Service Quality Assessment with LibQUAL+® in Challenging Times: LibQUAL+® at Cranfield University

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Cranfield University is the UK's only wholly postgraduate university focused on science, technology, engineering, and management. The University Library first implemented the LibQUAL+® survey methodology in 2003 as a member of the Society of College, National, and University Libraries (SCONUL) consortium.[1] The successful pilot study was the first time the LibQUAL+® protocol was used outside North America. Since 2005 the survey has been used at Cranfield's School of Defence and Security annually. Specializing in the teaching of defense science, technology, and management, the student population consists of 1,200 military and civilian students, 85% of whom study part-time away from the university campus.

Thorough analysis conducted on the School of Defence and Security's LibQUAL+® results has led to a culture of continued performance improvement within the library. Results are used to develop and improve services, assess the impact of change, and demonstrate the value of the library to senior stakeholders of the school. Results are benchmarked externally with key competitors as well as longitudinally, and are closely monitored by key administrators.

When necessary, further performance assessment activities have been conducted to explore issues raised in the LibQUAL+® results. These activities include focus groups, local questionnaires, interviews, and observational studies. Service developments have been designed around customer feedback and the library has received improving results year-on-year since 2003.

The 2010 LibQUAL+® implementation raised two key challenges:

- Firstly, how can the library improve the response rate of the survey?
- Secondly, how will changes made to library services impact future LibQUAL+® results?

Improving Response Rate

Owing to the relatively small population at the School of Defence and Security with the majority of courses conducted during one academic year, the survey has always been sent to the whole population, no sampling has been applied. All students and staff members receive an invitation to complete the survey through a generic university-wide e-mail message. Since the introduction of part-time distant-learning courses in 2006, the response rate had been declining annually, from 26% in 2006 to 8% in 2009. Although the part-time students are issued with a university e-mail address, many do not use it, preferring to communicate via their work or personal e-mail addresses instead. Therefore, many have never read the general invitation to complete the LibQUAL+® survey. Supplementary to this, concerns regarding the complexity of the survey coupled with survey fatigue had been raised by both staff and students alike. The first strategic challenge to improve the response rate led to two changes for the 2010 implementation. Firstly, non-university e-mail addresses were obtained from the student records system for the part-time students. This data was coupled with the students' full name enabling a personalized mailing to be sent rather than a generic invitation. The message emphasized the importance of the customer feedback and how the results have been used in the past. The link in the e-mail directed the customer to the library website with a subsequent link to the LibQUAL+® survey to emphasize the anonymous nature of the questionnaire.

Secondly, the new shorter LibQUAL+® Lite[2] protocol was used for 50% of the surveys, in line with an agreed-upon approach with other SCONUL participants. The 50/50 approach was adopted by members of the SCONUL consortium who had previously used LibQUAL+® to collect baseline data for the comparability of the long and Lite versions of the LibQUAL+® survey. This enables further analysis of the implications of the Lite protocol on the scores received.

Impact of Changes in Service on LibQUAL+® Results

The second key challenge concerned how changes made to library services might result in a decline in LibQUAL+® scores. The current economic climate has impacted libraries the world over, with reduced budgets and increasing resource costs leading to a reduction in resources and services available within academic libraries. Cranfield University has not been immune to this and there was concern from the staff about how changes to library services would impact the LibQUAL+® results. At the "Introduction to LibQUAL+®" workshop held in London in February 2010, it became clear that the fear was shared across libraries. In some cases, participants were planning on implementing LibQUAL+® prior to cancelling resources to minimise the impact on the survey results. Cranfield did not have this option; opening hours had been reduced along with front-of-house staffing levels, and resources had been reduced. How would these changes impact our previously happy, healthy LibQUAL+® scores?

Results

The survey was launched on March 1, 2010, and ran for one month. Immediately it became obvious that the reduced survey length and personalized e-mails were improving the response rate. More responses were received in the first day of the 2010 survey than the total number of responses received in 2009. Overall the number of responses increased by 163%, with the response rate increasing from 8% in 2009 to 21% in 2010. The key change was the increase in responses from part-time students, which rose by over 500%.

Detailed analysis of the results and longitudinal benchmarking found that the LibQUAL+® results for 2010 remained at the same high standard set in pervious years with the overall superiority mean score showing no change between 2009 and 2010. For all core and local questions the library exceeded minimum expectations, and overall for the Affect of Service and Library as Place dimensions it exceeded desired expectations. There was a slight decline in customer perceptions for some specific questions. However, performance is still above their minimum expectations and within the "Zone of Tolerance." The changes implemented have been acceptable to the customers, recognized by the academic community as necessary in challenging times. LibQUAL+® has been vital in assessing the impact of these changes, enabling the library to ensure that resources and services are still aligned to customer needs.

The library will be using LibQUAL+® Lite for the 2011 implementation—after assessing that there is no difference in the scores received for the two different protocols in the Cranfield context—as the Lite protocol offers the unique advantage of reducing response time and increasing response rates. Further changes are planned to library services based on customer feedback with the aim of improving the results once again.

[1] Selena Lock and Stephen Town, "LibQUAL+ in the UK and Ireland: Three Years' Findings and Experience," *SCONUL Focus*, no. 35 (2005): 41–45, http://www.sconul.ac.uk/publications/newsletter/35/.

[2] Martha Kyrillidou, "Item Sampling in Service Quality Assessment Surveys to Improve Response Rates and Reduce Respondent Burden: The 'LibQUAL+® Lite' Randomized Control Trial (RCT)" (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2009), https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/bitstream/handle/2142/14570/Kyrillidou_Martha.pdf?sequence=3.

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