Sconul Focus, 2005, Number 35, pages 41-44

LibQUAL+ in the UK and Ireland: three years findings and experience.

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Abstract

This paper reports on the SCONUL participation in the use of the LibQUAL+ survey methodology from 2003 to 2005. It discusses the history of performance measurement in the UK over the past decade and sets LibQUAL+ in the context of current practices. The overall results of the SCONUL consortiums from 2003, 2004 and 2005 are presented and discussed. Feedback from the participants over the three years is also presented proving incite into how the LibQUAL+ survey has been implemented in higher education institutions within UK and Ireland.

Introduction

The objectives of this paper are to give an overview of the SCONUL (the Society of College, National and University Libraries) experience of use of the LibQUAL+ survey instrument (Association of Research Libraries, 2004); to present some of the overall results of the 2003-5 SCONUL cohorts; and to describe some feedback from participant institutions and the lessons learnt from the process.

LibQUAL+ did not drop into a vacuum in the UK in terms of available academic library user survey methodologies (Town, 2003a & 2003b). UK Universities had

responded to the wider quality movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and part of the trend of seeing students as customers suggested the need to investigate their satisfaction levels, and to form agendas for improvement in areas of less than adequate performance. These general satisfaction surveys were often in the form of exit questionnaires for students within individual institutions, covering a broad range of university activities and services. This usually constrained the number of questions which could be included on library services.

These general institutional surveys could therefore provide some data on academic library satisfaction levels, but usually focussed on one stakeholder group without context, conversation, or comparison (other than with trends from previous years). Academic libraries in the UK recognised that a higher level of designed survey would provide better data to create agendas for action, and to identify the development priorities of users, in addition to indications of satisfaction with existing services. A number of university libraries started to engage with a firm called Priority Research in the early 1990s (Bell, 1995). Priority Research offered a tailored means of collecting views from users via focus groups, developing these into a forced-choice priority survey, resulting in a local detailed assessment of ranked user priorities for library service improvement.

SCONUL's Advisory Committee on Performance Improvement also responded to the needs of its members by providing a template for a basic satisfaction survey which libraries could draw on and use, and which could be analysed using the Libra software available from Priority Research (Working Group on Performance Improvement, 2005).

Chris West, the Secretary of the SCONUL Advisory Committee on Performance Improvement, undertook a survey of survey methods used in the UK in 2004 (West, 2004). 27 respondents were using the standard SCONUL Satisfaction Survey, and 18 libraries at that time used LibQUAL+. This reflected only the first year of UK LibQUAL+ participation, and we know now that 42 UK and Irish institutions have taken up LibQUAL+ across the three years. LibQUAL+ has therefore become a leading survey method of choice for academic libraries in the UK. Given the maturity of the market in the UK, and the range of well-developed products already available to institutions, this indicates the competitive nature of LibQUAL+, particularly in terms of offering additional benefits or features not available from other products.

A UK National Student Survey has now been piloted and launched this year in the UK across all HE institutions (Richardson, 2005). There is one question on library performance. Whilst this will become an important part of the survey context in which UK academic libraries operate, it is not likely to inhibit the further use of more detailed and sophisticated instruments. Further research will be needed to assess whether these national survey results correlate with the findings of LibQUAL+ and other designed survey instruments.

SCONUL LibQUAL+ participation

From the outset the UK and Irish engagement with LibQUAL+ has been mediated through SCONUL, with its Advisory Committee (now Working Group) on

Performance Improvement undertaking the leadership and coordinating role. This approach was also agreed and supported by CURL (the Consortium of University Research Libraries in the UK and Ireland).

Following discussions with the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) on the mechanics of involvement, and the development of a "British English" survey instrument, the first year of UK involvement in 2003 saw 20 UK higher education institutions participating. This was the first use of LibQUAL+ outside North America. 16 Irish and UK HE institutions participated in 2004, and a further cohort of 16 participated in 2005. Because some institutions repeated across these years the total number of institutions taking part so far from the UK and Ireland has been 42. This represents an involvement in LibQUAL+ of almost one third of UK Universities (based on a Universities UK Membership of 126). This represents a far higher proportion of institutional involvement than in any other national context in which the LibQUAL+ survey has been offered so far.

