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What do they want now? Qualitative regrounding of the LibQUAL+® survey

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What do they want now? Qualitative regrounding of the LibQUAL+® survey.

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Abstract

Purpose: LibQUAL+® has provided libraries with a customer satisfaction benchmarking tool which is easy to administer and cost effective. The questionnaire was initially developed following a series of interviews conducted in late 1999 - early 2000 with academic library customers on what constitutes a quality library service. In order to remain current, LibQUAL+® must review the questions asked of the library customers to ensure that it remains relevant as user expectations alter over time (McKnight, 2008). Do the needs of the academic library customer still align to the views held over a decade ago? The purpose of this paper is to present the findings of a Cranfield University research project into the current needs of its academic library customers, and to gauge if the LibQUAL+® questions are still assessing these needs.

Methodology: A series of focus groups were held at Cranfield University during 2011 capturing what academic library customers expect from their library service. Separate focus groups were conducted consisting of customers from four key stakeholder groups; full-time taught postgraduate students, part-time taught postgraduate students, doctoral research students and academic teaching staff. The semi-structured discussions covered the needs of the customers in four main areas; information provision, access to information resources, support from library staff and the physical library environment. The focus groups were transcribed then coded using Atlas.TI to identify common themes of service provision requirements across all user types. These common themes were then compared to the core LibQUAL+® questions to identify the differences and similarities between the two data sets.

Findings: The findings at Cranfield University show that LibQUAL+® is still addressing the issues that matter the most to our customers. As it stands, LibQUAL+® still provides Cranfield University with a cost effective and easy to administer survey tool which measures the areas of service provision that our customers expect from their academic library.

Research limitations and implications: Whist the discussions aimed to be as broad as possible, at this stage the research is restricted to Cranfield University customers only. Views from undergraduate students were not captured during this research project as Cranfield University is the UK's only wholly postgraduate university. For these reasons implications for the

overall qualitative regrounding of LibQUAL+® are limited. Wide research into the qualitative regrounding of the LibQUAL+® survey should be considered.

Originality and value of the proposal: Customer Value Discovery research conducted by McKnight (2008) in a UK academic library in 2005 concluded that the LibQUAL+® core questions met most of the customer needs. Outside of the UK, the reforming and regrounding of the LibQUAL+® survey within the digital library environment has been developed through the DigiQUAL+ project based on qualitative research conducted in 2003 (Kyrillidou, et al, 2009a). No recent studies into the qualitative regrounded of LibQUAL+® have been identified.

Paper type: Research paper

What do they want now? Qualitative regrounding of the LibQUAL+® survey.

The LibQUAL+® centre piece web-based survey that enables libraries to assess their service is internationally respected for its rigorous development and testing (Kyrillidou, 2009b). Built on the premise that "only customers judge quality; all other judgements are essentially irrelevant" (Zeithaml, et al, 1990); the questionnaire was initially developed following a series of interviews conducted in late 1999 - early 2000 with academic library customers on what constitutes a quality library service (Cook, et al, 2002). Further qualitative and quantitative research iterations completed in 2004 resulted in the core 22 questions currently used.

LibQUAL+® has provided libraries with a customer satisfaction benchmarking tool which is easy to administer and cost effective. The success of the tool has been partially due to the survey questions relevance to the expectations of library customers. In order to remain current however, LibQUAL+® must review the questions asked of the library customers to ensure that it remains relevant as user expectations alter over time (McKinght, 2008). Do the needs of the academic library customer still align to the views held over a decade ago?

In April 2011 Cranfield University embarked on a research project into the current needs of its academic library customers with a view to evaluate if the LibQUAL+® questions are still assessing these needs. To set this research in context, Cranfield University is the UK's only wholly postgraduate university; focused on science, technology, engineering and management subjects. It is one of the United Kingdom's top five research intensive universities delivering the United Kingdom Ministry of Defence's largest educational contract. The University has over 5,000 students, 40% of whom are studying on a part-time basis (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2011).

A series of focus groups were held at during spring 2011 capturing what academic library customers want from their library service. Separate focus groups were conducted with customers from four key stakeholder groups; full-time taught postgraduate students, part-time taught postgraduate students, doctoral research students and academic teaching staff. Owing to the postgraduate focus of Cranfield University the views of undergraduates were excluded from this research.

