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Developing a culture that values the need for assessment and continuous improvement: the growth of a learning organisation

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Abstract

In a period of six years, the University of Wollongong (UOW) Library was transformed through a planned change management strategy. Prior to 1994 the Library was considered to be a conservative, hierarchically structured and risk-averse organisation using few and questionable performance indicators and measures to ascertain its success. The selection of the Australian Business Excellence Framework as the management framework to drive and support transformational change led to the development of a new cultural paradigm. Within a few years, the Library was positioned for external scrutiny and underwent assessment by third party evaluators using nationally and internationally recognised criteria of business excellence. UOW Library became the first, and at the time of writing this paper, the only library in Australia to be recognised with the prestigious Australian Business Excellence Award. By the year 2000, the goal of developing and fostering a culture valuing assessment had been achieved.

Session 15

Developing a culture that values the need for assessment and continuous improvement: the growth of a learning organisation

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Introduction

In a period of six years, the University of Wollongong (UOW) Library was transformed through a planned change management strategy. Prior to 1994 the Library was considered to be a conservative, hierarchically structured and risk-averse organisation using few and questionable performance indicators and measures to ascertain its success. The selection of the Australian Business Excellence Framework as the management framework to drive and support transformational change led to the development of a new cultural paradigm. Within a few years, the Library was positioned for external scrutiny and underwent assessment by third party evaluators using nationally and internationally recognised criteria of business excellence. UOW Library became the first, and at the time of writing this paper, the only library in Australia to be recognised with the prestigious Australian Business Excellence Award. By the year 2000, the goal of developing and fostering a culture valuing assessment had been achieved.

What is a culture of assessment?

Terms such as 'culture of assessment', 'learning organisation', 'performance orientation' are becoming pervasive in contemporary professional literature and are often used to describe features indicative of a high performing organisation. If such a culture is considered to be a desirable state, how is it to be achieved? Is it simply a case of identifying performance indicators and measures? Is it asking staff to report on pre-determined metrics and outcomes? Is it surveying clients and other key stakeholders? While is it possible to tentatively answer 'yes' to these questions, are these practices truly indicative of a culture that values the need for assessment and continuous improvement? The answer that can be offered is 'it depends'. Why? It depends on how systematic the notion of performance measurement and evaluation is throughout the

organisation; it depends on whether the organisation is measuring the right things at the right time and who actually decides or influences the selection of performance measures; it depends on whether there exists an ethos of empowerment and responsibility for performance measurement; it depends on whether the organisation is learning from regular and systematic measurement and evaluation.

Lakos (2002) has defined a:

... Culture of Assessment is an organisational environment in which decisions are based on facts, research and analysis, and where services are planned and delivered in ways that maximise positive outcomes and impacts for customers and stakeholders. A culture of assessment exists in organisations where staff care to know what results they produce and how these results relate to customers' expectations. Organisation mission, values, structures and systems support behaviour that is performance and learning focus (Lakos, 2002)

Can organisations make the necessary cultural shift to support and value assessment? They can, but not without the investment needed to develop infrastructure, systems and people. It is an investment that few organisations can not afford to make. The ability to acquire, interpret and synthesise information and knowledge is becoming a key differential in an increasingly competitive market place. If such a state is to be achieved, what can a library do to facilitate development and more importantly sustain a culture of assessment and continuous learning?

**Where to start? At the beginning**
In its earliest days the University of Wollongong Library was far removed from the notion of a *Culture of Assessment.* It was characteristic of its time in being conservative, hierarchically structured, cautious in its approach and risk averse. Performance measurement at the time focussed on inputs and outputs, primarily those considered mandatory for reporting purposes.

The appointment of a new leadership team in the mid 1980's signalled an agenda for change. Strategic planning was instigated, accompanied by management training for senior staff. Staff development was embraced as a driver for change. Team-based structures were implemented in the late 1980's and performance management was introduced driving increased involvement of all staff in planning. This formed the foundation on which to build further improvements.

