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CHAPTER 20

LibQUAL+: A Quality Survey Case Study

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INTRODUCTION: AN INTERNATIONAL TOOL

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'Quality is what the customer says it is' (Feigenbaum, 1991) is one of the core precepts of quality approaches. Quality management frameworks place customer focus at the centre of attention, and this may comprise a requirement for customer identification, the achievement of customer satisfaction, and the acquisition of a deeper understanding of customers that allows services such as academic and research libraries to refine existing and develop new offerings. Surveys are a key tool that may assist in these processes, and this case study focuses on one leading example of a total market survey.

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Since its inception at the turn of the millennium, LibQUAL+ has become the international standard tool for the measurement of library satisfaction. LibQUAL+ was developed in response to the cross-pressures from universities to understand the benefits of investing in their libraries at a time of change, and from students to demonstrate the value and effectiveness of the services delivered. Libraries at that time considered that they needed to be more accountable to all of their constituencies, and the growing availability of tools and methods from industry offered routes to developing library-related approaches. Texas A&M University academic staff had originally developed the SERVQUAL gap theory protocol for customer satisfaction (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1990), and this served as the basis for the development of LibQUAL+. Through a collaboration involving the University Library, academic staff in the quality and statistics fields and the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) the instrument was developed, tested, refined and initially offered in North America.



p0020 LibQUAL+ is now in its 16th year of application. ARL views LibQUAL+ as a suite of services, with the centrepiece being the ‘rigorously tested web-based survey bundled with training that helps libraries assess and improve library services, change organisational culture, and market the library’ (LibQUAL+, 2015).

p0025 The goals of LibQUAL+ as described by ARL are to:

- u0010 • Foster a culture of excellence in providing library service
- u0015 • Help libraries better understand user perceptions of library service quality
- u0020 • Collect and interpret library user feedback systematically over time
- u0025 • Provide libraries with comparable assessment information from peer institutions
- u0030 • Identify best practices in library service
- u0035 • Enhance library staff members' analytical skills for interpreting and acting on data.

p0060 The LibQUAL+ survey itself has evolved into a protocol consisting of what is often referred to as ‘22 items and a box’. These 22 core survey questions measure user perceptions of service quality in three dimensions:

- u0040 • Affect of Service
- u0045 • Information Control
- u0050 • Library as Place.

p0080 Despite the many changes in libraries since 2000, these dimensions and the individual questions have proved resilient and of continuing relevance. This may appear surprising, but perhaps the underlying value and values of libraries in the academy is based on a more robust construct than we sometimes appreciate in the midst of the digital revolution. The LibQUAL+ Steering Committee has advised on and implemented strategic and tactical improvements to the protocol over the years, ranging from the development of LibQUAL+ Lite in 2009 to the more recent testing and implementation of a confidential (instead of anonymous, survey) version. The latter will allow libraries to link LibQUAL+ data to campus student and faculty analytics for the purpose of correlating beyond satisfaction to user outcomes.

p0085 For each item, users indicate their minimum service level, desired service level and perceived service performance. The survey contains additional questions that address information literacy outcomes, library use and general satisfaction. An open-ended comments box provides the opportunity for users to express further opinion or explanation, and this can be an

important source of data for qualitative analysis, as well as providing very specific advice on how to improve or develop services. Participants also have the option to select five additional local questions to add to their survey from a substantial bank of items used in the survey's history.

p0090 Conducting the LibQUAL+ survey requires little technical expertise. Users are invited to take the survey through a link to the site. Data is analysed by ARL and a substantial notebook of results provided. The full data is available to participants permitting as much further local analysis as is desired or capability allows. The survey can be offered in standard form, in which users answer all the questions, or 'Lite' form, in which users are only offered a subset of the questions. The latter is widely used, as it offers a simpler and shorter task for users to complete. The notebooks use 'radar graphs' and 'zones of tolerance' charts to illustrate the results, although libraries are now also using a variety of presentational methods, including Tableau, to display their results to institutional audiences.

p0095 The need to promote the survey within the institution to achieve a high response rate has generated many creative ideas, and many institutions use incentives to encourage participation. Results are often used to generate further dialogue or mobilise influence with constituents and university management through informal or formal governance channels. LibQUAL+ can be used very simply to create agendas for improvement by consideration and ranking of individual question scores, using either adequacy (the difference between minimum and perception scores) or superiority (perception to desired) gaps. LibQUAL+ provides a definitive answer to whether library services meet, fall below or exceed user expectations.

