Recognizing Best Practice in Portuguese Higher Education Libraries

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to identify best practices in order to improve the quality of services in Portuguese academic libraries. This article describes an ongoing project to assess the performance of library services, resulting from a partnership of six Portuguese higher education libraries. The study has three main steps: (1) selection of criteria to be evaluated and selection of their corresponding performance indicators; (2) data collection and analysis; (3) identification of best practices. The selection of the criteria to be evaluated is based on a mixed model combining the Common Assessment Framework and the Balanced Scorecard. The associated performance indicators are in accordance with International Standards ISO 11620:1998 and ISO 2789:2006.

Keywords: benchmarking; academic libraries; performance assessment; Portugal

Introduction

This article describes a project to assess the performance of library services, resulting from a partnership of the Libraries of the Applied Mathematics and Pure Mathematics Departments of the Faculty of Science of the University of Porto, the Abel Salazar Institute of Biomedical Sciences of the University of Porto (ICBAS), the Lusíada University of Famalicão, the European Documentation Centre at the General Library of the University of the Azores, and the Documentation Centre of the Higher School of Nursing of Porto – S. João.

In an age of constant change and great competitiveness among companies, benchmarking has been widely used in commerce and industry over the past 25 years, in order to improve the quality of services and products (Camp, 1989). In an effort to improve the performance of documentation services, librarians and information managers all over the world have used this tool together with quality assessment models and performance indicators.

The vast body of literature on the subject provides multiple definitions of benchmarking. Cullen (2003) states that, in its application to libraries and information services, Foot offers a useful and pertinent concept – "a process of measuring your service's processes and performance and systematically comparing them to the performance of others in order to seek best practice" (Foot, 1998). This definition focuses several concepts in the area of Quality Management which are extremely relevant: systematic comparison; processes; performance; and analysis to achieve best practices.

Ponjuán (1998) identified 5 stages of the benchmarking process:

1. definition of the purpose of the benchmarking study (define critical factors of success)