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

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Introduction

This article gives an overview of the SCONUL LibQUAL + participation, presents some of the overall results of the 2003-5 SCONUL cohorts, and describes some feedback from participants and the lessons learnt from the process.

Academic libraries in the UK had been involved for more than a decade in drawing on data from 'designed' surveys. Some of these developed from general satisfaction surveys on a range of university activities within which there would be some questions on library services. These were often initiated as exit questionnaires for students, as UK universities responded to the wider quality movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s and began to see students as customers.

These general satisfaction surveys could provide data on satisfaction levels, but usually without context, conversation, or comparison (other than with trends from previous years). Academic libraries in the UK quickly recognised that a higher level of designed survey would provide more useful data to create agendas for action, and to identify the priorities of users, in addition to indications of satisfaction with existing services. in the early 1990s a number of university libraries started to engage with the company Priority Research, who 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.

Because there has been a reasonable history of satisfaction surveys in the UK, SCONUL's Advisory Committee on Performance Improvement (now the Working Group on Performance Improvement) felt it needed to develop a product which libraries could draw on and use. And so the SCONUL satisfaction survey has been available as a basic standard product for libraries in the UK to use for some time.

Chris West, the Secretary of the SCONUL Working Group on Performance Improvement, undertook a survey of survey methods used in the UK in 2004. Twenty-seven respondents were using the standard SCONUL Satisfaction Survey, and 18 libraries at that time used LibQUAL+. This reflected only the first year of UK participation, and we know now that 43 UK and Irish institutions have taken up LibQUAL+ across the three years.

LibQUAL+ in the UK

From the outset the UK and Irish engagement with LibQUAL+ has been through SCONUL with the Working Group on Performance Improvement undertaking the leadership and coordinating role. This approach was also agreed and supported by CURL (the Consortium of Research Libraries).

Following discussions with ARL (the Association of Research Libraries [USA and Canada]), the first year of UK involvement was in 2003 when 20 UK higher education institutions participated. In 2004 17 Irish and UK higher educations institutions participated and a further cohort of 17 participated in 2005. Because some institutions repeated across these years the total number of institutions taking part so far from the UK and Ireland is 43. This represents an involvement in LibQUAL+ of about one third of UK university level institutions (based on a Universities UK membership of 121).

The potential sample covered by LibQUAL+ in relation to the overall UK higher education enterprise is therefore considerable. To 2004 a fifth of UK institutions had been involved, and by 2005 this had risen to one third. To 2005 this represented the potential to capture the views of nearly three quarters of a million students and implying

a judgment on over a third of the total higher education library expenditure in the UK.

Since 2003 the UK LibQUAL+ return has continued to rise, with an increase in responses of 45%. LibQUAL+ as a whole has seen a decrease in responses since 2003, subsequently the UK now accounts for 16% of the LibQUAL+ responses received.

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 and 22 core questions measured the three dimensions.

The overall results for SCONUL in 2005 show that performance is a little above the minimum in Affect of Service and some problems of performance below the minimum in Information Control and Library as Place.

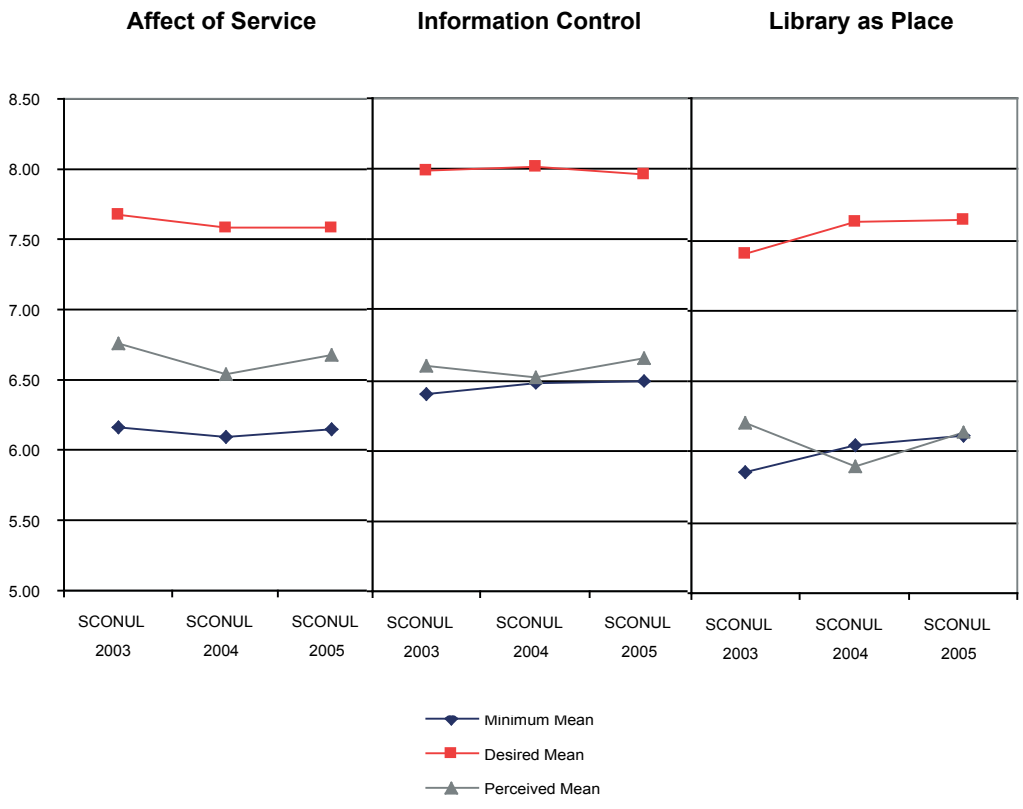
There is a marked difference between the results for 2003 and the subsequent years, and one without obvious immediate explanation. Library as Place is the dimension which suggests more research is needed to understand the variation across the three years, and the particularly good results in the 2003 cohort.

