QUALITY ASSURANCE IN LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The paper discusses the essences of quality assurance in library and information service, approaches to quality assurance in library and information service, and the methods of library and information service review. It suggested that the main focus of any library should be to improve and enhance quality service delivery and prevent any type/form of decrease in quality service provision rather than on identifying or developing measures to restore service quality.

Introduction

It is generally agreed and accepted that the major mandate or task of any library is to support, promote and facilitate the achievement of the mission, vision, goals and objectives of its parent body and the target community or society to be served. This done especially through the provision of needed and relevant information resources, services, customer – friendly environment, state-of-the

art systems and facilities and competent personnel. Thus, the vision, mission and values of a library must align with that of the body establishing it.

The vision statement of a library should be a world-class or most preferred centre of excellence for the support and provision of the state- of- the art information environment, systems, resources, services, competent personnel and facilities for study, learning, research and advancement of the community and the society. Thus, the mission statement of a library should be to support, promote and provide high quality and relevant library and information resources and services for effective learning, study, teaching, research and advancement of the community or society it is to serve. In the same vein, the core values of a library should centre on competence, integrity, customer-focused, excellence, honesty, creativity, innovativeness, entrepreneurship, quality, teamwork, partnership, collaboration, openness, diligence, caring, effective communication, relevance and integrity.

Essentially, the basic policy statement of any library is to meet or exceed its customers' expected performance especially in terms of quality service, economic human and material costs, effectiveness and efficiency, rapid response time for customer inquires; etc. In effect therefore, the vision, mission and values of a library can be said to be relevant and in focus when its systems, resources and services are in tangent with the governing body's set ideals and expectations continually. In order to keep and remain focused to ensure the attainment of the parent body's ideals and aspirations, it is necessary and obvious for the library to ensure quality in the promotion and provision of the requisite library and information systems, resources, facilities, environment, services and personnel

aimed at meeting the vision, mission and goals of the parent body, the customers and other stakeholders. Availability and maintenance of quality assurance mechanism and processes in a library setting and indeed in any other type of setting will ensure accountability, control, Improvement and compliance to internal, national and external standards and benchmark for best practices.

Library and Information Services Quality Assurance

Quality Assurance (QA) can simply be conceived as the steady and consistent assessment and management procedures to monitor and evaluate operations and performance against a set standard, benchmark or objective in order to ensure compliance and the attainment of quality output and improvement to satisfy the needs and interests of the stakeholders. However, Harman (2000) defined it as a systematic management and assessment procedures adopted by higher education institutions and systems in order to monitor performance against objectives and to ensure achievement of quality outputs and improvements. Quality assurance is more of ensuring an overall quality status of a library and its continued improvement process. Quality assurance in libraries and information centres is the general concern of all the stakeholders particularly the library and information centre parent body, the management and staff; the customers, other information service providers, the regulatory agency (LRCN) and the general public. According to Derfert-Wolf (2005), the quality of libraries is the totality of the features and characteristics of a product or services that bear on the ability to satisfy defined or implied needs of its clientele.

Quality assurance is however in variance with Quality Control (QC) which is more of a measure being taken continually to ensure that no defective or inferior

product or service is dished out to customers and other stakeholders. That is, while QA is concerned with strategies to enhance and improve processes, QC focuses more on the quality of an end product, output and end result. In the same vein, while QA deals more with the process used to ensure the provision and availability of quality resources, systems, staff and services, QC centre more on quality related to the various activities associated with the provision and availability of quality resources, systems, staff and services. Similarly, while QA is checklist based to be evaluated by internal and external panel of reviewers, QC verifies that the end products, resources, services are of acceptable quality, complete, correct and relevant. The concept 'quality' can therefore be viewed from the two perspectives as 'doing it right 'and' goodness of fit' (that is, QA =What and QC= How).

