Quality assurance in Library and Information Schools in Europe: major trends and issues

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Abstract

In Europe, the internationalisation process of higher education – driven by Bologna Process - have identified the objectives of improving quality assurance, transparency and recognition of qualifications. LIS guidelines for quality assurance and the recognition of professionals have been analised to discover a common definition of quality, of same purposes and of similar process. Could European LIS Schools collaborate toward a single accreditation system in Europe? The paper reports on the findings, limited to Europe, of an international survey, promoted and partly financed by IFLA Education and Training Section on quality assurance processes used in Library and Information Science (LIS) Schools. The survey has shown that, regardless of whether it concerns an institution or programme evaluation, assessment, audit or accreditation, there is a substantial convergence on: a common set of standards, a similar approach to evaluation process. It can be said also that quality assurance in LIS is more focused on resources and curriculum design than on learning outcomes and student evaluation. Conclusions will argue that further studies are required.

1. Background

The challenge of internationalisation in Europe is taking on a new precision and also a new urgency. The internationalisation process of Higher Education – started with the Bologna Declaration (Bologna Declaration 1999) - have focused quality improvement, transparency and recognition of qualifications as objectives to be reached in order to improve the overall performance and attractiveness of European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and to foster students mobility and professionals employability. The results of the Bologna process, at this stage of development, have been mainly based on the recognition issue: the architecture of the courses (established in three main cycles), the "Dublin descriptors" (Joint Quality Initiative 2002) to mark the outcomes of the first cycle and to distinguish from the outcomes of the second and the third cycle, the transfer and accumulation of credits (ECTS and ECVET systems), the European Qualification Framework and EUROPASS for facilitating mobility.

Later, at the Berlin ministers meeting (Berlin Communique 2003), quality assurance was added as an important objective for enhancing the competitiveness of EHEA and the Bologna process has indicated the learning outcomes/competence-oriented approach for quality assurance (Adam 2004). The learning outcomes focus is based on other important pillars of Bologna reform:
- the lifelong learning scenario where the student/adult learner, from student to full professional status, should be able to trace his progress with the identification and recognition of knowledge and skills acquired;
- the actual shift of pedagogy from teaching to learning, where the students/adult learners are in a more central role in the process of quality assurance;
- the collaboration with employers and the dialogue between all stakeholders for course design and better employability.

There is now a cascade effect for quality assurance in Europe that links: a learning outcomes orientation, the selection of appropriate teaching strategies, the development of suitable assessment techniques (Adam 2004). Sectors will be responsible for quality developments towards the gradual emergence of what is called *zones of mutual trust* and should guide the internationalisation of quality assurance; for example Engineering and Business communities have started interesting projects for international quality assurance schemas (Maffioli 2003; Prøitz, Stensaker, and Harvey 2003).

Kajberg (Kajberg 2002, 2003) says that Bologna process results in LIS schools in Europe are still weak. A lack of a common definition of quality, of same purposes and of similar processes seems to make difficult and also not desiderable to collaborate toward a single accreditation system for LIS. However, common trends must not to be overlooked. The paper provides an overview, describes the trends and give a first analysis of the quality assurance systems of LIS Schools in Europe. It is an introduction to the quality assurance process, as it is now, and provides a base for further studies.

2. Quality assurance in LIS Schools

Quality assurance has been considered a strategic importance for LIS schools in at least two approaches: 1) the professional associations accreditation of the programme, 2) the higher education institutions accreditation of the program. Strengths and weaknesses of these models have been extensively discussed. Saracevic (Saracevic 1994) speaks of the "iron grip" on library education held by the Committee on Accreditation (COA) of the American Libraries Association (ALA). Gorman (Gorman 2005) affirms that accreditation should be tied to national standards by cooperating with practitioners in developing curricula.

The Guidelines for LIS programmes accreditation, produced mainly by Library Associations, together with a documentary and literature review, have been analysed to outline common objectives, indicators and benchmarks. All the LIS guidelines are fairly general open and flexible enough to offer space for different approaches (Khoo, Majid, and Sattar Chaudry 2003). They cover areas as:

-   The context of the programme, the institutional support, the relationship with the parent institutions;
-   Mission, goals and objectives;
-   Curriculum;
-   Faculty and staff;
-   Students and policy and procedures;
-   Administration and financial support;
-   Instructional resources and facilities;
-   Regular review of the programme;
-   Employment and labour market.