The Australian Quality Council's Quality Framework was selected as a change management framework. The Australian Business Excellence Framework (ABEF), as it is now known, provided a structured and integrated management system upon which the Library could build upon its earlier successes as well as identifying areas that had been addressed less rigorously. The Framework provides descriptions of the essential features, characteristics and approaches of organisational systems that promote sustainable and excellent performance (SAI, 2004). In describing the ABEF (see figure 1), SAI-Global (2004) states:

'Business Excellence provides organisations with a systematic and structured approach to assess and improve the performance of its leadership and management systems in the key areas of organisational capability, namely: Leadership; Strategy and Planning; Data, Information and Knowledge; People; Customer and Market Focus; Innovation, Quality and Improvement; Success and Sustainability'.

Figure 1 - Australian Business Excellence Framework
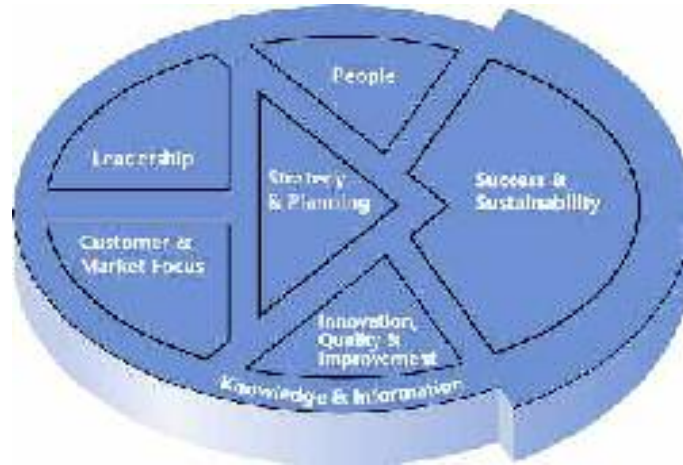
The ABEF is underpinned by twelve principles of business excellence (see table 1). When establishing criteria for the selection of a management framework, it was important that these principles were compatible with the Library's own articulated values and beliefs.

Table 1 – A summary of the 12 Principles of Business Excellence

1.	• Clear direction allows organisational alignment and a focus on achievement of goals • Clear direction helps people know what to do, why they are doing it and how their individual and team efforts contribute to achieving the organisation's goals
2.	• Mutually agreed plans translate organisational direction into actions • Organisations cannot measure progress and success without plans that set out the direction and goals
3.	• Understanding what customers value, now and in the future, influences organisational direction, strategy and action • Organisations must strive to understand and anticipate their customers' needs and provide them with outstanding service and product quality
4.	• To improve the outcome, improve the system and its associated processes • Specific processes and/or whole systems must be studied and changed in order to achieve predictable long-term improvement
5.	• The potential of an organisation is realised through its people's enthusiasm, resourcefulness and participation • An organisation's agility depends on the way people accept the need for change and respond rapidly with sustainable improvements

6.	• Continual improvement and innovation depend on continual learning • Without continual learning about how the organisation works, what its stakeholders expect and what the environment is demanding, organisations can only repeat past mistakes, make bigger mistakes and ultimately cease to exist
7.	• All people work in a system; outcomes are improved when people work on the system • The people working in a particular process understand that process best. Harvest their ideas and work with them to improve the system and its outcomes
8.	• Effective use of facts, data and knowledge leads to improved decisions • It is the willingness to analyse past decisions … with the aid of effective data and information management systems … support evaluation, decision-making, risk management and operational improvement
9.	• All systems and processes exhibit variability, which impacts on predictability and performance • Because variation has an impact on predictability and costs, management of variation should be a high priority. Variation must be understood and managed to enhance performance and allow organisations to make and keep realistic promises to stakeholders
10.	• Organisations provide value to the community through their actions to ensure a clean, safe and prosperous society • This means that benefits to a wider range of stakeholders … need to be demonstrated. Your organisation should show how it is aware of its potential for constructive or adverse impact on both current and future communities
11.	• Sustainability is determined by an organisation's ability to create and deliver value for all stakeholders • How do organisations know they are creating and delivering value for all their stakeholders? Are their perceptions of the organisation being measured? Are these measures linked to organisational plans
12.	• Senior leadership's constant role-modelling of these Principles and their creation of a supportive environment to live these Principles are necessary for the organisation to reach its true potential

In 1994, the Library's formal commitment to total quality management and continuous improvement was launched through the *Quality and Service Excellence* program. This title was chosen as these three elements underpin most quality philosophies and succinctly describe the key aims of the UWL quality program. The quality journey commenced.