The focus groups primary aim was to discover what the academic community wanted from their library service. The semi-structured discussions focussed on the needs of the customers in four main areas; information provision, access to information resources, support from library staff and the physical library environment. The focus of the discussion was on academic libraries in general, rather than the specific needs of Cranfield University customers; however participants often pulled upon their experiences of Cranfield University. Users and non-users of the Library were invited to attend the focus groups to enable a broader understanding of customers' expectations, however all attendees had used the library service at least once. Eight focus groups were conducted in total, two with each of the four stakeholder groups. The discussions were recorded, transcribed and coded using Atlas.TI to identify the common themes of service provision requirements across all user types.

For students and academics alike the provision of information resources remains the primary remit of the library service, however their expectations differed.

For the students, the focus in the main was on readings recommended to them by their lecturers. They expect the library to provide the articles, chapters and books recommended to them; they did not find the need for abstract and indexing databases. The emphasis was on electronic full-text with easy, immediate access. They have no desire to access journal articles in print, and in the main the same was found when discussing books. When asked if they would prefer electronic or paper books the majority of students preferred the electronic format; with availability, easy access, searchability and portability being cited as the reasons. eBooks are viewed as being more convenient than their printed counterparts. Despite this, there is still a desire for print books. Students discussed the emotional connection with paper books, the desire to browse the shelves and flick through the pages in a way they perceive impossible with electronic media. Digital rights management is also inhibiting the popularity of library owned electronic books. Students that have eBook readers wish to use the library resources on their own devices; and all students wanted to print off, download, save and print book chapters in the same way they can for journal articles. The varying access restrictions across providers are frustrating and confusing for the students.

Taught and research students both raised new media and social networking in the discussions around information provision. Video lectures being made

available either via YouTube or the University's own website were requested, whether managed by the library or otherwise. Research networking, as apposed to 'social', was also discussed enabling students to share information pertinent to their studies across cohorts, years, courses and institutions. They expressed a desire for integration of personal devices with library services though a mixture of smart phone applications that allow them to locate resources on the shelves, QR codes that allow eBooks to be downloaded to their devices, and barcode readers that allow them to scan a barcode on any book to check if there is a copy within the library collection.

Despite having access to a cross-searching database, students still used Google or Google Scholar as their primary information source. Frustrations were encountered when trying to work with a myriad of systems which required varying authentication methods. The Library cross-searching tool was seen as inefficient compared to Google, providing too many irrelevant search results and not enough full-text access; despite having more options than Google to refine and filter the search results.

Overall they want personalised seamless electronic access to information resources via their own device whenever connected to the University network whether wirelessly or remotely.

The needs of the academic staff differed slightly. Although electronic journals were the primary information source used by the academics for their own research, unsurprisingly the desire for abstract and indexing databases was greater than full-text only sources. They use text books to support their teaching only, and overall they would prefer to recommend a book available in electronic format compared to print only. Electronic information delivery was in the main the preferred method of access.

So with the desire for electronic delivery of library resources, is there still a need for a physical library environment? All focus group participants said yes. The library is viewed as an escape, whether it is from their office, home or residential accommodation. It provides an environment conducive for study, focussing the mind on the task at hand.

Staff and students alike want the physical library to offer a one-stop-shop, with a mixture of information and computer provision, along with space for their laptops and a wireless connection to the University network. Students desire a mix of study environments and spaces, including areas for group working and individual quiet study. They desire a comfortable working environment where they can eat and drink whilst working, with an area to relax and take a break in when they wish. They do not feel comfortable at the thought of working in a strictly silent library.

The students expressed a desire for 24/7 opening hours, currently not available at Cranfield University, however they did not feel it needed to be staffed at all times. The wish to use the Library late into the night as a space to study in, especially when working to a tight deadline.

Within the Library students and academics alike want access to helpful, friendly staff who can answer information seeking questions in a supportive manner. They do not expect the library staff to have detailed knowledge of their subject area, but they do expect them to have an understanding of the best information sources to support their research. Students and academics prefer to find information independently in the first instance, only coming to the library staff for help if they have been unsuccessful. When they have a problem and need help they want to contact the Library through a central contact point whether that is face-to-face, online, via email or over the telephone. They also like having a named contact within the Library that they can call upon for more general or in-depth enquiries.

