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Quality Assessment - combating complacency

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Abstract

Quality management was formally adopted by the University of Wollongong Library in 1994 as a management framework compatible with established values and previous change programs. Despite considerable goal accomplishment in recent years, new strategies were needed to continue to build on strengths, and to assimilate continuous review and improvement as a means of managing future change. Application for the Achievement in Business Excellence Award was selected as an indicator to measure progress towards the goal: Incorporation of Total Quality Management principles into all aspects of Library management. The process is quite rigorous and the commitment of leaders and staff at all levels is essential for success.

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Quality management was formally adopted by the University of Wollongong Library in 1994 as a management framework compatible with established values and previous change programs. Despite considerable goal accomplishment in recent years, new strategies were needed to continue to build on strengths, and to assimilate continuous review and improvement as a means of managing future change. Application for the *Achievement in Business Excellence Award* was selected as an indicator to measure progress towards the goal: *Incorporation of Total Quality Management principles into all aspects of Library management*. The process is quite rigorous and the commitment of leaders and staff at all levels is essential for success.

Wollongong's Quality Journey

Recognising that successful change and innovation must be carefully planned, the University of Wollongong Library has, over the last decade, experimented with various management theories, models and instruments, with the goal of creating a world-class library service. Improving the quality of staff has been a persistent, pervasive and dominant objective and is one of the major factors responsible for the noticeable improvement in Library services in recent years. Many of the strategies employed in pursuit of this objective are strategies which are also fundamental to the success of Quality Management programs, for example, the breaking down of interdepartmental barriers, the introduction of team-based structures, the establishment of a framework for ongoing training and development, rethinking of work flows and procedures, the integration of functions and the involvement and empowerment of staff. The Library was, therefore, well placed to build on this foundation and implement Quality Management.

Although the Library had established a good reputation for effective service provision, complacency would be mis-placed in an environment which is increasingly competitive and performance-oriented. The Library Executive sought an iterative change-management and review framework which would consolidate previous strategies and facilitate future advances. Although the University's budget allocation process is not currently based on performance, it may be in future. A major factor in selecting a program emphasising

performance measurement was strategic; to ensure that the Library would be equipped to meet future challenges of this kind.

Quality management was adopted, therefore, as a comprehensive and integrating framework which was applicable to the Library's particular stage of development and to the successful management of the current and perceived future environments. The established credibility of the Quality philosophy and the availability of external assessment and recognition provided impetus and, ultimately, recognition for achievement. With its emphasis on quantifiable measurement and process management, some aspects of the program were daunting initially. However, determination to maintain funding levels and demonstrate the success of service improvements provided incentives to implement all aspects of quality management, not just those which built on previous improvements.

The *Quality and Service Excellence* program was implemented in 1994. The introductory stages of the program were conducted with the assistance of a consultant working under the auspices of the Australian Quality Council. Phase 1 of the program was designed to establish baseline data relating to staff and client perceptions of quality and included interviews with representatives of major client groups and with a cross-section of Library staff.

Library users were interviewed in *Client Focus Groups*, conducted by the consultant and trained volunteers from the Library staff. The following information was collected and analysed:

- the services sought from the Library by each major client group
- the service attributes considered important by each major client group and their relative ranking
- the Library's performance against client expectations
- the Library's performance against that of any perceived competitors

Client Quality Perceptions

81 customers participated in 11 focus groups representing academic staff, undergraduate and postgraduate students and other Library users. Essentially, clients were asked to identify and rank the important attributes of Library service and to rate the Library's performance against each attribute, in terms of client expectations. They were then asked to identify the Library's major competitors and to rank its performance against each competitor.

Client primary needs were identified and grouped under the following headings: *resources, availability, responsiveness, information, facilities* and *environment.* Results from the 11 groups were averaged. Predictably, the Library's performance in meeting the

need for *resources* rated poorly. Performance in meeting customers' expectations for other needs was rated as *usually meets expectations*.