Consistently across all 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 has scored below users' minimum expectations in the UK.

Graph 1 shows the change in the dimensions over the three years LibQUAL+ has been running in the UK. The Information Control data has been calculated to take into account the merging of the dimensions between 2003 and 2004.

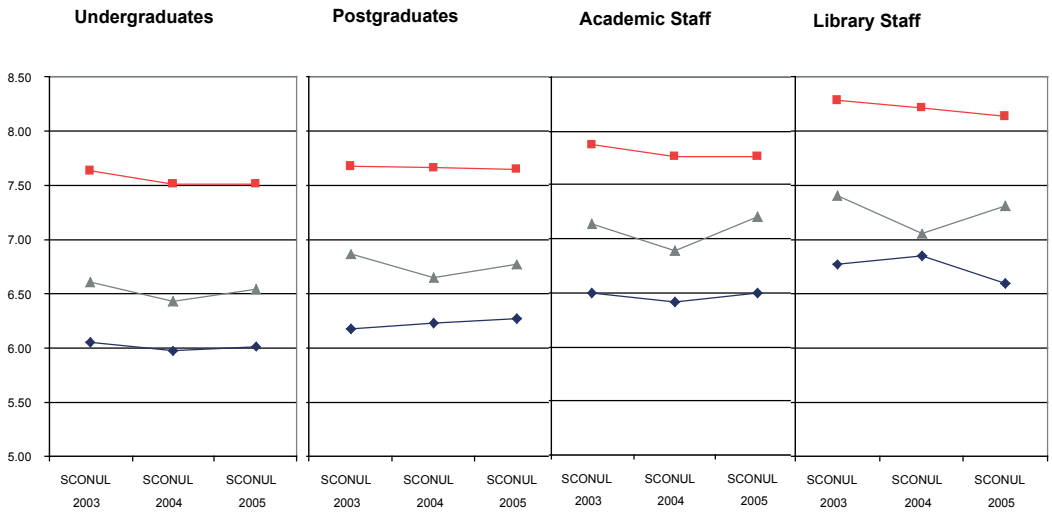
For all three dimensions there was a decrease in perceptions in 2004. Library as Place is the only dimension to see a steady increase in users' expectations over the three years, Information Control expectations have remained fairly stable and Affect of Service has seen a decline in users' expectations.

Graph 1: Overall results for each dimension from SCONUL



Graph 2 shows the Affect of Service dimension broken down by user group for the three years.

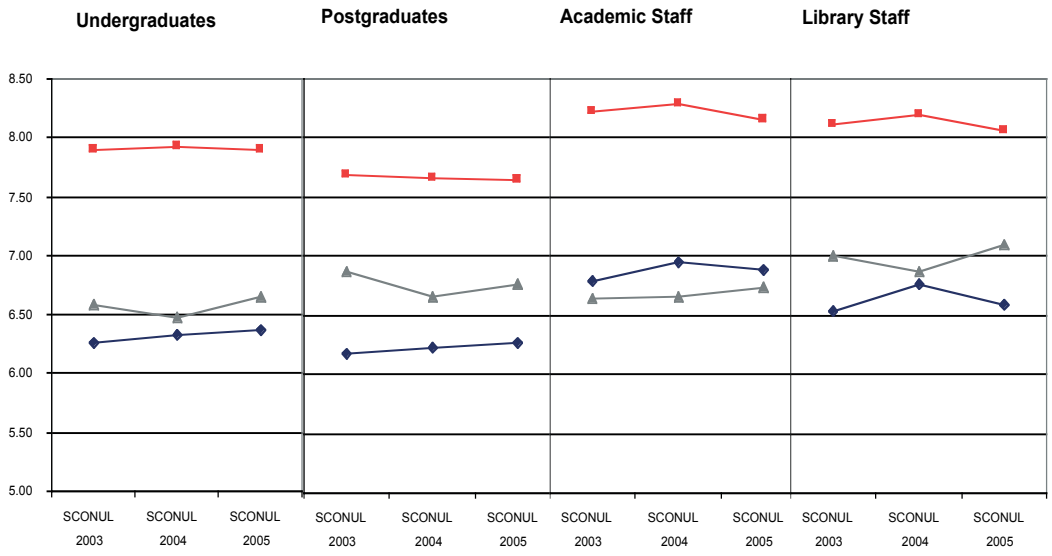
Graph 2: Affect of Service results by user group