p0100 The scale of engagement with LibQUAL+ is worldwide and substantial. Although the survey was created and defined by research within the academic research library context, it has been used by specialist academic libraries, for example in health sciences, business schools and law, and by other tertiary level college libraries, national libraries, military libraries, NHS libraries in the United Kingdom and public libraries. To date over 2 million library users have provided responses to the questionnaire, and 2645 institutions have issued the survey to their clienteles across 31 different countries on 5 continents. The questionnaire itself has been translated into 21 different languages, and this author was responsible for the translation of American English into British English for its first use outside North America in 2003. The collective data provides an unparalleled and rich resource for improving library services.

s0015 **THE UK & IRELAND SCONUL CONSORTIUM CASE**

p0105 Consortium participation is often regarded as a mutually beneficial arrangement, providing additional support and confidence for new entrants to the survey. The analysis of group data and a group results notebook provides relevant comparative data, and an immediate source for benchmarking. The social benefits of being in a consortium may vary, but many consortia organise their own meetings for training, and sharing approaches, results and interpretation. The experience of others can often inspire or stimulate further the desire for service improvement, and provide concrete examples of implementation projects or library service advocacy.

p0110 This author's experience has been as the coordinator of the SCONUL Consortium across more than 10 years, and also as a member of the LibQUAL+ Steering Committee. This has involved advice and support to inform the development of other consortia, including those in France, across European Business Schools and in 2010 the instigation of an Irish (CONUL) subconsortia of the SCONUL group, as well as assisting with individual applications of the survey in Europe and beyond.

p0115 SCONUL participation began in 2003, when a pilot study was conducted in the United Kingdom involving 16 libraries. This was the first experience of survey use outside North America, and its success provided a template and example for further expansion. The view was originally that the instrument might not be transferable given its genesis in the North American research library environment, but this has proved not to be the case. In the last decade 75 UK and Irish participants (representing around 60% of the UK university market) have used the instrument.

p0120 It is worth noting that around 70% of Research Libraries UK (RLUK 2014 membership) institutions have used the survey, a higher proportion than other mission group segments of the UK HE sector. This may reflect the suitability of LibQUAL+ for research academic libraries, or more capability within larger libraries to conduct and manage the survey, or both. Overall 51% of libraries have repeated the survey, and a common approach is to use the survey every 2 years to provide sufficient time to plan and implement improvements before checking the results of actions in the next iteration. There are probably many different reasons for one-off participation, and these may include a single effort to inform a longer-term strategy, potential conflicts or overlaps with other local surveys or the avoidance of the mythical 'survey fatigue'. Some institutions may find

that they do not have the quality management maturity or resource to enact the improvements suggested by the survey, and some in the United Kingdom may be content with the single library question data from the National Student Survey (NSS).

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The combined overall results from participants in the SCONUL Consortium show a steadily increasing positive perception of service in those libraries since 2004 when the survey took its current form. The overall desired scores have not increased a great deal, whilst minimum expectations have increased, but not in parallel with perceptions. This might suggest that taking part in LibQUAL+ is likely to result in improved user satisfaction over time, because it is difficult to avoid acting on the data. Affect of Service perception scores have increased substantially overall since 2004, indicating that UK and Irish library users feel much better treated by staff than a decade ago. Information Control perception scores have also improved overall, in spite of continuing pressure on resources for acquisitions, but this remains the area in which users have the highest desired scores, resulting in the greatest superiority gap. Library as Place remains important to users, with a relatively consistent desired score across the period, whilst perceptions and minimum scores have a less consistent relationship. Many libraries in the United Kingdom have made use of LibQUAL+ Library as Place scores and trends to advocate and obtain substantial capital resource for either new build or refurbished libraries.

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INDIVIDUAL UNIVERSITY CASES

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The author has 12 years experience of employing LibQUAL+ as part of a systematic and strategic approach to quality and the achievement of excellence in academic and research libraries.