Employee Quality Perceptions

Twenty five Library staff, comprising a cross section of employees from senior management to general library assistants, were interviewed. Employees were asked to define their understanding of quality and to rate the Library's quality performance on a scale of 1 to 5. The vast majority gave a rating of between 3 and 4, no one gave a rating of below 3. Most believed that the Library's quality performance was improving, while indicating there was substantial room for improvement. There was widespread recognition of the need to obtain more regular feedback from customers. Staff were asked to respond to 30 statements concerning quality aspects of the organisation, for example, *all staff are involved in service improvement activities.* Of the 30 statements, thirteen received an average response of 4 or above. According to the consultant, this was an exceptionally high response, usually obtained after the implementation of a TQM program.

While the above results reinforced the effectiveness of staffing strategies, there was little reason for complacency overall. The most challenging aspect of the program was to achieve an improvement in client perceptions, particularly in the area of resource provision.

Phase 2 of the program included training for all staff in TQM awareness and techniques, with particular relevance to the Library environment. A number of staff volunteered for additional training in group facilitation and these staff volunteered to lead the first *Quality Improvement Teams*. (*Q* Teams). Projects were then selected from the areas of concern identified in Phase 1.

Three *Q* teams were formed in 1995, comprising a cross-section of staff volunteers. Two teams included client representatives, either student or academic or both. Teams were given a defined time-frame to analyse the process to be improved, collect baseline data, identify improvements and provide a report to management, including the team's recommendations. Teams also presented their findings, in a less formal format, at what has become an annual event, the *Library Breakfast*. The tradition has evolved to include send-ups, video presentations, short plays and sketches in a beginning-of-year function which reinforces the achievements of the past year, while providing a great deal of fun and collective raising of morale. The event also provides an opportunity to present Client Service and Merit Awards to staff. Other more formal meetings are held throughout out the year to keep staff informed of progress, to discuss possible innovations and provide recognition for performance. The process has increased the participation of some of the more reticent staff.

A major *Client Survey* was administered in late 1995 and it was pleasing to receive positive feedback in some of the areas identified as priority improvement areas from the

Client Focus Group data. Satisfaction with information received at service desks attracted a mean rating of 83% and the friendliness of staff 85%. Although resource provision is a perennial problem, improvements in the availability of resources have received favourable comments. These improvements were the direct result of *Q* team activites, which targeted the timely acquisition and processing of new orders, on the one hand and improving the speed and accuracy of re-shelving on the other.

**Applying for a Quality Achievement Award**

The idea of applying for a Quality award arose out of the Strategic Planning process for 1996. Informal evaluation, the *Client Survey* results and feedback from clients all indicated positive results from quality initiatives and the majority of staff found the client service emphasis in the Quality program to be both challenging and rewarding. External evaluation would either reinforce this feedback or identify areas needing improvement. For these reasons, assessment by submission for an Achievement Award in 1996 was identified as a measure of progress towards the *Quality* goal, depending on the outcome of a process of self assessment.

Following training in the assessment process, two staff were responsible for administering a questionnaire, designed to assess progress in terms of the seven areas of the Quality framework. There were no real surprises in terms of strengths and weaknesses. We knew we would perform well in the areas of client and staffing policies, leadership and strategic planning and less well in the areas of information and analysis and organisational performance measures. The staff's assessment was supplemented by a trial external assessment, conducted by a local company's quality manager. A number of staff recommended delaying application for the award, given the magnitude of improvement needed in the measurement of activities, an area traditionally problematic for libraries and other service, or non-profit organisations.

Since calculated risk-taking is a component of one of the Library's Values, the risk-takers won the day. Consequently, the main improvement target for 1996 was the development of performance indicators. This process is discussed below under *Information and Analysis*. At about this time, a Steering Committee was formed to coordinate the Award submission process and related activities. Approval was obtained to advertise an existing vacancy as *Quality Coordinator*. This position was filled relatively recently so did not have a large impact on the Awards process. However, it underlines the Library's commitment to continuing the *Quality Journey* and to continuing the process of review and improvement which is central to quality mangement.

