# LibQUAL+®: The SCONUL experience

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### Introduction

LibQUAL+® is a library customer satisfaction survey developed by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) in association with Texas A&M University (Association of Research Libraries, 2011). The survey consists 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. 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 72 libraries have used LibQUAL+® as part of the SCONUL consortium. The composition of the consortium has been examined by UK higher education (HE) sector as presented 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.

| | 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*

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.

| | 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*

Over half of the consortium participants have used LibQUAL+® more than once. Repeat use 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 a three-yearly basis.

### Customer expectations

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 website enabling me to locate information on my own.

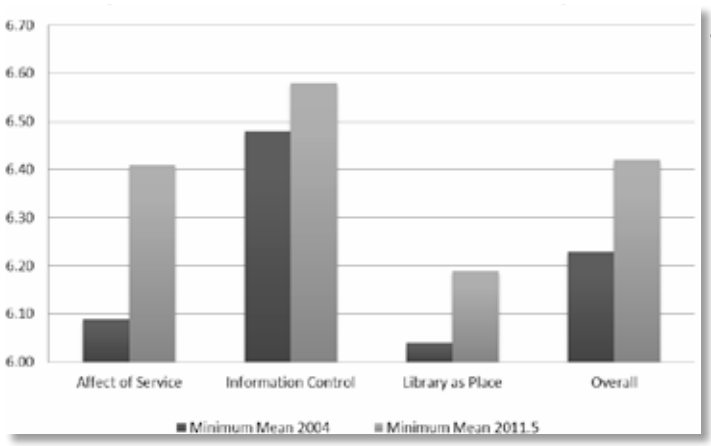
These paint a picture of students who prefer to work with electronic resources autonomously outside the physical library.

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

- giving users individual attention
- space for group learning and group study
- library staff who instil confidence in users.

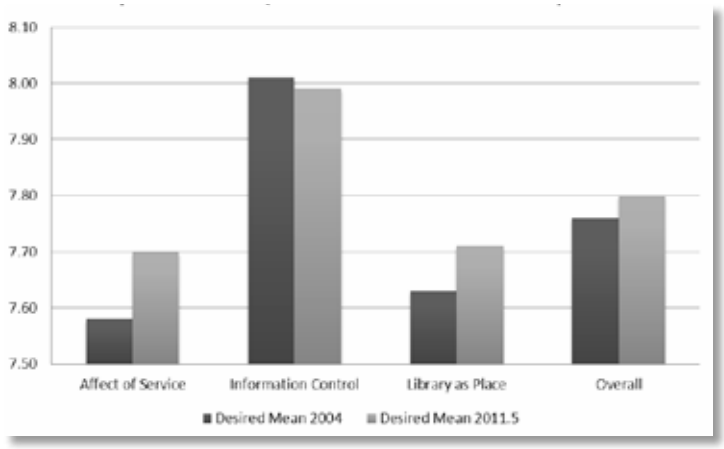
Although the questions consistently received low desired mean scores, they are only the least desired items within the confines of the survey limitations and in relation to the other questions asked.

Longitudinal analysis has been conducted of the SCONUL results from 2004 – when the survey first took its current form – against the results from the first half of 2011. The minimum expectations of respondents rose for all three dimensions of service quality, as shown in graph 1.




*Graph 1 SCONUL LibQUAL+® dimension minimum mean comparisons*

In contrast, graph 2 shows the changes to the desired mean scores between 2004 and 2011. Expectations of the Library as Place and Affect of Service dimensions rose between 2004 and 2011. Information Control had a slight decline in desired expectations; however, this area remains highly desired.




*Graph 2 SCONUL LibQUAL+® dimension desired mean comparisons*

When looking at the individual questions, 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 instil confidence in users
- space for group learning and group study.

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.

With the increase in personal laptop ownership, remote access and electronic resources since 2004, these declining expectations are not surprising.

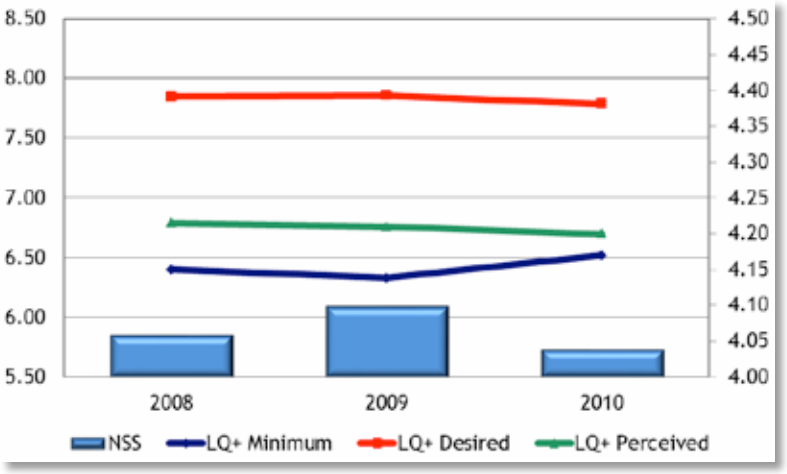
### Perceptions

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. 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 in 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.

### National Student Survey comparisons

LibQUAL+® does not operate in isolation; within the UK the National Student Survey (NSS) 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, as shown in graph 3. There is no scientific significance in this. Averaging averages at this level should normally be avoided where possible, however 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 risen, with the overall minimum mean score increasing between 2008 and 2010.




*Graph 3 SCONUL LibQUAL+® & NSS comparisons*

#### Results in action

As Matthews & Oakleaf (2011) reinforce, we do not assess to prove, but to improve. A request for information was sent to the LibQUAL-UK JISCMail discussion list in August 2011 asking the SCONUL consortium what they were doing differently as a result of using LibQUAL+®. Responses were received from the University of Glasgow, University of Birmingham, Anglia Ruskin University, University of the West of England and St Andrews University.

The 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. In addition to procurement, libraries reported increasing academic liaison, especially with regard to reading list provision; and improving the library website. Two of the libraries had developed an online information literacy tutorial and one improved their help provision through a 24x7 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 get online quickly and check their email or print a document for a maximum of twenty minutes at a time was one of the more innovative changes. 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.

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, asserting that 'Libraries are being transformed into rowdy social spaces... many of the changes have had unfortunate – even disastrous – consequences for the 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. The majority of SCONUL members who use LibQUAL+® more than once tend to repeat the survey on a biennial basis. The results of the SCONUL consortium demonstrate that minimum and desired expectations have increased for all dimensions of service quality measured since 2004. Along with increased expectations, perceptions of the library service rose between 2004 and 2011. Unlike the National Student Survey, LibQUAL+® enables libraries to put their survey results into context against customer expectations and provides more detailed information on library performance. 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 inform library performance improvement at a local, national and international level.

More details about the survey and its methodology can be found on the LibQUAL+® website: www.libqual.org

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# LibQUAL+: The SCONUL Experience

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