The potential sample covered by LibQUAL+ in relation to the overall UK higher education enterprise is considerable. By 2005 a quarter of all SCONUL members had been involved. Consequently it is now possible to form detailed conclusions on the national condition of academic library quality based on data from a potential sample of about one third of HE students, and from one third of the total of individual academic libraries representing two-fifths of the total UK expenditure on academic library services (based on HELMS data).

SCONUL cohort results

The total number of responses from UK and Irish LibQUAL+ participants has risen during the three years, from 11,919 (2003), through 16,611 (2004), to 17,355 (2005). This represents a 45% increase since inception. The total for all LibQUAL+ surveys has seen a decrease in responses since 2003, and consequently the UK and Irish share of the overall response has increased from 9% to 16% (2005).

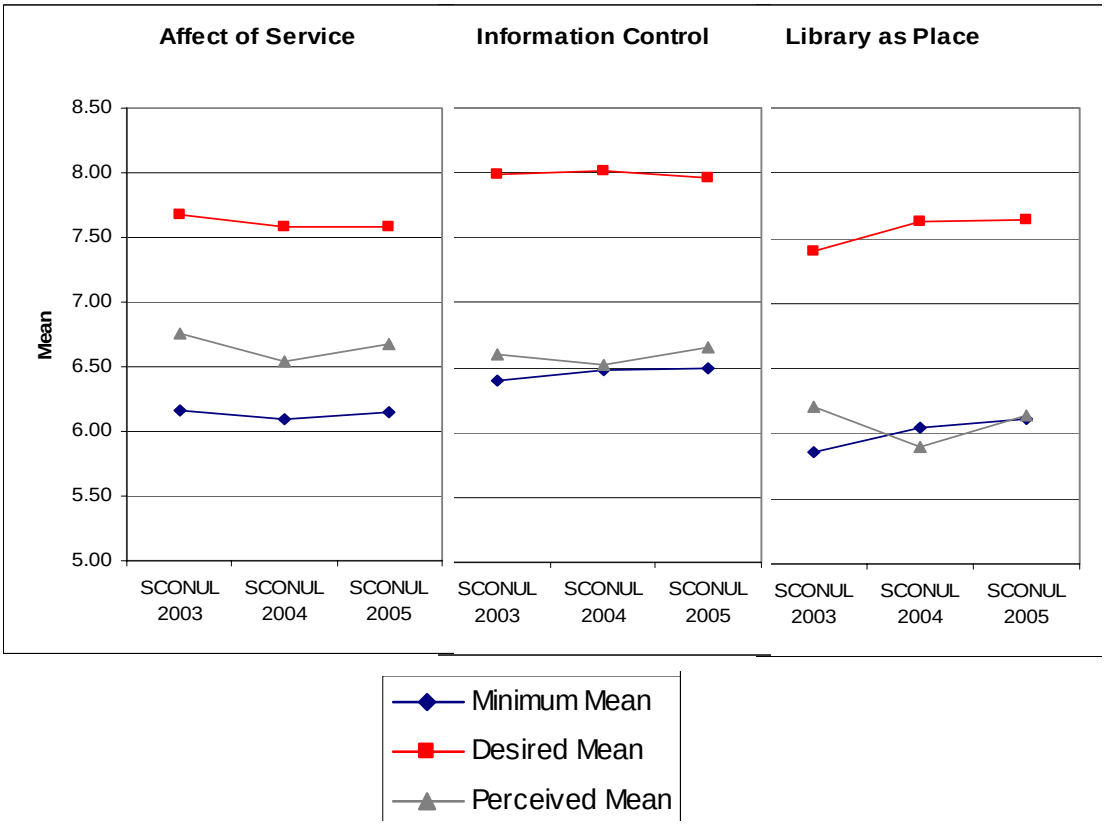
There has been a close match between the responses made and the potential markets segmented on a subject discipline basis. The LibQUAL+ results can therefore be taken to be properly representative of the range of possible opinion.