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Cranfield University was a participant in the first year of the UK Consortium, and the author's experience includes use of the survey across five academic years between 2003 and 2007. This context was one of a specialised postgraduate institution; the author's library was at the Shrivenham campus where Cranfield held the contract for Army Officer education in applied science, engineering, technology, management and military affairs, as well as providing executive courses and applied research for the defence, health and security sectors. The library had had a formal quality management programme since 1993, when it also ran the first systematic academic library benchmarking project. Other surveys had been conducted across this decade of quality commitment, and LibQUAL+ did

not enter a survey market vacuum in the United Kingdom at that time. The benchmarking benefits of LibQUAL+ were a significant factor in the choice of Cranfield to use this survey on a continuing basis. The ability to compare data with leading institutions in the United States was of great importance, given the excellence of Cranfield's survey results, with many item scores achieving positive superiority scores (a finding akin to LibQUAL+ results in US military library contexts).

p0140 LibQUAL+ was a good fit for this contractual and specialised environment in which proof of high quality customer service and satisfaction was essential to stay in business. The requirement for continuous improvement even when excellent standards had already been achieved required the type of solid and reliable data that LibQUAL+ was able to deliver. LibQUAL+ data was also heavily used to demonstrate excellent performance to the UK MoD client, and use of the survey was eventually enshrined in the long-term contract won by Cranfield in 2006.

p0145 The University of York had previously undertaken one iteration of the LibQUAL+ survey in 2004 when the author arrived in 2007 as University Librarian. The survey immediately became an annual fixture in the Library's quality approach. It was already clear from the scores for the library NSS question that improvement was required, and LibQUAL+ was seen as a cost-effective and swift way to collect the data and user opinion required to set out an agenda for both immediate and strategic action. The University was also at the time developing a new Information Strategy, and the first LibQUAL+ results were used to inform this work and provide a longer-term development programme perspective. Results for Library as Place were used to successfully rejustify and expand the scope of a proposed library refurbishment project, and a subsequent extension of the library to provide an additional information commons type facility.

p0150 Use of LibQUAL+ over the last 7 years has had a profound effect on the culture of the library at York and its relationship with both academic and student users. Accurate and reliable data has replaced anecdote, received wisdom and negative cultural web stories in the discourse within and between the library, its users and university management. Problems revealed by either the quantitative or qualitative data are now seen as obstacles to be overcome through informed solutions and effective project management, and a 1-year cycle of survey, analysis, action plans and results checking is now central to the library's quality system. LibQUAL+ has therefore had a strong cultural impact as an enabling influence, encouraging a more objective and rational approach through following

the data. The resulting attitudes and achievements have also played an essential role in the award of the national Customer Service Excellence (CSE) standard, including particular commendation for the library's approach to customer insight for consultation, engagement and satisfaction measurement.

p0155 LibQUAL+ has provided the source data for telling the story of the library's progress over the last 7 years. As evidenced by trend data, this has not always been smooth. The refurbishment project had a very detrimental effect on perceptions of the library while it was in progress (which was expected), but perceptions have otherwise improved substantially. Minimum expectations have however also increased, demanding continuous improvement rather than complacency.

p0160 LibQUAL+ scores also correlate closely with the Library questions scores in the York NSS results, and the LibQUAL+ data enables a much deeper understanding of what lies behind the score from this blunter instrument. York's LibQUAL+ results are analysed by individual academic department, which, together with departmental NSS results, are used to develop a tailored departmental library action plan on an annual basis. The outcome of resulting actions has seen considerable subsequent improvements in many departmental NSS scores, which ultimately improves the University's league table positions as well as providing service benefits to students and staff. LibQUAL+ data has also underpinned broad service developments in the areas of:

- u0055 • 24/7 opening
- u0060 • Flexible loans and zero fines initiative
- u0065 • Student induction and marketing
- u0070 • Morebooks (Patron Driven Acquisition)
- u0075 • Collections development.

p0190 As is clear from the above, LibQUAL+ plays a key role in library advocacy at York at many levels. The ability to benchmark against the results of other leading institutions internationally has been of significant importance in a university that seeks to be internationally competitive and attain a world-class status. York results are compared annually to those of other libraries undertaking the survey in World Top 200 institutions (as judged by the THE); usually numbering about thirty. It is important to note that the LibQUAL+ ethical framework agreement applies here, so these results are only used internally and informally to judge where York's library stands against its peers, and more importantly to seek out potential exemplars for more detailed comparison and improvement.

