

A whole-service Quality Evaluation Framework

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Background – the Customer Service Excellence agenda

Customer Service Excellence™ (CSE) is a trade-marked UK Government standard that was developed as a tool to drive continuous improvement in customer service. It is held by a wide range of organisations in the UK, including a number of public and academic libraries. The University of Worcester Library Services first applied for Customer Service Excellence accreditation in 2017 as part of an ongoing commitment to drive up student satisfaction. It was also felt by the Director of Library Services that the range and quality of services offered was not fully recognised or understood by the University. It was hoped that CSE accreditation would be a useful advocacy tool, providing independent, external verification and objective assessment of the quality of the services being provided.

To achieve accreditation, an organisation provides evidence for 57 criteria in 5 areas: Customer Insight; Culture of the Organisation; Information and Access; Delivery, and Timeliness and Quality of Service. On the first inspection, all 57 criteria are assessed and can be graded as compliant, compliant plus or partially compliant. Accreditation can be achieved whilst some criteria are partially compliant providing there are only a very small number in any one area. There is then a 3-year rolling programme under which a third of criteria are revisited each year, along with any partially compliant areas. Holders of the award are listed on the CSE website and can use the CSE badge, as we now do on our website and email signatures.

Initial planning and selection of evidence before the first assessment took about a year, along with a self-assessment of readiness to apply. Some criteria were easy to address, with a range of potential evidence available. For instance, Library Services has a tradition of innovative

engagement and co-creation of services with students, and a strong culture of customer service with associated staff recruitment and training processes. At our first official assessment these were duly recognised as 'compliant plus' areas indicating that best practice had been identified by the assessor. The value of the planning and our initial self-assessment quickly became apparent as it brought to our attention where there were gaps and areas of comparative weakness that we needed to address before the official assessment. For instance, in contrast to our extensive student engagement, we had no formal process in place for exploring the satisfaction levels and requirements of university staff with our services. Therefore, before our first assessment took place we introduced and analysed a staff survey that now runs every 3 years and has just had its 3rd iteration. This has been proved very useful for getting feedback, information on the awareness of and engagement with different services and reactions to new or proposed services.

Our first visit by the assessor in 2017 resulted in a successful accreditation with 10 criteria deemed worthy of compliance plus, and 8 being rated as partially compliant. On the following review a year later this was reduced to just 2 partially compliant criteria. But these continued to give us a challenge: criterion 5.3.2 "We are meeting our current standards for timeliness and quality of customer service and we publicise our performance against these standards" and 5.3.3 "Our performance in relation to timeliness and quality of service compares well with that of similar organisations." The report of the first assessment read: "Library Services needs to address... how it sets meaningful and measurable quality standards across its services" and the following year's report said: "Whilst progress has been made Library Services needs to further develop its approach to the setting of a suite of quality standards and their monitoring".

Development of a quality framework

To address these comments and achieve compliance in these two criteria, the Library Director began a literature search into quality frameworks and also looked at what other university libraries were doing in this arena.

One important factor was to identify an approach which would allow the whole service to be assessed without imposing a heavy bureaucratic load. Published literature revealed and discussed numerous possibilities, with a helpful overview of many in an edited volume on Quality and the Academic Library (Atkinson, 2016). This work cited the view that “The literature of the area has become complex and vast with the adoption of a sometimes bewildering variety of tools” (Holmes and Parsons 2016, quoted in Atkinson, 2017, p.422). As a follow up to this book, Atkinson decided to try to produce “a simple, top-level framework or tool for academic library quality”. The result was a framework with 8 key themes, each with a top-level question and additional questions to think about for each theme (Atkinson, 2017). Atkinson also suggested 3 sources of evidence that could be used, firstly drawing from external data or reviews, secondly University data and documents including strategies, KPIs, committee minutes etc. and finally internal Library information and data.

Theme	Top level Question
Strategy and planning	How effective is your engagement in strategy and planning?
Engagement with customers	How effective is your engagement with customers?
Communication and promotion	How effective is your communication and promotion of services?
Collaboration with partners	How effective is your collaboration with partners?
Effectiveness of services	How effective are your services and do they meet customer needs?

Change Management	How effective are you at responding to internal and external changes and developments?
Management and leadership	How effective is your management and leadership?
Quality processes	How effective are your quality processes?

Table 1 Quality Framework Themes. Taken from Atkinson, 2017, p.423

This was a very helpful and authoritative starting point based as it was on a comprehensive analysis of existing literature, specifically designed for academic libraries and not requiring excessive amounts of data or time to carry out.

Another publication that was useful was John Beckford's book on Quality (Beckford, 2017) as it makes specific reference to service environments. Beckford claims that an important factor in these contexts is that their principal asset is people, and that "the application of the skills and knowledge of those people .. is the key differentiator between 'good' and 'bad' service" (Beckford, 2017, p.14). Beckford argues that quality in a service context should be about the outcome for the customer and that the key is three-fold: skills, knowledge and education. "Service quality arises when individuals follow a good process, can do it right, and understand why it matters to the customer" (Ibid, p.15).