The IFLA Education and Training (ET) Section has been studying the issue of equivalence and reciprocal recognition of academic qualifications in LIS since 1977 and its current activities still include the problems of international reciprocity/equivalency of qualifications and quality assurance. This led to the publication of the Guidelines for *equivalence and reciprocity of professional qualifications* (Fang and Nauta 1987). IFLA ET has produced later the *Guidelines for professional LIS programs* which define accreditation requisites, including core subjects (IFLA. Section Education and Training 2000). IFLA Guidelines specify theory and practice balance in the program and suggested having practicum, internship and fieldwork for students. The disciplines to be included in a core curriculum are indicated, together with transferable skills, as communication skills and teamwork, time and task management skills, analytical and problem solving.

Towards international recognition of qualifications, it is important the work of ECIA (European Council of Information Associations) which, in 1994, established a certification for allowing experienced professionals to obtain recognition of their level of qualification, even if they did not possess the corresponding diploma[1]. Another outcome was the definition of compatibility criteria between different certification systems. The second stage was CERTIdoc: its objective is the definition and establishment of a European certification system. The certification procedure will be the same, it will refer to the same range of competences, the certificate will have the same value ((Meyriat 2003). For almost all European countries, most of the information associations were interested in a European certification in higher levels and expect an integration in the information sector in Europe to learn from each other and to integrate the different professional groups in the information sector (archivists, librarians, documentalists, ecc.) (Rittberger and Schmid 2003). CERTIdoc (CERTIdoc Consortium 2003) has defined in this way the elements of an international recognition process to be agreed:

Competences: a set of skills necessary to perform a professional activity and the proficiency of required behaviour. The components are: knowledge, know-how, aptitudes. These are considered as proficient when put in practice effectively and validated;

Level of qualification: a person place in reference to a scale of qualifications, which separates the knowledge and know-how of an occupation (or group of similar occupations) into different functions. The level of qualification takes into account the individual's competence (especially technical), the complexity of different responsabilities undertaken as well as his/her degree of autonomy, decisiveness and foresight;

Profiles: directory of competencies necessary to exercise a profession.

The risk of recognition is to become a rigid grid, leading to the status quo conservation, instead of motivating people to continuing development. Recognition should be combined to a revised quality assurance model, focusing more on innovation, internationalisation and collaboration between different stakeholders. RAPID is an interesting project of collaboration between HE and VET. The RAPID process also enable the lifelong learners, from students to full professional status, to trace their progress through a process of identification of skills acquisition and further training needs (Brine and Feather 2003).

Competences lists are also important tools. Webber (Webber 1999) discusses three competences lists: two from Europe and one from US. The first is the Council of Europe study, in the context of the new book economy, including media and publishing inside the traditional library and information professionals competences. The second study, by TFPL on behalf of UK Government, is on Knowledge Management people competences. SLA study only was realised within a professional association, its target are educators, positioning the profession in the new environment of digital library. Webber highlights international issues as linguistic problems, problems of identifying up-to-date lists of target departments for all countries and problems of cultural identification. They would be compounded by the fact that a much broader range of professions is covered and that there would be a variety of different bodies carrying out the training.

3. Methodology

This paper is based on the findings of the survey on quality assurance processes in LIS Schools, promoted and completed by the IFLA Education and Training Section. The survey aim was that of

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[1]   This model of certification was followed by SEDIC (Spain) in 1997 and Germany (DGI) in 2001. Such achievements fostered the idea of a common endeavour: Decidoc (Develop EuroCompetencies for Information and Documentation). This resulted in *Euroguide LIS: the guide to competencies for European professionals in Library and Information services*.

achieving greater transparency of LIS professional qualifications and increasing mobility of students and employability. The survey objectives were:

- To explore the existence of quality assurance systems in LIS schools worlwide;
- To consider the different stakeholders role in quality assurance;
- To look at quality assurance models and procedures;
- To consider the quality assurance standards, guidelines and quality indicators followed by LIS schools.

The methodology used for the survey included:

- Literature and documentary review;
- Analysis of LIS Quality Guidelines and Standards;
- Library schools survey, using a questionnaire.

Via the first phase of the literature and documentary search of current practice and guidelines in LIS it has been drawn a taxonomy of quality assurance techniques, which has demonstrated that there are different quality assurance approaches related to different phases of the educational process and to different stakeholders with differences in focus and criteria for evaluation.