Basically, it is necessary that libraries and information centres and indeed any other setting should aim at maintaining quality in their systems, organisation, structure, operations and services. What is however necessary to ensure derivable maximum benefits from quality assurance endeavour is to be:

- Confident and trustful in the QA exercise;
- Ready and willing to expose identified and eminent weaknesses;
- Ready to accept and own inadequacies;
- Ready to make amend and correct lapses;
- Ready to synergise to save human and material costs for efficiency and effectiveness; and
- Determined to improve to meet up to expectations.

The basic task needed to institutionalise QA in libraries and information centres to ensure quality services is to strategise in order to determine how to:

- Identify and recognize the need for it;
- Motivate and instill QA culture;
- Continually assess and measure its effectiveness and impact; and
- Ensure and assure QA implementation continually.

Approaches to Library and Information Services Quality Assurance

Quality assurance in library and information services and indeed in any given setting can be approached from 3 angles, i.e. Accreditation, Assessment and Audit.

Accreditation is a comprehensive physical, on-the-spot and site visit evaluation of the philosophy, vision, mission, objectives, resources, systems, structure, operations, services, procedures, functionality and programmes/ activities of an organisation, institution, etc. It is usually conducted by a regulatory body to determine level of readiness and compliance to set standards and benchmark with the view to decide on whether it should be given full, interim or denied accreditation status. The status of an institution's accreditation has direct implication on the level of its recognition and acceptability of its systems, products and services by the stakeholders. The regulatory bodies for accrediting the programmes of the tertiary institutions in Nigeria are the National Universities Commission (NUC) for the Universities; the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) for the Polytechnics and Monotechnics; and the National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) for Colleges of Education. Library systems, resources and services stand out significantly among the parameters

being evaluated in accrediting the programmes of the tertiary institutions in Nigeria as well as for institutional accreditation of the tertiary institutions. However, the accreditation of libraries per se is the responsibility of the Librarians' Registration Council of Nigeria (LRCN) which should provide the standards and benchmark for measurement.

Assessment is an examination of an institution's, organisation's, etc products and outputs in graded form to determine their goodness and fitness periodically. According to Woodhouse (1999), the output of an assessment is a quantitative evaluation, a grade (whether numeric, literal or descriptive). Unlike accreditation exercise which provides collective grade of the parameters investigated, assessment is more of an in-depth evaluation of the outcome or product of the individual programme of activities engaged by an institution or organisation to achieve its goals and objectives. In the case of library situation, it will mean assessing the individual systems, resources and services of a library and information centre with the view to determine their suitability, relevance and appropriateness in quantitative terms. Assessment method could be used to determine/examine the worthiness of libraries' products, systems and services.

Audit is a systematic internal assessment of an institution or organisation with the view to determine the extent to which it is complying with the set standards of operation and quality of products and services. It is useful in: checking how an institution is achieving its explicit and implicit objectives; determining the suitability and quality of the procedures put in place in relation the set objectives; determining the quality and conformity of the planned activities; and determining

the relevance and effectiveness of its operations and activities in achieving the set objectives. Dill (2000) observed that audits focus on those processes implemented by higher education institutions in order to assure and improve the quality of teaching and learning. Essentially, unlike accreditation and assessment, audit concentrates more on the processes of implementation of action plans rather than evaluates directly the quality of product, an output or makes comprehensive examination of the products or output. In library and information centre environment, internal auditing is necessary and should be carried out regularly to evaluate the processes of operations and service provision with the view to determine their effectiveness, efficiency, appropriateness and relevance in achieving the desired objectives, goals and aspirations of the stakeholders.

A study conducted by Sali (2011) on the implementation of quality assurance to Nigerian university libraries discovered that the available information resources in the university libraries are significantly relevant to the implementation of quality assurance in the respective libraries; the methods and strategies employed in the university libraries for quality assurance are significantly correlated with implementation in the respective libraries; and the respective university libraries have and use different quality assurance mechanisms to enhance their functions in their respective communities.

