LibQUAL+ in the UK: a brief report on the SCONUL Pilot.

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LibQUAL+ has been developed through a partnership between the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) and the Texas A&M University (TAMU) Libraries with a goal of measuring service quality systematically from the library user perspective. LibQUAL+ was modelled on the 22-item SERVQUAL tool developed by Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml (1991, 1985, and 1994). The Texas A&M University Libraries and other libraries have been using modified SERVQUAL instruments for several years. These applications showed the need for a newly adapted SERVQUAL protocol that serves the needs of libraries; thus LibQUAL+ was born. The original SERVQUAL instrument was restructured based on a series of interviews with library users. The restructured instrument, called LibQUAL+, is being refined with each iteration of the survey through the pilot phase (1999-2003). Funded through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE), the project has resulted in a Web-based survey that collects and analyses user perceptions of library service quality. The nature of LibQUAL+ enables participants to measure not only their own library service, but also their services in comparison to other academic libraries. 308 organisations participated in LibQUAL+ in 2003, including SCONUL members in the first participation of libraries outside North America.

In October 2002 all SCONUL members were invited to participate in a UK pilot for LibQUAL+. The aim of the pilot was to test the methodology in the UK context and lay the foundations for a standardised survey instrument for the UK HE Library sector. The response was encouraging, and 20 member libraries agreed to participate in the pilot project as part of a SCONUL Consortium group. These represented a full variety of U.K.

institutions, and the potential sample consisted of one-sixth of the UK's higher education students.

The UK 2003 participants were:

- Cranfield University
- De Montfort University
- Glasgow University
- Lancaster University
- Leeds Metropolitan University
- Liverpool John Moores University
- Robert Gordon University
- Royal Holloway University of London
- South Bank University
- University College Northampton
- University of Bath
- University of Edinburgh
- University of Gloucestershire
- University of Liverpool
- University of London Library
- University of Oxford
- University of the West of England, Bristol
- University of Wales College, Newport
- University of Wales Swansea
- University of Wolverhampton

The LibQUAL+ survey instrument makes it possible for libraries to canvas their users opinion with minimal local effort. It employs a Web interface to ask users about their library service expectations and experience. The 2003 survey used 25 core questions to

measure library users' minimum, perceived, and desired levels of service quality on a nine-point scale in four key areas:

Access to Information
Affect of Service
Library as Place
Personal Control

Other outcome questions, and five questions developed specifically for the SCONUL participants were also included. The final section of the survey enabled users to provide free-text comments about the library. These were fed directly back to the library in real time enabling the library to provide a prompt response.

The UK participants adopted different methods to sample their local users. Some gathered a random sample of e-mail addresses representative of their user population, whereas others decided to sample the whole population. A message was sent encouraging recipients to complete the survey on the Web. Data was transmitted directly to the LibQUAL+ database in the US. After survey closure the data was then analysed and reports were generated for the individual libraries. The reports presented information on the gaps between users' desired, perceived, and minimally acceptable levels of service. Further details on the survey instrument can be found on the LibQUAL+ Web site: http://www.libqual.org/

A total of about 12,000 responses were received by the SCONUL participants, representing a good proportion of the LibQUAL+ respondents overall. It provided individual libraries with their own agenda for action. The combined results from all participants, presented in a SCONUL group results report, indicates that UK consortia libraries scored best in 'Affect of Service' (which focuses on the service provided by staff members). 'Access to Information' and 'Personal Control' were rated as being the most important to the users. These areas focus on resources available, and users' ability to access them when and where they want in a preferred format. Concern amongst users

about the availability of information resources is a common finding on both sides of the Atlantic. The final aspect, ‘Library as Place’, focuses on the building and study environment. This was not as important to the users overall but the perceived level of service was still some way from the desired.

The UK participants have provided feedback to help SCONUL assess the survey process and to decide on what to recommend to members in the future. Overall the experience was seen as a positive one. The key benefits were seen as being able to benchmark against similar institutions; being able to compare against a national average; and the fact that the majority of the work was done by the ARL with limited local effort required. Difficulties were found by institutions using a random sample of e-mail addresses, as this was often time consuming and difficult. Cultural differences in language and assumptions about the role of libraries inherent in the survey, and the complexity of the instrument were seen as drawbacks. It took a user on average 13 minutes to complete the LibQUAL+ survey and only about one third of those who opened the survey completed it fully. As a result the majority of participants reported a low response rate in comparison to previous or simultaneous survey instruments used. Most of the participants concluded that they were likely to participate in a LibQUAL+ survey again, as the benchmarking data was considered to be of high value, and the managed and serviced process represented very good value for money.

At its meeting in September 2003 the Advisory Committee on Performance Improvement (ACPI) endorsed the success of the UK Pilot, and agreed to encourage and co-ordinate a 2004 consortium of SCONUL members. Fuller dissemination of both results and the process of the UK Pilot will be achieved in due course (see for example, Town, 2003). Further consideration will be given to the relationship of LibQUAL+ to the existing SCONUL User Satisfaction Survey and related UK survey methods and stakeholders. The Chair of the ACPI and the UK Pilot Co-ordinator have been invited to the Statistics & Measurement Task Force Meeting at the ARL Membership Meeting in Washington in October to discuss the UK Pilot and future involvement. This will also hopefully further

cement the excellent relationship between the two bodies, which the UK Pilot of LibQUAL+ has helped to enhance.

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