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LibQUAL+®: The UK and Irish Experience

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper reports the progress and development of the Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL) LibQUAL+® consortium in the UK and Ireland since 2003, together with analyses of the results of the survey instrument from international and national perspective.

Approach: A consortium of SCONUL member libraries has been using LibQUAL+® in the UK and Ireland since 2003. Over 70 UK and Irish Higher Education Libraries have implemented the survey providing a wealth of data on the quality of academic library provision. This paper examines the composition of the consortium and its implementation patterns. The results of the surveys at a national and international level are discussed with statistical analyses on users' expectations of libraries, how these are changing over time, and how successful libraries are at meeting these expectations. Demonstrable outcomes from LibQUAL+® at a local and national level are also presented.

Findings: Customer perceptions of library services within the UK have increased since 2003 indicating the results of action taken has had a positive impact. The opportunity for improvement does however remain, encouraging us to strive to further in our quest for the perfect library service.

Value: This paper will be of interest to those involved in library surveys or other methods of listening to users. In particular it may assist the development of deeper understanding of library users' expectations in a changing environment, and will also therefore be of value to all those concerned with library strategy and development.

Keywords: LibQUAL+®, SCONUL, Academic Library Performance, Expectations.

Category: General Review.

Introduction

This paper reports the progress and development of the Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL) LibQUAL+® consortium in the United Kingdom and Ireland since its introduction in 2003. The paper discusses the consortium composition, the expectations of the customers and how these have changed over time, the perceptions of the library service in the UK and how this compares with the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) survey respondents. Demonstrable outcomes from LibQUAL+® at a local and national level are also presented.

LibQUAL+® is a library service quality survey instrument developed by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) in association with Texas A&M University (Association of Research Libraries, 2011). A consortium of SCONUL member libraries has been successfully running LibQUAL+® in the UK and Ireland since 2003 (Lock and Town, 2003). In 2003 the survey consisted of 25 questions across four dimensions; a consortium of 16 SCONUL member libraries successfully piloted the LibQUAL+® survey for the first time outside of the United States of America. In 2004 the survey was adjusted to consist of 22 questions on library services across three dimensions; Affect of Service containing questions relating to the library staff, Information Control covering the library resources and access to them, and Library as Place assessing the physical environment. The 22 question / three dimension model is still used today. One of the key strengths of LibQUAL+® is its use of gap theory to evaluate customer expectations as well as perceptions. For each of the 22 questions respondents are asked their minimum and desired expectations along with their current perceived level of service on a nine point scoring scale. The standardised survey enables participating institutions to benchmark their scores against one another, and against an aggregated score for their consortium.

Consortium Composition

Since 2003 a total of 73 libraries have used LibQUAL+® as part of the SCONUL consortium, with over half of those using LibQUAL+® more than once. In 2010 a number of Ireland's Consortium of National and University Libraries (CONUL) members joined the SCONUL consortium enabling benchmarking across the United Kingdom and Ireland.

The composition of the consortium has been examined by UK Higher Education sector and in table 1. The primary users of the survey tool are universities from the Research Libraries UK (RLUK) or the Pre-1992 sectors, with over half of the institutions within these sectors using LibQUAL+® at some stage. Compared to the sector population, fewer new Post-1992 have used LibQUAL+® with only one third of institutions implementing the survey. To date only two UK Higher Education colleges have used LibQUAL+®.

	RLUK	Pre-1992	Post-1992	HE colleges
LibQUAL+® Participants	17	23	22	2
Percentage of sector group using LibQUAL+®	57%	55%	33%	7%

Table 1. LibQUAL+® Participants by UK HE Sector

Within the UK there are four Higher Education mission groups. They consist of HE institutions that have common aims and values; they work collaboratively with a view to

influence public policy. Not all universities are members of a mission group. The composition of the consortium by UK HE mission group can be seen in table 2. Around a third of all University Alliance members and two thirds of Russell Group and 1994 Group member libraries have used LibQUAL+® at some stage. To note, although not a UK HE mission group, nine out of the eleven CONUL member libraries have used LibQUAL+®.