Some of the key aspects of the management of the Library and the challenges we faced in attaining our quality goals are outlined below, using the seven criteria which form the Quality Assessment framework: *Leadership*; *Strategy, Policy and Planning*; *Information and Analysis*; *People*; *Customer Focus*; *Quality of Process, Product and Service* and *Organisational Performance.* See Figure 1 (below).

Fig. 1 Quality Assessment Framework
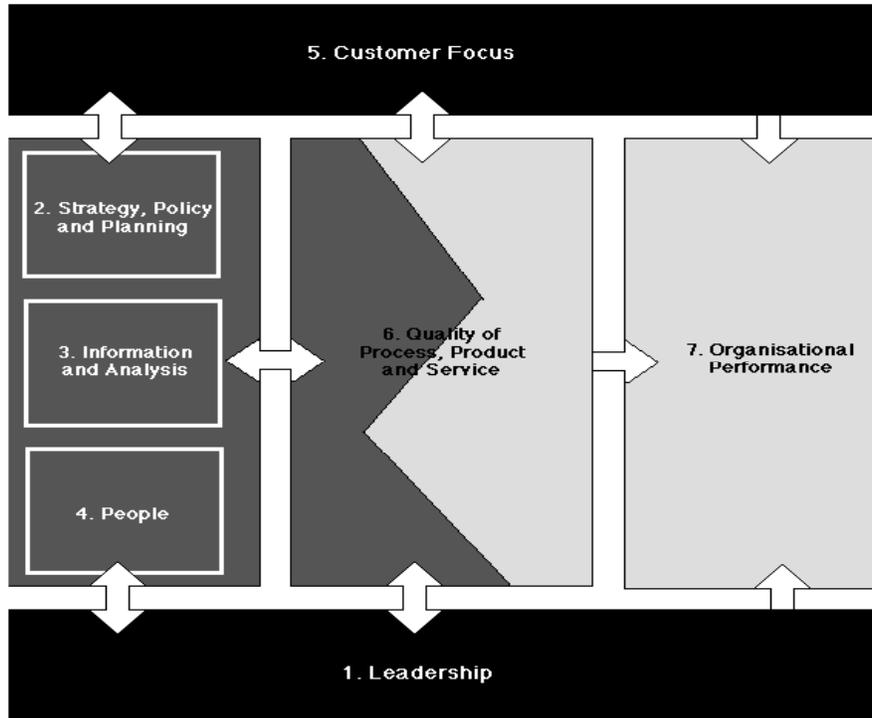
Leadership

In quality organisations, leadership is not confined to a few senior managers but is fostered amongst all staff. Although Chief Librarians have a particular responsibility for defining the Library's purpose, priorities and values and for ensuring the Library's financial viability, working as a *Library-wide team* and involving all staff in the strategic planning process promotes the development of leadership skills throughout the organisation.

One challenge for leadership was to enhance the Library's involvement with the wider community. Although our primary responsibility is to the university community and to other libraries, the quality philosophy promotes contributing value to the local community and the sharing of innovations and experiences to help improve the environment, beyond our traditional horizon.

Strategy, Policy and Planning

Although participative strategic planning is an established process, to meet the AQA requirements, the integration of values and beliefs into the process and the involvement of stakeholders in the planning process must be demonstrated. It is self-evident that values and beliefs underpin the policies, decisions and services of libraries, however, they are seldom overtly stated and discussed. Our values were determined through a consultative process, involving all staff, and agreement was reached surprisingly readily. Since the values reflected priorities which have been emphasised in all our activities, the Library culture was conducive to a process which may be sensitive in organisations which are not team-based, supportive of staff and client-focused. The agreed values consist of short explanatory statements under the headings: *knowledge*, *planning*, *cooperation*, *continuous improvement*, *staff*, *teamwork*, *leadership* and *communication*.