Expectations increase progressively from the undergraduates through to the library staff members, with the library staff having the highest desired expectations. Perceptions appear to increase in line with expectations across the user groups.

Graph 3 shows the Information Control dimension broken down by user group for the three years.

Graph 3: Information Control results by user group.

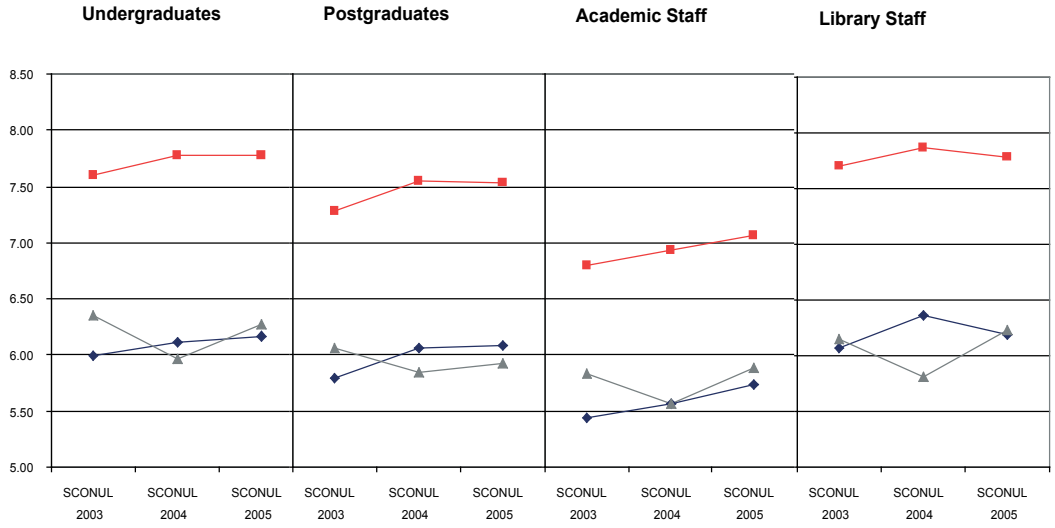


Postgraduates appear to have the lowest expectations in this dimension and are the most satisfied with a smaller superiority gap. Academic staff are clearly the least satisfied with their perceived level of performance never exceeding their minimum expectations. They also have the highest expectations of the Information Control dimension. Library staff have the highest perceptions of the level of service provided in this dimension, which

could indicate a gap in the level of awareness of resources amongst the other user groups.

Graph 4 shows the Library as Place dimension broken down by user group for the three years.

Graph 4: Library as Place results by user group



Although expectations are growing in this dimension across the majority of user groups, it is not viewed as important as the other two dimensions – especially for academic staff. This is not unusual as questions relating to space for group study may not be as applicable to academic staff as it may be to undergraduates. Library as Place has the most dramatic differences across the years, which could be attributed to the difference in libraries taking part over the different years. The other two dimensions remain fairly consistent despite the difference in cohorts, however due to the nature of Library as Place the impact of the different participants has more impact.

Feedback from participants and lessons learnt

Participants from the 2005 SCONUL cohort 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 and the analysis of the results being conducted by LibQUAL+ on behalf of the institution. The majority of participants 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.

Institutions reported changes they had made on the back of their results which included lobbying for more funds to improve the environment, resources or PCs. One institution reported that they were able to improve the PC 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 comments to the library about areas of concern or praise. One institution reported that on the back of these comments direct (and prompt) action was taken to re-introduce a feature which had been removed from their web site shortly before undertaking LibQUAL+.

Institutions which first participated in 2003 and again in 2005 have all commented on the improvements to the tool and the process. One major positive improvement has been seen as the ability 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.

SCONUL's Working Group on Performance Improvement (WGPI) is encouraging and organising a 2006 consortium of SCONUL members for the LibQUAL+ survey. This is being coordinated by Stephen Town of Cranfield University on behalf of WGPI. Those wishing to participate should contact him directly at j.s.town@cranfield.ac.uk to indicate interest as soon as possible.

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