It was decided to trial Atkinson's framework, but incorporate Beckford's three dimensions to capture the 'people' element and provide a fuller evaluation of service quality at Worcester:

What is done – the process

How it is done – the skills

Why it is done – behaviours / values / culture

The additional questions suggested by Beckford for each theme were used to identify the different points to be addressed. The result is a template which identifies 39 different aspects of the service.

Implementation

The first full assessment of Library Services took place against the framework in the summer of 2018, following the management team’s annual awayday which included a SWOT analysis of the service. Any significant gaps or development opportunities that were identified were fed into the Operating Statement for the subsequent academic year and assessed in the next review of the framework. This process has been repeated each summer since. After the first few iterations, it was found that there was considerable overlap between the ‘How’ and ‘Why it is done’ columns so the framework has been slightly amended to just include 2 dimensions: What we do (processes) and How we do it and understanding why (Skills needed and used; Behaviours exhibited / promoted).

What success looks like	What we do (Processes)	How we do it and understanding why (Skills and behaviours)
1.1 Well-developed plans that are regularly reviewed and updated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LS Strategic Plan – process for development included stakeholders. Reviewed annually by Team Leaders. • Annual Operating Plan is considered at annual TL away event in June and linked to the Strategic Plan, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic planning skills are in Team Leader JDs • Plans are communicated to all library staff in May / June to inform appraisals. Individuals are reminded to align their personal targets to department strategy and university priorities. • Staff are consulted over plans, team structure and aims etc.

	<p>assessed twice a year in TL meeting.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual team plans. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wider consultation carried out as appropriate.
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Table 2. Sample from the framework

It should also be noted that a fairly light touch is taken without reference to the full range of data identified by Atkinson in order to keep the process manageable within a relatively small team. Highlights and any major issues are identified for each of the aspects of the framework, it does not attempt to be a full record of everything that we do.

Nonetheless, it has proved useful and informative as will be discussed below.

A whole service approach to Quality

Following the implementation of the framework, Library Services approach to quality was articulated in the following statement:

Our approach to quality assurance and enhancement embraces the following commitments:

- The overall quality of provision will be assessed against the mission of Library Services.
- We will seek continuous improvement in all 8 themes of the Quality Framework.
- We will monitor the themes and look for gaps or weaknesses.
- We will have high expectations for ourselves and our services, including setting challenging targets and standards.
- We will be open to criticism and feedback.
- We will seek to learn, trying new approaches and looking for examples of excellent practice.
- We will publish the results of quality assessment processes and methods.

- We will work in partnership with our service users in service developments and quality enhancement.
- We will apply for established accreditation schemes, kitemarks etc. where appropriate as external verifications of quality.

The full framework along with the latest two years assessment can be found at <https://library.worc.ac.uk/reports-policies-and-strategies> under 'Reports'.

Outcomes and benefits

The immediate objective, to achieve full CSE compliance was quickly achieved, with the assessor expressing considerable interest in the approach taken. The 2019 report included the comment "your Quality Evaluation Framework is an excellent tool, which in itself merits Compliance Plus for Element 5.3.2". Full compliance was achieved for the final criterion a year later. However the benefits extend beyond this initial objective. The framework and process of review enables the Director to keep a regular overview of the whole service, giving confidence that no major areas are being overlooked or attracting disproportionate attention. It supports discussions with managers which encourages them to be thinking about quality and how it can be demonstrated in their area. It helps to identify areas that need improvement so that actions can be identified, resources targeted, culture changed, job roles altered etc. By following the same process each year, improvements (or their lack) can then be tracked and documented and further action taken if necessary, with less likelihood of them being forgotten or superseded by other priorities. It therefore supports a culture of continuous improvement, true customer focus, and skills development.

Examples of issues identified by the tool

1. Wider university developments including changing course provision.

An area which has been challenging recently is the support and services provided for the new types of courses that are being developed. (Section 2.4 of the framework "We are aware of and involved in course development and review processes"). Worcester has long had students

who are taught around the country and overseas at various partner institutions, and Library Services has a Partnership Librarian to support these students. However since the pandemic, we are seeing more fully online or highly blended courses being developed and also a number of apprenticeships where students are in employment but also studying for a degree. There are implications for the resources we provide, understanding the support required by students and how to deliver it, effective communication channels with both the students and the teaching staff, the range of online systems needed and library staff digital capabilities, to name just a few areas. A development area recently identified therefore is to review our policies around support for both online students and apprentices and work with teaching staff to develop awareness of these. This will be included in this year's review of the framework for assessment next year. We have also put more staffing resource into this area of our provision.

There was also a need to inform Library Services staff more generally of these developments and their implications (Section 1.3 "Plans are aligned to University / Hive goals, strategies and priorities"). One way this has been addressed is to invite staff from other parts of the University to give occasional lunchtime talks or workshops, and these have generally been very well attended. One example of this was a talk from the Director of Apprentices who explained the political background to why apprenticeships are being developed, the complex reporting and funding environment they operate in and some of the challenges faced by apprentices. This helped Library staff understand why the University is developing these courses and the wider implications of providing good support to the students so that they successfully complete their course.