Preparation for quality assessment provided the opportunity to refine and re-examine the strategic planning process to ensure participation of all stakeholders and integration with University planning. See Figure 2 (below)

Fig.2 Strategic Planning
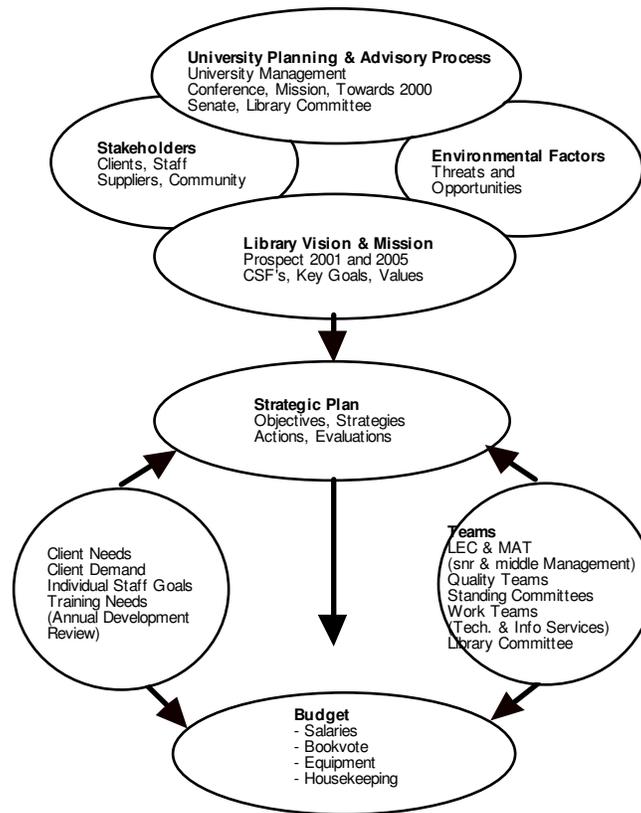
Information and Analysis

As mentioned above, this was the most challenging aspect of the quality framework. Statistics have always been collected according to the requirements of the University and CAUL, however, the use of data to produce meaningful information for planning and performance evaluation had not been exploited. The importance of relating data to key goals and objectives and for communicating performance against goals to stakeholders, including staff, is a key aspect of quality management and was, perhaps, the most time-consuming part of our preparation.

Information from our vision document: *Prospect 2005*, and from earlier strategic planning documents, provided the raw material for formulating *critical success factors* (CSFs), developing key goals and identifying *Key Performance Indicators* (KPIs) to provide a barometer for performance in each key area. Once the definitions and formats were agreed, each team developed its own KPIs and data collection measures. Training and information sessions preceded this exercise and members of the Quality Steering Committee, the Staff Development Officer and the Deputy University Librarian attended each session. In this way the importance of the process and the involvement and support of leadership was communicated to staff.

People

The difference between a good service and an excellent service is the quality of the organisation's staff. The Library's long-term emphasis on all aspects of human resources management was congruent with the priority of the *people* element in the Quality framework.

Wollongong University Library is a medium-sized regional university library which does not readily attract experienced staff. Our strategy, therefore, has been to use selection criteria which weight attitude and aptitude above qualifications and experience. Team skills and a client service ethic are considered to be as important as technical know-how. Rewards are in the form of development opportunities, enriched work design and empowerment, (enabling staff to make decisions and contribute to the maximum of their abilities and aspirations). All human resource strategies are integrated with the overall *Strategic Plan*, are compatible with our espoused values and are designed to achieve Library goals, as well as individual development and career goals. Performance management, goal setting and career development are linked in a carefully planned annual review process.

Empowerment and teamwork are supported by an organisational structure in which boundaries between functional departments and divisions have virtually disappeared. The traditional hierarchy has been reduced in levels and replaced with a series of overlapping teams. Team Coordinators retain functional responsibilities but their primary role is coaching, developing, and, as their title suggests, coordinating activities. Staff may work in a number of teams and are encouraged to pursue multiskilling, a policy which enables staff to develop expertise in a number of functions and which may include regular work in different teams.

Many strategies, such as those outlined above, support the Quality goal of *Staff Wellbeing* The challenge was to measure and demonstrate that our approach and deployment had contributed to this goal. Administration of a *Staff Perceptions Survey* proved an excellent source of data. Survey questions were designed to provide specific feedback on staff satisfaction, communication effectiveness and acceptance of Library values, in terms of importance and Library performance. The results provided reinforcement for many of our human resource policies, whilst identifying areas for improvement. This cycle of planning, implementing, evaluating and improving is the basis of management practice and is central to total quality management.