In the second phase, a questionnaire has been designed and it has been tested by the IFLA ET Section Standing Committee at Buenos Aires IFLA Conference; IFLA ET Section participants have collaborated for improving the questionnaire and feedback has been collected. A limitation of the questionnaire has been not to consider different levels of LIS programs. The questionnaire questions were related to the survey objectives as follows:

Survey objectives	Questionnaire questions
Existence of a quality assurance system Who is accrediting	1) Is the LIS program evaluated by a body outside the School?
Ways to review performance	2) How often does a formal evaluation of the LIS program take place? 4) Is a self-evaluation report delivered to the evaluating body? 5) Do site visits take place? *Documentation* 1) What standards and guidelines are used for the LIS program evaluation? 2) Is a follow up evaluation report made publicy available, not limited to School/University?
Ways to look at perfomance indicators Ways to look at outcomes	3) What aspects of the LIS program are evaluated?

The selection of LIS schools has been done:

- Firstly, looking at members of IFLA ET section acting as regional and local area guide.
- Then, using the following LIS Schools directories, for finding LIS schools web sites and email addresses in as much as possible countries in the world. Only LIS Schools websites still available were selected for the survey:
  - the list of UNESCO Libraries Portal;
  - and the Wilson' "World list of Departments and Schools of Information Studies, Information Management, Information Systems".

o Finally, using the LIS schools lists Bailey, JESSE and LISNET-ECSA to send a general message

The questionnaire sent to European LIS schools were 33. The selection of European LIS Schools has covered most of European countries. The total of replies to the questionnaire received were 29 (88%) One questionnaire was returned without having been filled.

Tab. 1 European LIS Schools Questionnaire statistics	
European LIS Schools selected for the survey	33
Total number of questionnaires returned by final deadline	25
Response to reminder letter	3
Response rate (as percentage of LIS Schools)	88 %
Number of invalid questionnaires returned	1

The replies have been analysed considering the research questions and objectives of the survey.

4. European LIS Schools survey findings

The analysis of the findings has considered:
- the assessor or accreditor of the program,
- the focus of quality assurance,
- the way to measure performance,
- the performance indicators and the outcomes.

The data are presented in aggregated form, including the number of replies received from all countries in Europe, and indicating in the second column (EU LIS) the European LIS Schools percentage value.

4.1 Is the LIS program evaluated by a body outside the School?

Most of the European countries have a national quality assurance system and a university quality audit, however 10% of LIS Schools in Europe have no external evaluation or accreditation of quality. It is important to note that one of the major problem plaguing the field of quality is the inconsistent use of the term. In Europe, there are different evaluation processes called with different names: validation, accreditation and quality assurance, but sometimes there are misunderstandings between the meanings. *Validation* referes to internal procedures of the higher education institutions, which ensure that a programme has fulfilled institutional criteria of quality. In some countries, as Italy for example, the validation is limited to the new programs and it is not only internal but requires an external approval (Government, Peer Committee, others). Validation is done only once, at the start of the program. Most of the European LIS Schools have quality assurance processes for periodic review of existing programmes of study and of their constituent modules. This process sometimes is an external accreditation systems but more often it is an internal quality audit or a national Agency, usually conforming to explicit guidelines for quality evaluation.

The quality assurance process of LIS Schools in Europe is at present driven by Government or Government founded agency (69%), combined in 35% of countries with internal Quality Audit. The quality assurance model driven by Professional Association is limited to few LIS Schools (only 7%).

Some of the Library Schools in Europe have other external assessors (21%). It is the case for example of employers representatives, or international panel for accreditation, or past students and

alumni associations. Other evaluation procedures include the Subject Review Audit done only in UK, for the Benchmarking process.

Tab. 2 Accreditors or Assessors	Replies	EU LIS Schools %
No accreditors	3	10
Government or a body funded by the government	20	69
University Quality Audit	10	35
Professional association	2	7
Other stakeholders (like external assessors, employers, alumni, etc.)	6	21
Total	41	

4.2 Ways to review performance

The quality assurance process most diffused in European LIS Schools is in four steps:
- - periodically evaluation process;
- - self-assessment;
- - peer export site visit;
- - follow up report.

The process usualy takes place every two to five years (66%), with self assessment and site visit (55 and 52% respectively), often combined together. Differencies could be evidenced for the follow up report, not often produced (only 41%)and with limited publicity (only 7% made the report public).

Most of the respondents said that guidelines are followed. Tipically the guidelines are part of an accreditation handbook or policy manual that contains a description of the accrediting process, the eligibility requirements, relevant policies that institutions must address in their self study reports and other documentation developed to assist institutions that are preparing self study and conducting evaluation and assessment exercises. The policy generally elucidate standards and relate to their application. In most of the case, the European LIS schools have to follow the guidelines which are given by the Government Agency and they are common for all the Faculty and not subject related.