	Russell Group	1994 Group	University Alliance	Million+
LibQUAL+® Participants	12	13	7	12
Percentage of mission group using LibQUAL+®	60%	68%	30%	44%

Table 2. LibQUAL+® Participants by UK HE Mission Group.

Repeat use of LibQUAL+® by SCONUL consortium members is predominantly on a two-yearly cycle, with half of the repeat users adopting this pattern. Around 20% of libraries use the survey on an annual or three-yearly basis.

Expectations & Perceptions

The strength of gap theory as employed by LibQUAL+® is its assessment of customer expectations as well as perceptions. When reviewing the desired mean score for the SCONUL consortium across the years; three questions have been consistently seen as the most desired items on the survey:

- Making electronic resources accessible from my home or office
- Print and/or electronic journal collections I require for my work
- A library Web site enabling me to locate information on my own

Similarly, three questions have consistently been the least desired items:

- Giving users individual attention
- Space for group learning and group study
- Library staff who instill confidence in users

Although the questions consistently received high and low desired mean scores, they are only the highest and least desired items within the confines of the survey limitations and in relation to each other. Overall the questions indicate that the respondents prefer to work with electronic resources autonomously outside of the physical library.

Longitudinal analysis of the SCONUL results from 2004, when the survey first took its current form, against the results from the first half of 2011 has been conducted. The minimum expectations of respondents rose for all three dimensions of service quality measures. The largest increase was found in the Affect of Service dimension; however this had the second highest minimum mean score behind the Information Control dimension. In contrast, Library as Place continued to have a higher desired mean score than Affect of Service; expectations in both of these dimensions rose between 2004 and 2011. Information Control had a slight decline in desired expectation between 2004 and the first half of 2011; however this area remains highly desired. Overall both minimum and desired expectations have increased since 2004. At an item level, the largest increases in minimum expectations were found in:

- Making electronic resources accessible from my home or office
- Library staff who deal with users in a caring fashion

- Library staff who instill confidence in users
- Space for group learning and group study

The latter two questions are some of the least desired items; however expectations are increasing for these areas. Despite the overall rise in expectations, some questions saw a decline in desired expectations since 2004, including:

- Modern equipment that lets me easily access needed information
- Library space that inspires study and learning
- The printed library materials I need for my work

Along with rising expectations, perceptions of library service improved for all dimensions within the SCONUL consortium. There has been a steady increase in perceptions for the Affect of Service and Information Control dimensions, with the gap between perceived and desired scores gradually reducing. The Library as Place dimension has also seen an overall increase in perceived scores, however this has been more erratic than the other two dimensions with perceptions decreasing and increasing on alternate years. One explanation for this could be that although academic libraries are fairly consistent in the level of service and resources they provide, the physical environment varies more widely between institutions. With the majority of repeat survey users running LibQUAL+[®] every other year there is a greater chance of a variation of perceptions with regards to the Library as Place dimension.

Comparisons

The SCONUL results have been compared against the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) College & University results from 2004 and the first half of 2011. Overall the perceived mean scores received at ARL Libraries in 2004 and 2011 are higher than the SCONUL perceived scores. Although minimum expectations have risen for both consortia, the overall desired expectations have decreased for the ARL cohort between 2004 and 2011. The expectations of the UK and Irish respondents were the same as the ARL respondents in the first half of 2011. When reviewing the results at a dimension level the ARL libraries have received a decline in desired and minimum expectations within Information Control, the other two dimensions maintain relatively consistent expectations across the years. In comparison with SCONUL the desired expectations were relatively equal between consortia in 2011 except in the Library as Place dimension where the UK and Irish respondents had higher desired expectations. Across all dimensions the perceptions of the ARL respondents are higher than those of the SCONUL respondents.