s0025 **CRITIQUES AND RESPONSES**

p0195 LibQUAL+ has an associated substantial body of scholarship and research to which it would be difficult to do justice in this short case study. ARL continuously update references to this corpus on their website cited previously. No critique has seriously challenged the very sound and well-researched statistical basis of the survey or its fundamental reliability and validity. In almost every academic institution it is possible to find a faculty member who will wish to suggest deficiencies or propose alternative protocols, and one of the pleasures of library leadership in the academy is to justify the use of one's chosen tools to academic colleagues. These conversations appear to have declined in the United Kingdom with the growing importance of the NSS as a factor in league table compilation. Surveys, particularly of students, now appear to be a permanent and essential feature of life in higher education.

p0200 Almost 10 years ago Brophy (2006, pp. 44–49) raised a number of questions about LibQUAL+. These still seem a relevant starting point for a critical assessment of the tool. More recent criticisms have usually been related to one or another item on this list, or generalised expressions that something new or different must be required given the changing environment. Brophy's list of questions was:

- o0010 1. The US perspective
- o0015 2. The difficulty of understanding what the user is judging in the networked information environment
- o0020 3. Whether student expectations are realistic
- o0025 4. The decline in importance of Library as Place
- o0030 5. The absence of a place for professional judgment if only users judge quality
- o0035 6. LibQUAL+ is library-centric rather than user-centric
- o0040 7. The trademarking of LibQUAL+.

p0240 It is probably worth reviewing these questions after a further 10 years of application. The following thoughts are provided from the perspective of a member of the LibQUAL+ Steering Committee, with that potential bias, but perhaps more importantly from a Library Director and customer and user of LibQUAL+ data in a real world context.

- o0045 1. The participation in LibQUAL+ is now worldwide. The database of library customer experience thus formed is no longer therefore dominated by US experience. However, the ability to compare against United States and other world leading institutions is one of its great

strengths for universities that aspire to being world class. Users occasionally make comments about the survey and its question style on its introduction to an institution, but when used regularly LibQUAL+ swiftly seems to become part of the local furniture rather than being seen as a foreign product. There are no reports of the survey being widely unacceptable or culturally inappropriate in any context so far, as evidenced by its extraordinary spread. ARL has been very hospitable to all comers, and of course ARL itself had to accommodate from the start the complexity of Canada's diversity of language and culture, as well as that of the United States. Demographic information questions are regularly reviewed for suitability, and this can now be a difficult area for any survey instrument. The increasingly available customisation of discipline and demographic data allows a degree of local freedom whilst retaining the important capability of broader benchmarking. A cycle of periodic re-grounding is under consideration and this would have to involve deciding whether qualitative re-grounding would take place on an international basis.

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2. The problem of measuring the performance of what might be termed 'the digital library' remains an issue for academic and research libraries still operating in a hybrid context. LibQUAL+ does not provide (or seek to provide) detailed analysis of the use of or satisfaction with individual electronic (or print) resources, although discipline breakdowns can provide a good view of content or access satisfaction as a starting point for more detailed investigation. At the time Brophy wrote there was hope that an accompanying tool might solve this problem, and there are other methods for assessing elements of a library's digital services. There remains no simple route to understanding the balance of use and satisfaction with the range of digital, print and other resource collections that libraries manage. ARL offers other platforms for this purpose such as DigiQUAL, MINES for Libraries, and more recent work on assessment methods for institutional repositories.

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3. The critique of variation of student expectations now seems odd in the current context. All aspects of UK university education are now judged against student expectations in the context of value for money perceptions linked to the scale of the new fees regime. This context is now therefore more similar to the North American situation. The underlying theory behind SERVQUAL and LibQUAL+ is that users will be realistic in their expectations, and relate these rationally to the standing of the local institution. A gap theory survey seeking minimum

and desired expectations would seem to be actively dealing with the issue of expectations in a way that simple perceptions surveys do not.