In 2003 LibQUAL+ contained 25 core questions which were categorised by four dimensions of library service quality: Access to Information (questions on, for example, availability of journals, electronic information and opening hours); Affect of Service (questions concerning the effectiveness of Library staff); Library as Place (questions on the physical environment); and Personal Control (questions concerning the ease with which information can be found, e.g. effectiveness of access tools, web-sites etc.). In 2004 the Access to Information and Personal Control dimensions merged into the Information Control dimension. LibQUAL+ also collects free text comments from users, as well as additional questions on general satisfaction, information literacy outcomes, frequency of use, and others chosen locally.

The overall results for SCONUL in 2005 shows that the perceived performance is a little above the minimum requirements of users in the Affect of Service dimension,

but below the minimum requirement expressed in some areas of the Information Control and Library as Place dimensions.

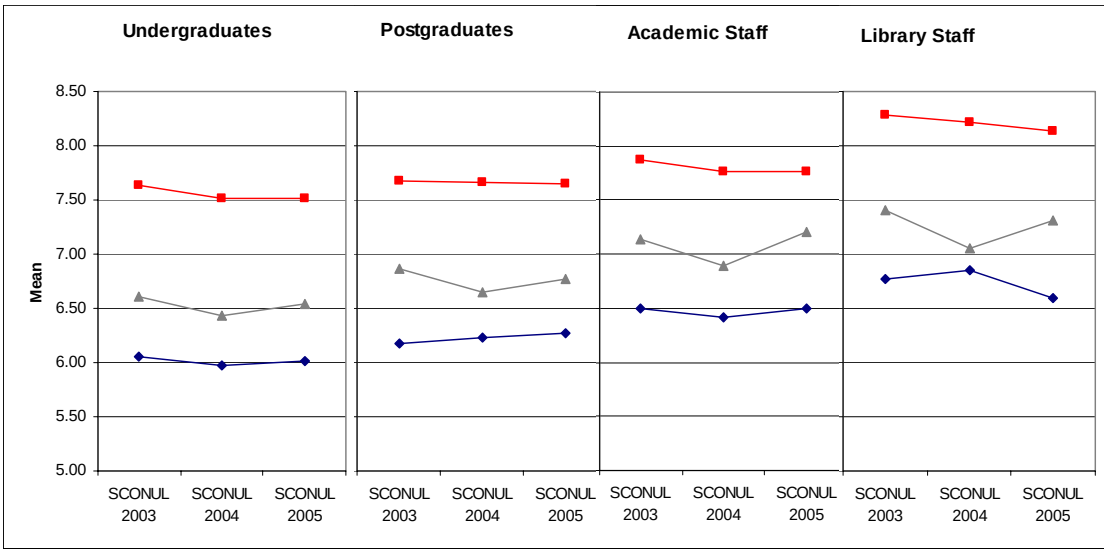
Graph 1: Overall results for each dimension from SCONUL