Client Focus

In common with most libraries, the University of Wollongong has long recognised the importance of good service. Quality service means more than simply paying lip-service to the concept. Clients must be involved in planning service improvements and mechanisms must be in place for obtaining regular feedback from clients to measure the success of plans. The use of some of the terminology*,* such as *client* or *customer* is unfamiliar at first but is vital in sharpening the service focus and inculcating a professional view of the relationship between those providing and those receiving the service.

An example of a client feedback mechanism is our *Compliments/Comments/Complaints* form, which is located at all service points. Clients, including internal clients (other staff) are encouraged to complete these forms. Comments and complaints receive responses, posted on notice boards. Each team receives a client feedback report highlighting areas of recurring comment and the team will identify improvements in their area wherever possible. Many compliments are received, from both internal and external clients, thus reinforcing excellent service.
The publication of measurable *Service Standards* is an example of making explicit the implicit commitment to excellent service. Developed in consultation with all staff, the standards set expectations for services such as queue waiting times, cataloguing of new items, shelving accuracy and interlibrary loans turnaround time.

Quality of Process, Product and Service

Although the importance of quality staff cannot be overemphasised, well-designed processes enable even *ordinary* people to produce outstanding results. Continuous improvement of processes and reduction of unpredicted variation is essential for consistently excellent service.

Processes and services are improved through innovation, good relationships with suppliers and use of data to identify variation and to discern trends. Technological innovations associated with document delivery, electronic placement of orders, access to remote databases and networking are all means of improving our products: service and

information. Cross-functional Quality Teams are used at Wollongong to focus on processes or issues which are improvement priorities. Priorities are essentially determined through client consultation and feedback. Examples of quality teams at Wollongong have been *Shelve-Trek* (aiming to increase the availability of materials through improved reshelving practices), *Ready Reserves* (to improve the functioning of the Reserve process) and the *Space Team* (to improve the deployment of seating, shelving and other functions throughout the Library).

Organisational Performance

This criterion is designed to ensure that all aspects of the management system work together to achieve the organisation's vision, mission and key goals. It also involves envisioning future services and how success will be achieved in different circumstances. The Library's two "futures" documents *Prospect 2001* and *Prospect 2005* were invaluable in planning for future success and in trying to anticipate the type of services needed by prospective as well as current clients.

Future challenges include development of improved overall performance indicators and conducting benchmarking exercises to provide comparative performance data and to establish best practice in key services.

Conclusion

Embarking on a process of external assessment in terms of the Australian Quality Awards Assessment Framework is not to be undertaken lightly. Without a history of managed change and previous development of a supportive, team-based culture, implementation to Achievement Award level would take considerably longer than two years. Commitment from the Library's leadership is essential, as is a belief that the Quality philosophy is suited to your Library and its unique environment. Essential also is a *critical mass* of proactive, change-oriented staff who are prepared to work hard and maintain determination over a lengthy period.

The Award process is outlined in more detail below and it can be seen that writing a detailed submission is not sufficient in itself. The evaluators are interested in determining the depth of penetration of quality principles and practices throughout the organisation and in verifying the claims made in the submission.

From my own point of view the process was, without question, rewarding and worthwhile. The involvement, commitment and positive attitude of the vast majority of staff was the most satisfying aspect of the process and, I believe, the single most important factor in gaining the Award. Clearly, the Achievement Award provides recognition for all Library staff, not just those who were most closely involved in the mechanics of the process. Although not all staff could attend the presentation ceremony, a celebratory lunch was held the following day. Recognising all contributions and sharing

success are important ingredients in creating and maintaining the organisational culture which will meet the demands and exploit the opportunities of our changing environment.

Following the announcement of the Achievement Award, recognition from the Vice-Chancellor, the Council and other members of the University was received and appreciated. Indications are that increased interaction and cooperative projects will result in some areas, notably with those who teach total quality manangement. Advice and information has been sought from sections interested in implementing changed management practices. These benefits are welcome but were not central to our goal of effectively managing our resources to provide quality information services for research, teaching and learning, both now and in future.