Barriers
Evaluation of the Library's culture at that time, using tools such as organisational self assessment and staff surveys, revealed that data collection was extensive but analysis insufficient to convert data into information. In addition, evaluation revealed that the skill set least evident amongst staff included the ability to analyse and graphically present data and information and to understand statistical variation (McGregor, 2004).

These findings were not unusual for their time. Research on academic libraries in the United States revealed similar outcomes. Hiller (2000) describes the obstacles that stand in the way of developing a culture of assessment as: organisation structure and

inadequate leadership, librarian unease with quantitative analysis, lack of good data analysis and presentation skills.

The way forward
Overcoming such barriers was critical to realising the envisaged 'desire to know' culture that would support the commitment to becoming a learning organisation. As espoused by change management theorists, the involvement of people in planning and implement desired change is essential to success.

Planned preparation and training activities permeated the entire organisation, not only at the supervisor or team leader levels. All staff received extensive in-house training in quality tools and techniques and the basic concepts associated with measurement and evaluation. This same skill set was vital in the next stage of development – identification of performance indicators and measures (McGregor, 2004).

A key outcome of this training was the identification of change champions. Opportunities were sought to encourage these 'champions' to promulgate the principles of *Quality and Service Excellence* in more informal contexts. Quality Improvement Teams (QITs) were formed to address process issues identified through consultation with stakeholders. Of a cross-functional nature, the teams were designed to examine business problems using quality tools and techniques and to put forward a series of recommendations for improvement. Additionally, teams provided new leadership development opportunities, e.g. as team leader or team facilitator. Closer ties with the Executive and other senior leaders was afforded, for example, members of the Library Executive Committee were sponsors of the various teams. QITs allowed staff to reinforce skills learnt in training programs and, most importantly, offered staff the opportunity to effect change within the organisation.

Identifying Performance Indicators and Measures
Prior to the development of an in-house suite of performance indicators and measures, datasets primarily consisted of those mandated by government agencies or professional associations. The emphasis was mostly on inputs and outputs. At the time, and even today, there is a paucity of measures within this sector that assist in the evaluation of quality and effectiveness, as well as efficiency of libraries. In short, it was challenging to find indicators and measures aligned with the principles of *Quality and Service Excellence*.

A desired outcome of restructuring the organisation and devolving leadership to teams was that team members would become responsible for conducting, analysing and reporting their team's performance. Instilling a sense of ownership of performance indicators and measures was vital to this process.

A lengthy, but ultimately worthwhile, consultative process commenced to establish performance indicators and measures. The University Librarian with members of the newly formed Quality Steering Committee systematically worked with each team to identify key processes and activities; identify performance goals for each process; identify the factors that can/could affect performance; and select performance indicators and measures. This process generally took two to three team meetings to accomplish.

Towards the end of the process, the frequency, timing and methods of reporting were determined.

As reporting expectations grew, skill gaps in statistical literacy became evident. In response, a new workshop TQM Plus was introduced. Structured on statistical models, it was designed to refresh mathematical and basic statistical skills. For some, those had lain dormant for a number of years. The workshop assisted staff to select the appropriate reporting methodology depending on datasets and report audiences. This was supplemented with training in statistical and data management packages such as Excel. Style guides were revised to include preferred styles for presenting data in graphical formats.

A Performance Indicator Framework was developed to provide a foundation for the systematic review of services and processes using measures aligned with stakeholder needs and expectations. Teams were expected to report results, identify trends and elaborate on variations and corrective actions.

Values and the Ideal Culture
The development of performance indicators and measures to evaluate organisational performance, while critical, provided little in the way of describing the enabling behaviours and practices required to instil a culture valuing assessment. Library Values were first articulated in 1995 through a highly consultative process. Staff workshops identified shared beliefs and norms and these underpinned the framework within which all staff were enabled to recognise and understand their own, and their peers', overall responsibility for organisational performance. As the organisational culture matured, the Values were reviewed. The latest iteration is known as the *Values and Ideal Culture.* The concept of an *Ideal Culture* was premised on a vision of how the Library would look, sound and feel if the Values and their associated behaviours were internalised and practised to their optimal level. Behaviours aligned with developing and fostering a culture that values assessment include, for example:

