines was to produce a broad statement that represented expectations about standards for the award of honours degrees in particular subject

areas. The benchmarks set out the intellectual capability and understanding that should be developed through the study of a particular discipline; the skills and techniques associated with developing understanding and the level of intellectual demand and challenge appropriate to honours degree study in that discipline. They were not about listing specific knowledge. That remained a matter for individual institutions in designing programmes.

Initially three benchmark statements were produced in 1999 for consultation and comment with a further 19 drafted and released in early 2000 for consultation within the broader community, including the draft statement on Librarianship and Information Management.

Professor Charles Oppenheim was appointed by the QAA to chair the panel. He recruited expert team members from within the academic community. The Library Association was also invited to participate and to provide secretarial support, a role that fell to me.

The teams were set a very tight timetable for producing a subject benchmark statement in Librarianship and Information Management:

- First meeting of the panel in September 1999
- Draft benchmark statements to the QAA by December 1999
- Consultation during January 2000 – February 2000
- Final revisions to be completed by end March 2000
- Benchmark statements on the QAA Web site by Easter 2000
- Implementation from autumn 2000

Methodology

Members of the QAA Benchmarking Development Team attended the first meeting the team. They introduced the background and context to subject benchmarking and outlined the task for the panel. They provided the following working definition of benchmarking:

Benchmarking is a subject community making explicit the nature and standards of awards which carry the subject in their title or in which the subject is included in the programme leading to the award. (QAA 1999)

They advised the panel to bear in mind the uses to which their statements would be put, namely, review, public information, course de-

velopments and the support of external examining. The teams were encouraged to consider what attributes they would expect a graduate in the subject to be able to display or demonstrate and also what expectations the wider community might have of a graduate in that subject.

There were two main elements to the project. Firstly, the creation of reference points, which would help define the nature of the awards in the subject, described by the QAA as the “subject territory”. Any awards that carried the subject in their title or were included within the programme leading to an award could thus be located in that benchmark.

One effect of this was that it allowed HEIs to choose to locate programmes within different subject benchmarks and thus to undergo assessment at different times to other institutions offering broadly similar courses within the same ‘macro-discipline’. Consequently it has occasionally been difficult for prospective students and employers to make informed judgements on the merits of similar programmes from a number of institutions. In our own discipline LIS programmes have been assessed against computing and media studies as well as against the Librarianship and Information Management benchmark.

Secondly, the panel was asked to articulate the minimum requirements of performance for an award of an honours degree in the subject and to produce threshold statements in terms of positive attainments relating to the graduate attributes identified.

The group was also given indicative headings that they were to use for the benchmark statement. These were:

- Defining principles
- Nature and extent of the subject
- Subject Knowledge and understanding
- Subject skills and other skills
- Teaching, learning and assessment
- Standards

By using common headings the QAA aimed to give a sense of unity, rather than uniformity, across the disciplines. However, if you look at the final version of the subject benchmark statement, you will see that the Panel departed slightly from these headings in the final version.

The subject area was defined as including Archives and Records Management. In the UK these subjects are taught primarily as conversion courses at Masters level and representatives from the sector were concerned that this would affect their participation on the panel. The QAA assured us that they wished panels to be inclusive and to represent a range of opinion and courses. At that stage it was anticipated that the situation regarding conversion Masters degrees would be clarified by the end of the year with the publication of the National Qualifications Framework.

Subgroups

The tight deadline meant that the work had to be sub-divided with different groups tackling different sections of the statement.

The first important achievement in terms of the working of the group was that they agreed a working definition for the discipline. This was that Librarianship and Information Management was:

“ ... About information (including works of the imagination); the theory of information, the retrieval of information, the preservation of information. It is also about the community of information and about information in the wider social context, the creation and dissemination of information ... and the users of information in all formats and about the evaluation of information”.

Issues concerning modal study, subsidiary subjects and joint awards, all of which impacted on the teaching of LIS in the UK, had also to be considered. Particular emphasis was placed on the need to identify and deal with subjects that the panel felt could not be left out of any degree course located in our discipline. The sub-groups were then despatched to work together on creating draft documents for each section. During this period they consulted with other colleagues as well as the other team members.

When the panel reconvened it was clear that the various subgroups had very sensibly decided not to re-invent the wheel and had looked at models already available to give a structure to their work.

First review meeting

This took place around six weeks after the first meeting, during which time the panel members had made great progress. Despite the pressure of

the deadline it was clear that panel members had enjoyed and responded enthusiastically to this demanding task.

The group responsible for defining the 'nature and extent of the discipline' had taken as their starting point the joint Library Association/Institute of Information Scientists joint accreditation checklist (JAA 1999) that was already in use to assess courses at both undergraduate and post graduate level. This document articulated what were then agreed the principle elements of the Body of Professional Knowledge for the discipline, although even at that stage it was acknowledged that this was itself due for renewal.