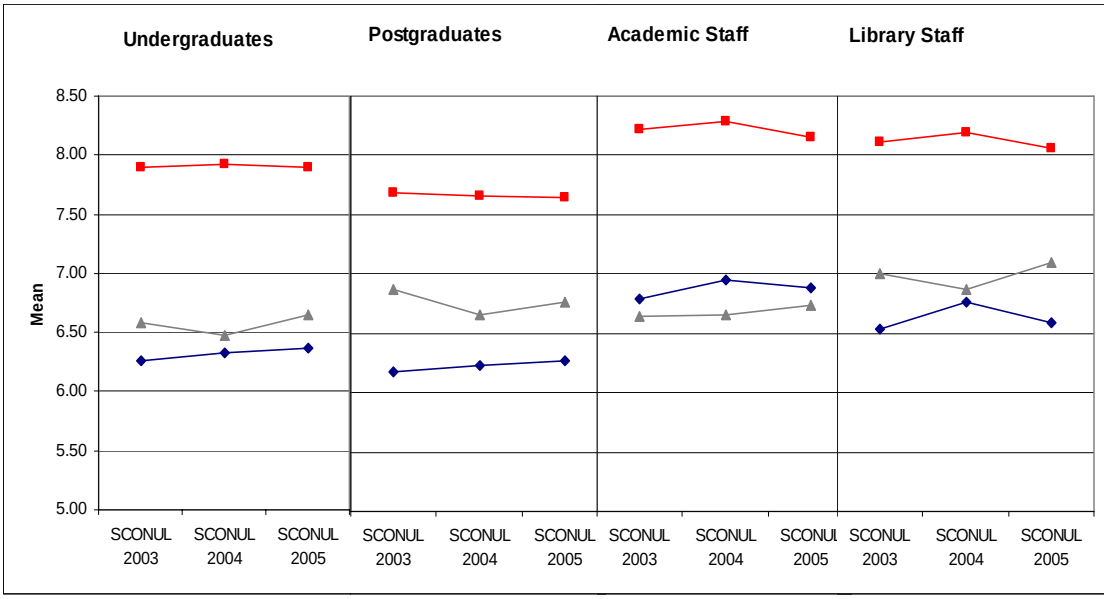
There are differences between the results for the SCONUL cohorts in each year. The graphs provide indications of the trends across the three years by quality dimension. The Information Control data has been calculated to take into account the merging of the dimensions between 2003 and 2004. Generally the results in 2004 were closer to the minimum levels than in the years either side. The results in 2003 did not reflect the levels of apparent dissatisfaction with some aspects of Library as Place expressed through below the minimum scores to some questions in 2004 and 2005. Library as Place is the only dimension to see a steady increase in users' expectations over the three years. Further research on the Library as Place dimension is suggested, although it is possible that the poor results overall for library as place imply that growth in student numbers may be compromising the quality of the study environment.

Consistently across all the three years the ability of libraries to deliver printed materials that staff and students require for their work, and the print or electronic journal collection provision have scored below users' minimum expectations in the UK.

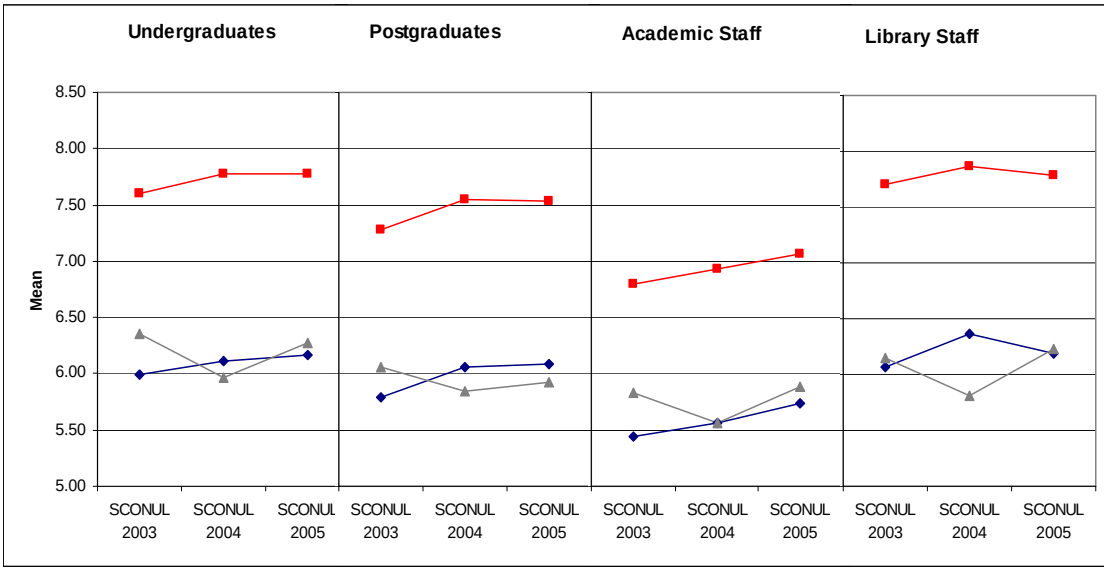
Graph 2: Affect of Service results by user group



Graph 3: Information Control results by user group.



Graph 4: Library as Place results by user group



The tables of graphs provide the trend analysis across the three years by user group responses. Library staff scores are excluded from the overall presented analysis of results in LibQUAL+, but the data is collected and available to participating institutions. The authors believe that these results provide a useful indicator of any gap between library staff perceptions of services and corresponding user perceptions. These may generate their own agenda for improving library staff awareness, particularly if there is a large local variance between the perceptions of providers and those of users.