The Awards Process

The Australian Quality Awards (AQA) program recognises *organisation-wide Quality improvement* . In November 1996, the University of Wollongong Library was the recipient of *an Australian Quality Awards 1996 Achievement in Business Excellence*. This award is presented to an organisation which has clear plans in place and is taking positive actions across many of the areas as described in the awards assessment criteria.

The Quality Awards program has been operating since 1991. In 1996, 58 organisations applied for different levels, covering a broad range of industry, public and private, large and small. Twenty eight enterprises were recognised at Achievement level, including the libraries of the University of Wollongong and University of Melbourne.

Quality management is defined by the Australian Quality Council, (AQC), as: *the creative involvement of everyone, from the Chief Executive down, in the continuous improvement of the organisation's processes, products and services*. The AQC is recognised by federal and state governments as the peak body for the advancement of quality and productivity in Australia. In pursuit of this goal, the AQC provides specific advice and a wide range of training programs, seminars, workshops, conferences and information tours for member organisations. The Australian Quality Awards Foundation (AQA) is a subsidiary of the AQC and its role is to continually develop the framework of sustainable organisational excellence. The AQA administers the national awards program which provides an opportunity for people to achieve external review and recognition, using assessment criteria designed to apply to all types of organisation. Copies of the Australian Quality Awards Assessment Criteria are available free of charge from the AQA.

Applicants decide whether to apply at achievement or award level. Once your application is accepted, an applicant information session is organised to provide further information about the process and to explain the assessment criteria to staff. Before completing the submission, due in July of each year, it is advisable to complete a self-assessment process, using a questionnaire available from the AQC or by selecting a consultant to conduct an assessment. Whether or not you decide to proceed with the submission, the

self-assessment is a valuable tool for providing a yardstick of your quality progress and for identifying areas which need attention.

The Submission

A submission of up to twenty-five pages, describing your organisation in terms of the AQA criteria and providing examples and data to verify your statements, must be submitted by July. Comprehensive guidelines and explanations of the criteria are available from the AQA to assist in completion of the submission, as are case studies of previous Award winners. All organisational processes should be described from four perspectives, outlined below. The definitions are based on those given in the AQA's Application Guidelines:

Approach - What must be done? How should it be done? The approach to be taken to achieve desired outcomes must be thoroughly planned.
Deployment - How the approaches described are deployed and integrated throughout the organisation.
Results **-** The effectiveness of your plans, the results which have been achieved and the measures in place to evaluate success.
Improvement - Reviewing the effectiveness and appropriateness of the approaches used. How does the enterprise learn and seek further improvement?

At *Achievement* level, the evaluation process emphasises *Approach* and *Deployment*, as described in the above framework. Some *Results*, illustrating achievements to date, should be provided and demonstration of an improvement strategy, including how key processes are reviewed is also important. Results should be provided in the form of clear charts and graphs wherever possible.

Assessment
The written submission is assessed by a team of experienced evaluators who prepare a report which is used as the basis for conducting the site visit. The site visit in September is conducted by a Visit Team, usually three in number, drawn from the team which assessed the submission. Some of the questions which may be asked by the evaluation panel during the assessment process are published in the booklet which accompanies the Applicant Information Seminar. The AQA emphasises that the entire process is transparent and that assistance, explanation and feedback are available at all stages.

In our case, the site visit lasted most of one day. The Visit Team are always chosen from unrelated enterprises; library evaluators, for example, would not be employed in the higher education sector. The recommendations of the Visit Team are reviewed by an expert panel of experienced evaluators. Outcomes are announced at the Annual Award presentations in November. The day after the presentations, a detailed report is forwarded to you, providing feedback on perceived strengths and opportunities for improvement. If you receive an Award, you are expected to share your experiences with others as a means of encouraging other organisations to adopt Quality management principles and practices.

(Some descriptions of the process and various definitions were loosely quoted from the various AQA Assessment Criteria and other AQA publications, with permission.)