Group members themselves had expressed reservations about the draft, which could be interpreted as a shopping list of knowledge and skills (which the QAA had specifically counselled against). By using the checklist they had omitted certain key areas of the wider discipline such as publishing that the panel had agreed should be reflected within the statement.

The group recognised that they might be accused of straying over the boundaries by doing this but believed that the statement should include everything that was currently taught on LIS courses. The panel acknowledged that, in practice, faculties themselves would determine where they best fitted.

The group considering the section on 'subject knowledge, skills and understanding' drew on material provided by different Schools and Departments. They looked at their Web sites and drew up a consolidated list of the topics covered noting what was thought of as core elements and what were optional/elective elements. It would be fair to say that some of the more subject specific issues were only agreed after heated debate!

After this meeting the subgroups were despatched to finalise their sections prior to a final meeting in December 1999 to agree the text that would be sent to the QAA. Throughout the exercise the majority of communications were by email, indeed it would not have been possible to complete the task to time without it.

Chairs update meeting

In the time between the first and second panel meeting the QAA arranged a meeting for all the Chairs and Secretaries to share and discuss their

experiences and to look at some of the procedural and operational requirements that would have to be satisfied in order for the QAA's requirements to be met.

This session enabled representatives from all the subject groups to discuss matters that had been issues of concern to a number of them. It was clear that some subject panels had taken a portmanteau approach, often as a result of failure to agree definitions and content. The self-imposed 10-page limit of the LIM panel amongst others was seen as a desirable goal and was strongly commended to other panels.

The majority of subject groups had agreed almost identical lists of transferable skills but the QAA firmly resisted the suggestion that a national curriculum (or benchmark) of transferable graduate skills should be developed to wrap around all the subject benchmarks. They felt that they had to be assessed within the context of the relevant discipline. In the case of ICT, for example, this was a sensible approach as the level of knowledge, skills and understanding is far higher in LIS than in most other subject areas.

Final drafting and consultation

The panel had found that the indicative headings suggested by QAA were not completely appropriate and adopted amended headings. Between November and December 1999 there was further electronic discussion and debate between members of the sub-groups and the draft was produced without further face-to-face meetings. It was delivered to the QAA on the deadline day, 17 December 1999.

There followed a six-week consultation period. Discussions were held with HEIs in Scotland and Wales on the schedule for reviews at which the statements would be used in the period 2000–2003. During 2000–2001 the present programme of subject review in England Wales and Northern Ireland would conclude and the new method would be introduced there from 2002.

Response from the wider professional community

Unfortunately only a small number of responses were made following publication of the draft statement thus the comments cannot be claimed

as fully reflecting the true view of the wider community. Those that were returned were generally positive about the extent to which the statement had fulfilled its purpose. It was felt to be a clear and unambiguous expression of the skills and competencies required from a graduate providing adequate coverage of the specialties within the subjects covered.

Concerns were expressed in two areas. In relation to the process it was felt that the QAA should have provided greater clarity on the policy of review of the subject statements – their shelf life – and the need to ensure flexibility in relation to the evolution of dynamic and rapidly changing discipline.

Comments were also made on the subject coverage. Despite being modelled on the JAA there was felt to be insufficient content relating to the needs of users and communities, staff management and managing internal knowledge.

A small sub-group considered these comments and final amendments were made. The benchmark statement was published in April 2000. It is available at URL: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/benchmark/librarianship.pdf> [viewed November 15, 2002].

Conclusion

Being involved in a project such as this was both challenging and exciting. From a personal point of view it offered the opportunity to work with many of the acknowledged leaders of the academic community and to share their often passionate and heated discussions on exactly comprised the core elements of librarianship and information management at the tail end of the twentieth century.

I hope that the outcome for the academic community has been more helpful than unhelpful as the degree of harmonisation between the requirements for subject review and professional body accreditation helped alleviate some of the burden of inspection. However, I am sure that they are anxious to see this reduced still further.

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Its impact on the professional body has been indirect up until now. Despite early approaches from the QAA who wished us to delegate the responsibility for professional accreditation to them CILIP continues to accredit academic programmes at UK universities. The professional bodies affirmed in 2000 that there was a clear distinction between the purpose of their inspections and the QAA regime. The professional bodies were looking at fitness to practice issues whereas the QAA focuses on the quality of teaching. However, some of the evidence they need for this is now drawn from QAA reviews. Within Librarianship and Information Management the reports form a useful source of additional information when visiting parties from the professional body visit a UK university to review existing accredited programmes. They provide expert testimony to the quality of teaching and learning against agreed standards: their existence allows the professional body to concentrate on issues relating to the preparation for professional practice in a dynamic and rapidly expanding discipline.

In the light of recent developments within the QAA it may be timely to re-visit this issue. The new lighter touch reviews might bring the prospect of collaboration back onto the agenda. However, it should be noted that in a relatively small discipline such as LIS there are considerable practical and operational difficulties in trying to combine the two events, although both sides acknowledge the degree of overlap between them.

References

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