Value	Behaviours
People First	• Striving to understand our clients' needs through consultation and feedback
Initiative	• Actively seeking information to improve our processes and services
Commitment	• Taking pride in planning, anticipating change and working towards achieving our goals
Open Communication	• Actively listening to gain understanding and share information

Making measurement and assessment part of day-to-day work
A review of position and person profiles (otherwise known as position descriptions) in the late 1990's offered further opportunities to inculcate the *Values and Ideal Culture* and supporting behaviours. Moving beyond the traditional paradigm of simply describing tasks to be performed, the new profiles place a particular emphasis on behaviours and attributes staff are expected to demonstrate in their day-to-day working relationships. For example:

Extracts from Position and Person Profiles

Agreed Critical Success Factors and Key Performance Indicators guide the development of strategic initiatives, goals and objectives which inform the annual strategic planning process in which all Library teams develop individual objectives, strategies and performance targets.

A supportive environment which includes a range of training and development opportunities enables staff to meet the challenges of their position. In turn, each staff member has an individual responsibility to contribute to the improvement of processes within their team and throughout the Library.

Responsibilities within Position Descriptions are supplemented with articulated performance outcomes and performance indicators against which individuals are assessed twice yearly.

These documents were further supported through staff related policies, in particular the policy: *Managing for Excellence Performance – Responsibilities and Expectations*. The policy outlines the expected attributes of the Library workforce. To illustrate the intent of the policy an extract follows:

The Personal and Performance Attributes are a set of behaviours that the Library has identified to describe excellent performance for Library staff who are our most valuable asset. The Attributes, with the Values, form the Ideal Culture. The behaviours are aligned with the Library's strategic direction. The Attributes aim to develop a workforce that is prepared, involved, motivated and committed to achieving excellence. The Attributes:
- supplement staff's *Position and Person Profiles*
- clarify Library expectations of staff and outline their responsibilities
- aid in the development of *Position and Person Profiles*
- provide criteria to discuss and gain feedback on individual performance
- help staff identify training and/or development needs for personal development

Identified with input from staff, the Performance Attributes have been identified in four layers:
- All staff
- Team coordinators
- HEW 6 and up
- Library Executive

Each Attribute describes observable behaviours, for example, all staff are required to:

All staff	Demonstrated Behaviours
Contributes effectively as a team member	• Displays appreciation of and support for other team members • ***Shows commitment to team improvements by contributing to decision making and planning processes**** • Supports team decisions • Manages disagreements and misunderstandings openly
Channels Communication Effectively	• Clarifies for understanding, particularly complex, technical issues and jargon • Ensures communication is clear and precise • Confirms success of communication strategies by seeking feedback and responses • Facilitates open communication between team members and other teams • ***Assumes responsibility for disseminating acquired information**** • ***Submits information for reports in the required format and within the set timeframes**** • ***Actively seeks information****
Integrates quality into work activities	• ***Displays commitment to continually improving all aspects of work**** • ***Contributes suggestions to improve processes and services**** • ***Understands the management framework of Vision, Mission, CSFs, KPI, Values and Goals**** • ***Endeavours to provide service to maintain standards and reach targets****

* of particular relevance in developing a culture that values assessment

The opportunity to develop new skills, such as, data collection and analysis and process and project management, is valued and has provided a new level of interest and job enrichment for many staff. For some, the development of new skills has offered career progression opportunities.

Ongoing Integration of Assessment Principles
To signal the long-term commitment to the *Quality and Service Excellence* program, a concerted effort was made to embed the principles of business excellence in all Library activity. Since 1996, key reports such as Monthly Reports, Performance Reports and Annual Reports have been structured to reflect this integration. Information is organised under Critical Success Factors and performance indicators instead of functional areas, making it easier for stakeholders (including staff) to interpret core business and strategic outcomes. This approach has been a powerful catalyst in promulgating a 'systems view' of the organisation for teams and individuals. It illustrates that no one team owns *client satisfaction* or *efficient resource management*, but all share responsibility to effect outcomes in these critical areas.

In summary, data and information is used to: improve services, processes and operations for the benefit of stakeholders; develop and manage client relationships; forecast service and program viability and strategically plan for long-term success and sustainability.

Much of this discussion has focussed on internal communication and application of assessment practices. Published *Service Standards* provided the vehicle to communicate to service excellence to clients and stakeholders. Service Standards are communicated through a *Client Service Charter* which outlines what clients can expect from the Library and which key services and activities will be measured.