In terms of the spectrum of stakeholder groups, overall desired scores appear to be consistent across the groups. However inspection of the different dimension scores reveals a richer and more diverse reality. Library staff have higher desired scores than user groups generally, although for Information Control Academic Staff have the highest expectations. Library staff perceived levels of service are also usually higher than their user groups. Academic staff have higher minimum scores than other user

groups in the Information Control and Affect of Service dimensions, but lower for Library as Place.

Perhaps surprisingly postgraduates appear to have the lowest expectations in the Information Control dimension and consequently appear the most satisfied given the smaller superiority gap. However in some individual questions in this dimension the 2005 results show serious dissatisfaction with collections and materials. Academic staff are clearly the least satisfied, with their perceived levels of performance never exceeding their minimum expectations across the three years. In 2005 responses by academic staff to five of the eight Information Control questions resulted in negative adequacy means.

Library staff have the highest perceptions of the level of service provided in the Information Control dimension. Whether this is an indication of library staff's better awareness of the resources available or simply an overestimate of the ability of these collections to meet user's needs is questionable, and deserves further investigation.

Expectations in the Library as Place dimension are growing across the majority of user groups, but overall it is not viewed as important as the other two dimensions, especially for Academic Staff. This is not surprising as academic staff may have other places to work. Library as Place has the most dramatic differences in results across the three years, which could be attributed to the difference in libraries taking part in each year. The other two dimensions remain fairly consistent despite the difference in cohort membership.

The conclusion to be drawn from these results at a national level is that users are more satisfied with library staff performance than they are with information resources and access, or with the library environment. These results are unlikely to be surprising to academic library managers in the UK, but clearly action is needed to improve performance in these areas if the UK is to maintain claims to international excellence in its academic libraries.

Feedback from Participants and lessons learnt

Participants from the SCONUL cohorts were asked to provide feedback on their experience with LibQUAL+ survey. Different reasons for using LibQUAL+ were presented, with the most predominant being the opportunity for benchmarking the tool provides, and that the analysis of the results is conducted by LibQUAL+ on behalf of the institution. The majority of participants have found the LibQUAL+ process straightforward requiring limited staff time to administer. The issues that did take time were in obtaining email addresses and demographic data about their local population, and publicising the survey locally.

The survey results were as expected at the majority of participating institutions, the detailed level of results highlighted new opportunities for improvement at some institutions as the survey goes into more depth than other tools previously used. One institution reported that the results from LibQUAL+ differed from that of an in-house survey that was run at the same time to a different sample of the local population. Although the samples were comparable the results were not, with the LibQUAL+ results being more negative than the local survey. At Cranfield University the results

from the local exit questionnaire have been compared to the LibQUAL+ results, but the same variance was not discovered.

Institutions reported changes they had made arising from their results. These included lobbying for more funds to improve the environment, resources or PCs. One institution reported that they were able to improve IT facilities by presenting their results to the Computing department as evidence of a need to increase provision. The free-text comments gleaned from survey participants provide specific detail to the library about areas of concern or praise. One institution reported direct (and prompt) action was taken to re-introduce a feature which had been recently removed from their web site as a result of LibQUAL+ comments.

Institutions who first participated in 2003 and then again in 2005 have all commented on the improvements to the tool and the process. One major positive improvement has been seen as the facility for institutions to tailor the subject discipline categories to suit their local context, enabling further analysis of the results to be produced by academic area.

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. Those who have participated would like to see other institutions follow suit in order to improve the benchmarking possibilities.

Conclusions

The introduction of the LibQUAL+ survey instrument has been a success in the UK and Ireland. A good proportion of UK institutions have taken part and obtained reliable and representative data from library users for improving service quality. Areas for general national improvement in academic libraries have also been identified.

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2005-10-26T18:06:01Z
http://hdl.handle.net/1826/951
Lock, S. Town, J. S., LibQUAL+ in the UK and Ireland: three years findings and experience. Sconul Focus, 2005, Number 35, pages 41-44

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