National Student Survey Comparisons

LibQUAL+[®] does not operate in isolation; within the UK the National Student Survey (NNS) plays a significant role in the assessment of Higher Education (Stanley, 2009). Sent to all final year undergraduate students the survey covers all aspects of the students' education, including one question on the library service: *"The library resources and services are good enough for my needs"*. The results of the survey allow potential future students to review higher education institutions. The NSS mean scores achieved at SCONUL LibQUAL+[®] libraries have been compared to the overall perceived mean scores of the undergraduates achieved in the same libraries in the LibQUAL+[®] questionnaire between 2008 and 2010. There is no scientific significance in this as averaging averages at this level should be avoided where possible, however comparatively the perceived means of both surveys appear to be similar with little change in the results for either survey over the three years. The

benefit of the gap analysis employed by LibQUAL+[®] enables libraries to see these results in context and although perceptions have not changed at these libraries, expectations have with risen with the overall minimum mean score increasing between 2008 and 2010.

Results in Action

As Matthews & Oakleaf (2011) reinforces, we do not assess to prove, but to improve. The UK and Irish LibQUAL+[®] community were asked what they were doing differently as a result of using LibQUAL+[®]. One institution found they had poor performance in the Library as Place dimension, summarised by the free-text comment left by an undergraduate student:

"The Library is one of the most oppressively depressing locations on the face of the earth; its ugly decor and offensive lighting gnaw at the soul and the carpeting is an invitation to madness."

The library in question was St Andrews University Library, and since conducting LibQUAL+[®] the Library has secured a £14 million improvement programme to renovate the Library building, expand the collection and increase the study space. The renovations included new carpeting and lighting throughout the building.

SCONUL members reported that LibQUAL+[®] enabled them to secure additional funding to increase resources, including electronic journal and book packages; and to procure resource discovery systems such as cross searching databases. Along with procurement libraries reported increasing academic liaison, especially with regard to reading list provision; and improving the library website. Two of the libraries spoken to had developed an online information literacy tutorial and one improved their help provision through a 24/7 Chat cooperative. Improvements to the physical environment have also been made, including increasing study space and restricting access to external visitors at peak times. Computing, printing and photocopying facilities have been added or enhanced and zoning to help control noise has been introduced along with separate study spaces for researchers. Amongst the many improvements reported by the University of Glasgow, the introduction of 'quick search' workstations allowing customers to quickly get online and check their email or print an document for a maximum of 20 minutes at a time was one of the more innovative changes.

At a national level LibQUAL+[®] has provided SCONUL with detailed performance data of its member libraries to help inform public debate. In a 2009 Times Higher Education (THE) article Kevin Sharpe criticised University Library buildings stating that "Libraries are being transformed into rowdy social spaces... many of the changes have had unfortunate - even disastrous - consequences for then place of libraries in university scholarship and study". In reply, the THE published a response from SCONUL in the next issue outlining that the SCONUL LibQUAL+[®] results show that the academic staff perceptions of library buildings are the highest they've ever been (Bainton, 2009).

Conclusions

In conclusion, within the UK pre-1992 universities use the LibQUAL+[®] survey more than their post-1992 counterparts, and nearly all CONUL libraries have now used LibQUAL+[®]. The majority of SCONUL members who use LibQUAL+[®] more than one tend to repeat the survey on a biannual basis. The results of the SCONUL consortium have show that minimum and desired expectations have increased for all dimensions of service quality measures.

Along with increased expectations, perceptions of the library service rose between 2004 and 2011. In comparison with the ARL College & University Libraries the UK and Irish respondents had similar expectations in 2011; however perceptions were found to be lower in all areas. LibQUAL+® enables libraries to put their survey results into context against customer expectations and provides more detailed information on library performance than the National Student Survey. SCONUL member libraries have used the LibQUAL+® survey results to improve services, increase funding to procure resources, and develop their library buildings based on customer feedback. At a national level it has provided SCONUL with data on customer perceptions of library provision. Overall LibQUAL+® continues to provide the SCONUL consortium with data to enable library performance improvement at a local, national and international level.

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