In the beginning, the identification of measurable, guaranteed standards was approached with caution by most teams. This was partially due to the lack of process data needed to establish more informed standards, as well as concern about occasions when standards might not be met. To overcome these initial concerns, standards were somewhat conservative until substantive datasets could be collected to gain an improved understanding of process capability. They did, however, address issues identified by clients as being important, in particular the timeliness of response and processing times.

In the mean time, teams were encouraged to set stretch targets. These stretch targets although not communicated to clients, provided the necessary impetus to challenge existing process capability and implement continuous improvement initiatives.

Improved understanding of process capability and variation has influenced the cultural language of the organisation. A recent review of Service Standards saw a significant shift in conviction and confidence in articulating the Library's intent to its clients. Instead of 'we endeavour' or 'we aim' as in past iterations of the *Client Service Charter,* Library staff now state 'we will'!

Extract from the Client Service Charter

We are committed to meeting your service needs and to continuously improving the quality of everything we do.

We will:

- Respond to you at service desks promptly and courteously within 5 minutes
- Make returned items available within 6 hours
- Have 100% of obtainable items on reading lists held by the Library or on order
- Have newly received resources ready for borrowing within 5 working days
- Fill 90% of document delivery requests within 10 working days
- Respond to urgent requests within 1 working day of receipt
- Respond to suggestions and feedback which include a name and contact details within 2 working days

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Benchmarking
Benchmarking of services provides a different lens through which to view process capability and relevance of existing performance measures. Benchmarking strategies utilised by the Library include both formal and informal benchmarking. Identification and observation of good practices occurring outside the organisation provided valid and considered reflection of internal practices. Processes benchmarked include traditional library activities such as acquisitions, cataloguing and document delivery.

Structured self assessment enables internal benchmarking through the evaluation of the integration and acceptance of business excellence principles; it is an inclusive exercise and all components and members of the organisational system are considered. This includes support units and support staff, supplier and strategic partner relationships as well as key stakeholders. Through the involvement of all key stakeholders, not just the executive or management teams, the organisation can evaluate the depth of understanding and deployment of strategies which have been developed to move the

organisation forward. Therefore, self assessment outcomes can be a valuable input into the annual business planning cycle (McAdam and Welsh, 2000), ensuring opportunities are prioritised, actioned and resourced forming a structured approach to organisational development and growth. Self assessment is also a powerful catalyst for a change agenda, as it provides evidence of what needs to be improved at all levels of the organisation (McAdam and Welsh, 2000).

Assisting suppliers to benchmark their performance is at the heart of supplier evaluation within Service Level Agreements (SLAs). Suppliers receive regular reports illustrating their performance against other suppliers (other suppliers are blinded in the reports). This has been a useful mechanism in encouraging a more competitive approach towards improving performance with mutual benefit for both the Library and the supplier.

More challenging was benchmarking the principles of business excellence, for instance, leadership effectiveness, communication, strategy and planning and management of change. Involvement in the former Australian Quality Awards and the Australian Business Excellence Awards offered an entrée into organisations outside the library and information sector. The Library has benchmarked with a diverse range of firms and organisations including: legal, telecommunications, pharmaceutical and health. Fundamentally, most organisations desire the same things: to be leaders in their field; to have an extensive and loyal customer base; to posses the capacity to respond to and lead change effectively; to develop skilled and knowledgeable staff and to sustain their viability and success over time. (McGregor, 2004). The diversity of organisational practices identified through benchmarking outside the sector introduced new vigour to examining of Library practices. The subsequent review and redesign of processes yielded significant improvements.

The most rigorous form of benchmarking and structured assessment evaluation was through the Australian Business Excellence Awards application process. A team of independent evaluators examined a comprehensive, 50 page portfolio of evidence, followed by a one and a half day site visit to evaluate performance against the 7 ABEF categories. Through this process, the Library was benchmarked against globally recognised principles of excellence. After evaluation, a feedback report was presented, identifying strengths and opportunities for improvement. The successful actioning of this feedback is reflected in the external recognition: Australian Quality Award, Achievement Level in 1996 and Australian Quality Awards for Business Excellence, Finalist 1998.