Methodology of Library and Information Services Quality Review

You do not need to agree more that the periodic review of library and information services serve to put them in the right perspectives for achieving the objectives of which they were established. It serves as medium through which the libraries and

information centres are accountable to their actions and inactions, as well as explore viable means of improving their services to justify their existence and relevance to their customers and other stakeholders. Library and information service quality can be examined and assured through:

Self-review. Also referred to as self-study, is a self assessment procedure that provides a standard against which a library and information centre can measure the level of its quality status. It provides an opportunity for a library and information centre to check the extent to which it is achieving its strategic mission and goals and also prepare action plans for improvement and systematic development. During accreditation exercise it could provide an opportunity to pre-review the stand of the library and information centre through the collection, analysis and interpretation of the information gathered and entered in the assessment form/questionnaire for such purpose. A model template /manual could be dev eloped for use for mock self-review periodically by libraries and information centres.

Peer-review, is an evaluation method for library and information centre performance whereby another similar library and information centre of the same status assesses the performance of the target library and information centre to determine its level of compliance with the set standards and benchmark and how it is achieving its objectives. As an accreditation or quality assurance procedure, it could be carried out by experienced and senior staff panel of reviewers from the reviewing library or in the profession using a completed self-study form during site visits.

External review is an evaluation method for library and information centre performance by external assessors from other countries or by external regulatory/professional body to determine the level of its compliance with international standards and benchmark. The composition of the review panel is usually determined by the external body to ensure fairness and equity. In the Nigerian library and information scene, the LRCN could partner with a similar body in the sub-region, continent or with the International Federation of Library Association and Education (IFLA) for such programmes.

To a large extent, the performance of any type of library and information centre can be measured by the type, quality and relevance of its resources, systems and services in relation to the institution's vision mission and programmes as well as the level of its customers' satisfaction. Thus, whichever method is adopted for library and information service quality assurance review and indeed for any other type of assessment objectives, the following parameters should be considered. viz:

- management structure and functions;
- the type and extent of the information resources;
- the type and nature of library and information services;
- the category and competence of the staff;
- networking, collaboration and other forms of synergy opportunities and competences;
- funding and finance generation opportunities and competences;

- the internal operations of the library especially in such critical areas as resource processing (cataloging, classification, indexing and abstracting)and resource development (acquisition/collection development);
- reference and information services provision;
- media and public relations services;
- digitisation and archiving;
- library policy;
- online systems and services;
- database management and services;
- systems development and training opportunities and competences(human resource development); and
- ICT applications to information storage, access, retrieval, social media networking and dissemination.

Concluding Remarks and The Way Forward

There is no doubt in the fact that a library and information centre should, as a matter of policy, endeavour to maintain quality continually in satisfying the yearnings of the parent body establishing it , its customers and other stakeholders directly or indirectly involved in its survival, sustenance and also to win more favours from them. What is therefore needed is to strategise to ensure that the library and information centre:

- ✓ Develops the culture of self-study that is quality –centred;
- ✓ Develops and embraces both internal and external mechanisms and media to enhance quality;

- ✓ Ensures that the quality assurance model and strategies employed meets at least the national minimum standard and benchmark;
- ✓ Develops and encourage the acceptance of QA culture, capability and competence in the staff, management and authority;
- ✓ Creates an internal QA and QC mechanism and structure for observance of quality continually;
- ✓ Develops an internal best practices standards and benchmark comparable with national and international requirements and ensure strict compliance;
- ✓ Be responsible for customer satisfaction and quality service provision continually;
- ✓ Maintains cost analysis in information service delivery;
- ✓ Ensures continuous monitoring and evaluation of customer complaints and claims for quick remedy;
- ✓ Maintains close cooperation with customers in order to understand their present and future needs; and
- ✓ Ensures that the primary focus of the library and information centre is to improve and enhance quality service delivery and prevent any type/form of decrease in quality service provision rather than on identifying or developing measures to restore service quality.

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