Customers expect the library staff to provide training for the students on research skills and using electronic resources. Both students and staff value the embedded training currently provided at Cranfield University, linking the training to the student's first assignment. Part-time students additionally expressed a desire to have drop in training session available to them whist attending residential weeks at the University. Academic staff want the library to provide them with training and support on issues surrounding copyright and intellectual property rights, especially with relation to electronic teaching materials in the virtual learning environment. They would prefer training to be delivered in their own offices at a time convenient to them on a one-on-one basis.

Those are the findings from Cranfield University, but what about the undergraduates? In an attempt to capture the views of undergraduate students a facebook poll was created posing the question "University Students: What would your ideal academic library offer?" Around twenty options were added to the poll, but the poll was left open to allow further option to be added by the respondents. Over 2,000 votes were received in the first month of the poll being available, and over twenty additional items were added by the respondents. The poll is available at http://on.fb.me/jatsne. Not all respondents were undergraduate students and the poll does not provide any scientific results, but the most popular options include study areas I can plug my laptop into, access to electronic databases for my research, a comfortable place to study, Wi-Fi access and silent study areas. Overall the results paint a picture of a student who likes to work quietly in the Library using their own electronic devices with the library resource. They want a comfortable place to study, where they can eat and drink, with access to knowledgeable library staff if they need help. Or, in short, Starbucks with benefits.

So how do these findings relate to the questions in the LibQUAL+® survey? The questions cover three main dimensions of library service provision, affect of service containing questions concerning the effectiveness of library staff; Library as Place, questions on the physical environment; and Information Control, questions concerning the ease with which information can be found and the availability information.

The Affect of Service dimension contains questions assessing the library staff in nine separate elements of service provision. At Cranfield University all of these values were still regarded as important by the focus group participants, none of the questions are views as irrelevant.

The Library as Place dimension consists of five questions assessing separate elements of the physical environment. At Cranfield University, all customer groups still desire a physical library environment. The term 'escape' was used often by all focus group participants, which aligns to the LibQUAL+® question that describes the Library as a haven or getaway for study, learning, or research. The mixture of group and individual quite space is still desired by the students. All of the Library as Place questions are relevant to the needs of the Cranfield University library customers.

The Information Control dimension contains eight questions relating to information provision and access. The overarching desire from the customers was to have seamless electronic access to library resources from their own devices. With that in mind, the questions:

- Easy-to-use access tools that allow me to find things on my own
- Making information easily accessible for independent use
- A library Web site enabling me to locate information on my own

Are all still desired by our library customers.

With the exception of one respondent, all focus group participants favoured electronic information provision over print. Physical resources are still valued by the customers for their 'browsability'; however in comparison the desire for electronic books and journals was greater than the desire for their printed counterparts.

Customers preferred Wi-Fi and integration with their own laptops over computers provided by the Library, however they did still want the Library to provide computers as they did not wish to carry their laptops around with them at all times. With the change to internet provision through wireless hotspots and 3G networks our customers now wish to access our electronic resources from anywhere. It could be argued that there is a need to broaden the question 'Making electronic resources accessible from my home or office' to encompass these needs.

Within the information control dimensions all of the eight questions align to our current customer needs, but with varying levels of desired expectations.

Two key elements of the library service raised by the customers of Cranfield University are not part of the LibQUAL+® core 22 questions; library opening hours and training provided by library staff. However, questions on both of these areas are available within the optional additional five questions libraries can add to their survey.

In conclusion, the findings at Cranfield University show that LibQUAL+® is still addressing the issues that matter the most to our customers. The

expectations of our customers have not changed dramatically in the last ten years. Cranfield University is not a typical university library and as such further research into the views academic library customers at other institutions could be beneficial to ensure the relevance of LibQUAL+®. However, as it stands, LibQUAL+® still provides Cranfield University with a cost effective and easy to administer survey tool that measures the areas of service provision that our customers want from their academic library.

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