In describing the criteria for recognition, SAI-Global, Business Excellence Australia notes:
- Applicants should have a systematic approach to measuring and improving their performance
- At least three cycles of data showing positive trends is evident
- The organisation is learning and is willing to share its learnings
- A best practice culture will have been in place long enough to sustain continuing improvement and be robust in the face of the major change
- Its activities will be benchmarks for others

The Library was assessed as meeting this criteria winning the Australian Business Excellence Award in 2000 and could consider that it had achieved its goal of developing and fostering a culture valuing assessment.

Conclusion

Self assessment against recognised standards of excellence continues on a regular basis. The Library is an accredited *Investors in People* organisation (this is a prestigious international best practice standard which supports effective investment in the training and development of all people to achieve business goals) and has invested in annual surveillance audits since 1999.

Planned review of key activities is scheduled in an annual calendar of events and plans. The Performance Indicator Framework and Service Standards are formally reviewed every two years to test for relevance and to identify changes in process capability and to respond to the ever-changing needs of clients and stakeholders.

Client satisfaction results are benchmarked nationally, providing a new focus for continued improvement as well as offering potential for the sharing of good practices across institutions. Staff opinions are evaluated formally every two years via a Staff Perceptions Survey. The survey includes items designed to measure access to data and information and to monitor the quality of services and products. See figures 2 and 3.