Tab. 3 Quality Assurance Process in Europe		
Periodicity	**Replies**	**EU LIS Schools %**
- annually	4	14
- two to five years	19	66
- over five years	0	0
- other	4	14
Self assessment	16	55
Site visit	15	52
Follow up report		
Publicy available	12	41

| Not available | 2 | 7 |

4.3 Performance indicators

Quality assessment criteria and indicators could act as a thinking device to promote ongoing dialogue about quality in Europe. This section groups and lists in descending order the aspects of quality assurance that the respondents have indicated. The resources and content design indicators are ranked higher (respectively 83% and 66% of countries) which is consistent with the fact that input measures are more diffused than others.

Quantitative and demographical data on students are also considered quality indicators by 48% of countries.

Other indicators (about 21%) refer to: staff quality (eg professional experience, academic background, contribution to the professional development), research productivity, value based education, cultural meetings etc.; some countries consider the international activities, teaching materials, academic and service staff.

Tab. 4 Performance indicators in Europe	Replies	EU LIS Schools %
The design and content of the program	24	83
Resources in terms of funding, staff numbers and IT/Library facilities	19	66
Number of students, drop - out rates, recruitment	14	48
Other	6	21

4.4 Ways to look at outcomes

The outcomes focus is less used tha input measures. Students are involved in quality assurance by 69% of countries. Learning outcomes is used by 52% of countries, at different level. Other output measures have been indicated (about 14%) as: percentage of students working after graduation, approval of work done by students from library professionals, measure of relevance to the labour market, research and scholarly publication activity and strategic position of the program inside the university.

Tab. 5 Outcomes in Europe	Replies	EU LIS Schools %
Student evaluation of the learning experience	20	69
Assessment of student learning outcomes through exams and/or employers evaluations	15	52
Other	4	14

5. Conclusion

The survey has shown that, regardless of whether it concerns quality evaluation, assessment, audit or accreditation, there is a substantial convergence on: a common set of standards, and a similar

approach to evaluation process in Europe. The findings of the survey[2] have demonstrated that there is a common ground for LIS Schools quality assurance towards the contribution to the EHEA realisation. Further studies are needed for understanding how Bologna process could enhance quality assurance in LIS Schools and how the focus on learning outcomes could be introduced, working collaboratively with stakeholders on qualifications and profiles of information professionals.

Standards for the evaluation of LIS Schools in Europe should be related to the Bologna process. After Bergen, Bologna process focus on quality has been further clarified: quality is linked to the the realisation of the European Qualifications Framework. The different level of evaluation (international, national, local) were clarified, trying to define integration and differences of approaches of different stakeholders in different phasesof the educational process. The certification and accreditation processes could be considered as two faces of a same coin, and LIS Schools could have a new role in it.

One question could be done: Does quality assurance makes a difference? The discussion is particularly important for two reasons:
- first, it prompts us to consider the need for more impact research and indirectly perhaps the need for more research-informed approach to quality evaluation;
- second, it is worth reflecting the case while the improvement has been the secondary feature of most external review systems.

The difficulty is to find if there is an impact on the quality of student learning. Harvey (Harvey 1995) proposes a model for the transformation of quality evaluation, now most frequently informed by accountability and control; this is the reason for the author why consequently quality evaluation has contributed little to any effective transformation of student learning experience. As would be expected, in a diverse higher education system where institutions have distinctive missions and goals, universities vary in their approach to defining the attributes they expect of their graduates. Graduate outcomes are a critical indicator of how effectively universities are defining and instilling the skills and attributes expected of their graduates, with success in the labour market being the most obvious indicator of good outcomes. Given, however, that research training and more broadly, the provision of lifelong learning opportunities and skills upgrading are a significant aspect of the role played by the higher education sector in meeting Knowledge society's economic, social and cultural needs, another key indicator is the active participation of graduates in the quality assurance process.

Further study should try to reply to following questions:
- To which extent can we identify a LIS sector initiative aiming at European solutions for quality?
- What is the institutional/organisational basis of a LIS initiative at this level?
- Can we observe common problems, approaches and solutions across others sectors, for example engineering (ABET) and business (EQUIS)?

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[2] As part of the survey methodology, IFLA has collected a number of guidelines and quality policy documents that IFLA members could be willing to share. They are available for consultation in the IFLA survey on QA website (provisional URL: turing.ittig.cnr.it/ifla/index.html).

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