2. Staff and team relationships and communications

Another whole-service issue was identified as we returned to working in the office after the pandemic and included in the 21-22 review of the framework tool (Section 7.6 "LS Staff communicate effectively with each other"). Whilst working entirely or largely from home, the managers of each Library Services team had done an excellent job of maintaining

contact with their own team members. However, links between teams seemed to have weakened with limited awareness of what each other did or how their role supported Library Services overall or the wider university priorities. This sometimes led to issues where one team would for instance change a process without recognising the potential impact on another team and discussing it first. This is being addressed in a number of ways including regular updates from each manager at monthly meetings, a 'minor change' approval process, information to all staff about university initiatives and invitations to talks as described above, and a programme of social activities which also have the aim of supporting wellbeing. The success of these initiatives will be formally assessed shortly but they appear to be having a positive impact.

3. Oversight of resources

The University of Worcester does not have a culture of KPIs or regular formal reviews of services. However, Worcester like many UK Higher Education establishments faces significant financial challenges, and the Library is experiencing increasing scrutiny and challenge over its spending decisions. There is a growing need to demonstrate responsible use of finances and an ability to justify the resources purchased, especially the increasingly expensive ejournals and ebook packages. (Section 3.3 "We know and articulate the value and benefits of library use" and 5.4 "Library collections (including access to those externally) are well-used, adequate (number) and effective (nature and quality)").

Whilst we had good tracking of usage of subscriptions, it was identified through use of the Quality Framework that regular reporting of ebook usage and assessment of purchasing options was less strong. We have now set up a regular meeting of the relevant team leaders, chaired by the Finance Administrator where standard reports are submitted and discussed. Any decisions or queries are raised at the full management meeting or with the Director as appropriate. In addition, we are implementing Unsub (Unsub, n.d.) and ROAM Plus (ROAM.plus, n.d.) with related targets included in the relevant staff members' annual appraisal.

These changes have highlighted some staffing pressures so a small restructuring of the relevant team is also underway.

4. Student Engagement

Despite our longstanding success and history of innovation in this area, the period immediately post-COVID was challenging. Whereas we had previously had little difficulty in finding students to work with us on a voluntary basis, during the academic year 2021-22 even the offer of payment did not attract many students. Discussion with the Students Union and other university Library Directors suggested that this was a widespread phenomenon and it was identified as a development area in the review of the framework in summer 2022 (Section 1.2 "Stakeholder views and feedback and other evidence are used in the development of plans including business cases" and 2.6 "Students are involved in the delivery of library services").

In 2022-23 therefore, we allocated a small amount of the budget to recruit a team of students to work on projects throughout the year. This has been very successful with the students engaging enthusiastically and resulted not only in a number of projects being completed, but a poster and joint paper with some of the student team at the University's annual Student Experience conference. Some of the students also suggested an additional project around neurodiversity and we have extended their contract to allow for this. We intend to repeat this approach next year, but with slighter fewer students for more hours each.

Next steps

To date, most of the regular annual review against the framework has been carried out by the Director of Library Services when preparing for the CSE visit. This has also been influenced by several recent vacancies amongst senior managers in the team limiting the numbers of staff who can input. Now that the tool has been tested for several iterations and there is a new team in place, it is intended to share it more widely and encourage managers to reflect on those parts that refer particularly to them. Filling in the template, whilst not arduous is fairly time consuming

so the benefits of taking part in the process will need to be communicated to encourage engagement.

Currently, it is completed once a year, with occasional checks made throughout the year. It could usefully be more of a working document with more frequent reference made to it. One way of doing this and involving more of the staff in quality considerations could be to focus on one theme out of the eight at a number of management meetings throughout the year.

As earlier discussed, formal data to support the annual assessment is not systematically collected, with considerable reliance on personal knowledge of the service and the progress being made in different areas. This could be challenging in a larger library or where there is a stronger institutional culture and expectation of KPIs, analytics etc. We are working at identifying a key data set to support assessment of our annual operating statement and this is likely to inform the annual quality review and add some additional objectivity to the process.

Conclusions

The tool that has been implemented at Worcester met the immediate requirements of achieving Customer Services Excellence and was commended as an example of good practice by an assessor with extensive experience of both Quality Assessment and library services. It was based on a published and extensive review of approaches within academic libraries, covers all aspects of provision and explicitly relates to a service organisation. Taking all these factors into consideration suggests that it would be a useful tool for university libraries more generally, whether seeking accreditation or not. Its thoroughness, along with the ability to focus on specific areas, also suits it as a tool for advocacy.

Atkinson's lists of suggested evidence are biased towards the UK but could be replaced by equivalent data or documents depending on the context. It could be made more complex or data dependent if required, or kept fairly light touch and high level as we have done so far at Worcester.

Use of the blended tool at Worcester has successfully identified a number of areas of good practice as well as key gaps and areas for development, and ensured they are followed up. We intend to continue to use it for the foreseeable future. As it does not refer to any specific services or skills it is hoped that it will remain relevant, however as services evolve and new areas of professional interest emerge, it will be necessary to review the coverage to ensure it stays fit for purpose.

References

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