Figure 2 – staff perception trends

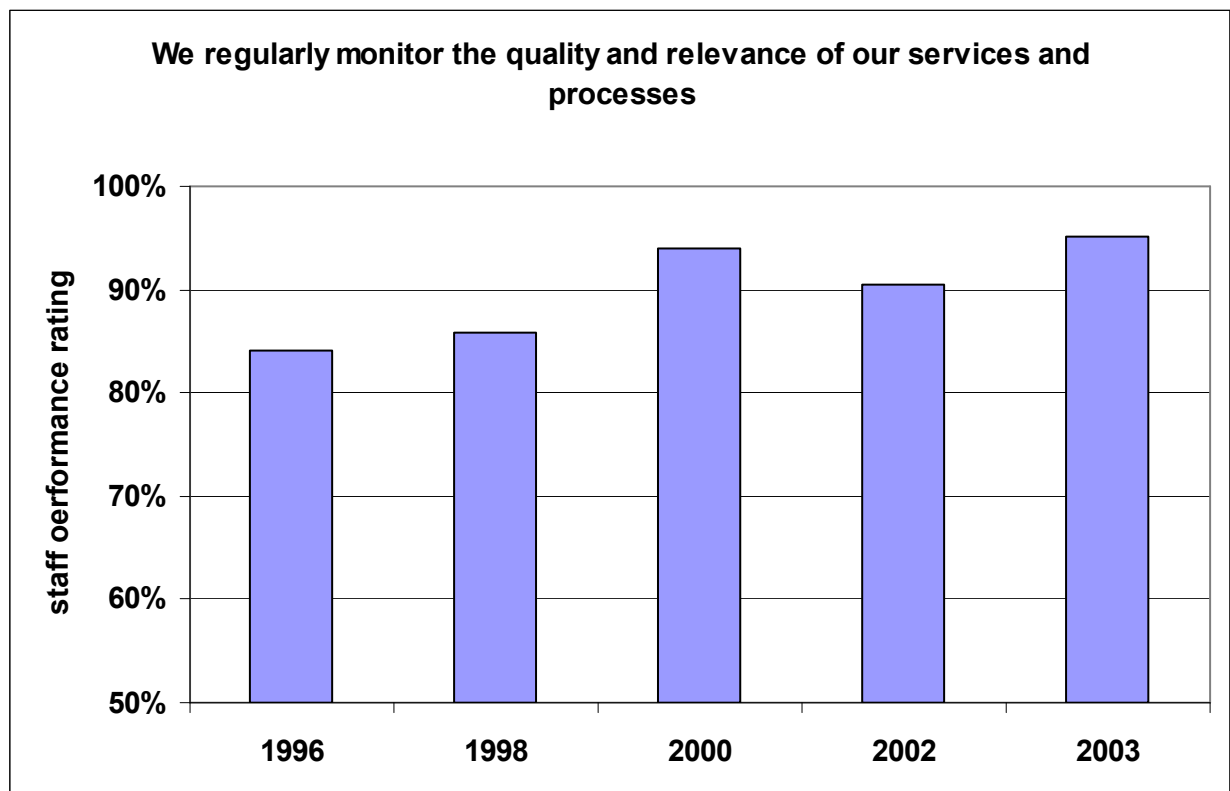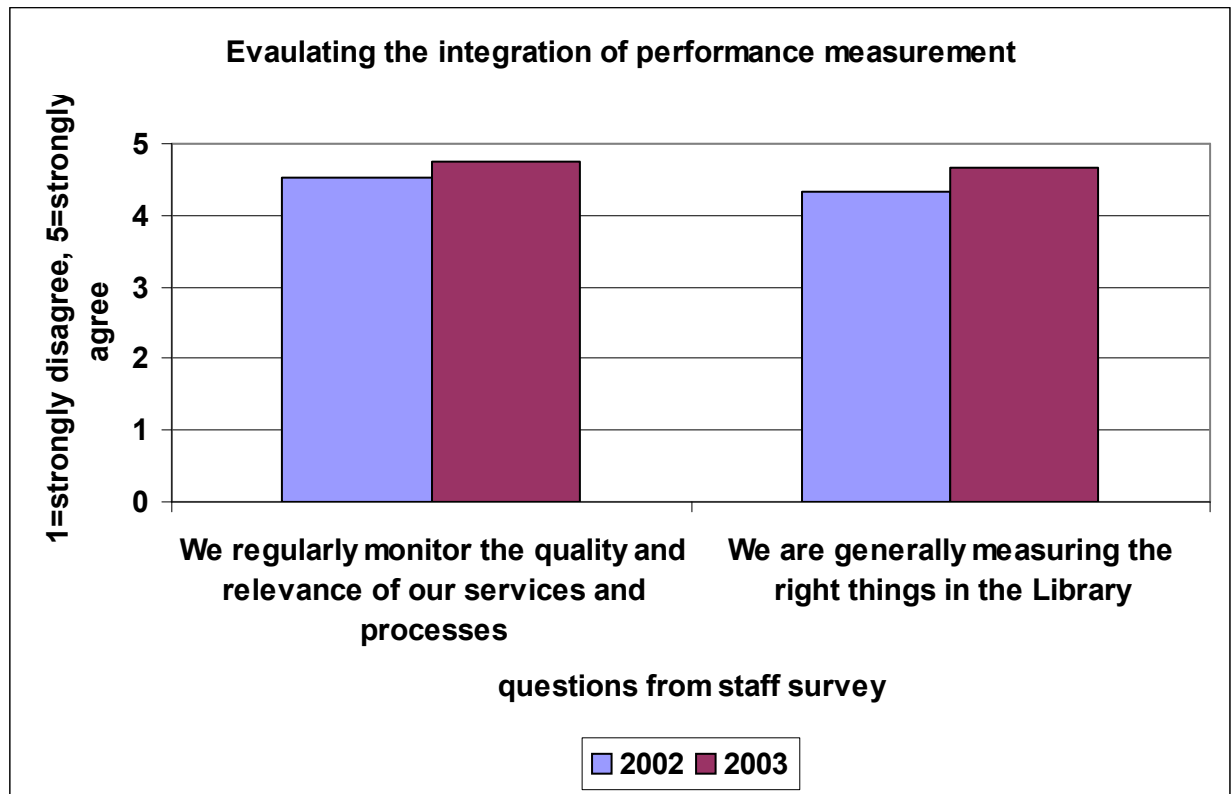We regularly monitor the quality and relevance of our services and processes

Figure 3 – staff perception trends

The integration of best practice principles of performance measurement into the day-to-day management and long term vision of the Library has resulted in:
- improved clarity of goals and purpose
- active involvement and participation of staff at all levels in achieving the mission of the organisation
- increased client and stakeholder satisfaction with Library services and
- a collective responsibility and passion for ongoing success.

The decision to adopt a business excellence framework as a management framework for the Library has been vindicated through increased external scrutiny of higher education institutions, most notably by the Australian Quality Audit Agency (AUQA). Brendan Nelson (2005) has stated that 'perceptions of quality will need to be informed by freely accessible information about performance outcomes.' The development of a culture valuing assessment has positioned the Library for external scrutiny and assessment, today and for the future.

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