- o0060 4. Brophy was not alone in questioning the future value of Library as Place assessment. However the experience of the last 10 years in the United Kingdom has been an unpredicted resurgence in the importance of the library as a 'third' learning space, accompanied by substantial investment in new or redesigned library spaces as universities wish to satisfy their students and keep up competitive offerings. LibQUAL+ has provided data to inform, justify and track the success of these investments, and this dimension remains of central relevance from the user perspective. It is clearly a key measurement dimension for academy library leaders; but at the same time consideration is also needed for distance and e-learning students and researchers.
- o0065 5. This question appears to suggest that libraries may undertake actions deriving from LibQUAL+ data without the application of judgment, or that professional views may diverge from user interests. From the author's perspective these are false dichotomies. Library leaders and managers are faced with cross pressures for quality improvement from multiple perspectives; not all suggested developments or projects can be resourced, or will be locally politically expedient, and so managerial (if not professional) judgment will always apply. LibQUAL+ obliges library management to face up to user views based on reliable and valid data, and can provide a very clear prioritised agenda for action. It does not provide the managerial quality framework or organisational quality maturity to guarantee improvement, but it can help develop these attributes.
- o0070 6. LibQUAL+ is based on extensive research that took the library as a core construct, but allowed users to define what was important to them about it. If the Library does become something different over time, then the items in the survey may become progressively less valid, and either new questions will be necessary, or a comprehensive re-grounding of the survey will be required. Some institutions with converged services of one kind or another have suggested that LibQUAL+ does not match their service construct. Some converged service enterprises in the United States have used a simpler survey protocol known as MISO, whilst universities in both the United States and now the United Kingdom have used TechQUAL for IT services. The majority of universities still however have something which users recognise as a library, and which the LibQUAL+ dimensions still characterise effectively.

o0075 7. Brophy's critique of trademarking related to professional sharing of performance measurement techniques. I think it would be hard now to suggest that LibQUAL+ has not been a major factor in creating an open climate and culture of measurement and assessment across an international community. Other institutional surveys offered by commercial providers (e.g. staff surveys) have been introduced to UK universities over the past 10 years with much less access to the raw data and far less opportunity for further analysis or effective benchmarking. Surveys used in the United States such as MISO and Ithaka S+R, and the NSS in the United Kingdom, do not have the same degree of open research literature and apparent peer reviewed rigour as LibQUAL+.

p0280 In conclusion the test of LibQUAL+ is whether it provides useful and defensible data for library management and leadership, deployable to support innovation and service improvement. LibQUAL+ cannot answer every library management question, and it is not by any means the only tool or metric source on which a quality library should depend. From the author's perspective it has been an indispensable tool across 12 years of proven quality improvement, and there are no competing products that provide the same opportunity for international comparison.

p0285 From the customer perspective LibQUAL+ allows the voice of the user to be heard, and permits a potential freedom of expression for their total market that academic libraries did not encourage for long periods of their existence. This freedom is an essential component of a quality library and supports the values of the academy.

p0290 From a Library Director's perspective a method for recruiting the words and ideas of users to a library's quality improvement and advocacy initiatives is both vital and of great value, and a case on surveys should fittingly conclude with that voice:

The York Uni library is really good (especially in comparison to other similarly ranked universities) but there is always room for improvement! (e.g. more study spaces in Harry Fairhurst)

Undergraduate, Age 18–22, Female, Medicine

I am totally satisfied with the library

Postgraduate, Age 31–45, Female, History of Art

s0030 **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

p0295 This case study is based on a panel contribution at the Library Assessment Conference, University of Washington, Seattle, 4 August 2014. I have used elements of the presentations



of others on that occasion (*A 15-year Retrospective on LibQUAL+*) in the creation of this case study, particularly those of Fred Heath and Martha Kyrillidou. Colleen Cook provided data on the breadth of LibQUAL+ participation that was accurate at the time of presentation. Much of the introduction is based on text from the ARL website. Selena Killick, formerly of Cranfield University and the UK LibQUAL+ Consortium Officer, provided the data trends for the UK SCONUL Consortium. Ian Hall and the Programme Office in the Information Directorate at the University of York provided the detailed analyses of York data on which this case relies. LibQUAL+ is a team effort and this case study reflects that: the base data is of course provided by library users, and this has been collected and analysed through the effective work of ARL. Any errors, opinion and speculative interpretation are my responsibility.

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NON-PRINT ITEM

Abstract

Surveys are a key tool in quality approaches to judge satisfaction and to provide data for improvement and innovation. LibQUAL+ is the international standard tool for the measurement of library satisfaction, and this case study critically reflects on its development and application since its inception at the start of this millennium.

The composition of the instrument is described, with its application in the SCONUL Consortium, and the cases of Cranfield and York Universities. An earlier critique of LibQUAL+ is used to critically assess the contribution of the survey to library quality and its strengths in relation to alternatives.

Key Words

LibQUAL+ surveys; academic libraries; SCONUL; quality; surveys; library satisfaction

