Measuring up: the experience of LibQUAL+™ at ITT Dublin library

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Introduction

This article provides an outline of the LibQUAL+™ web-based survey conducted in 2009 at ITT (Institute of Technology Tallaght) Dublin library, capturing some of the main findings, feedback from those who participated, lessons learnt and proposed future actions.

The library service at ITT Dublin is committed to enhancing quality, and part of this process involves communicating and engaging with our users to determine their requirements and respond to their ongoing needs. In March 2009, asa part of our efforts in providing a more customer-focused and improved library service, the library at ITT Dublin carried out an online library user survey, LIBQUAL+™. The library had previously run customer-satisfaction surveys in 2004 and in 2006 (using LIBQUAL+™ for the first time), the results of which have helped inform ongoing developments of the library service.

The LibQUAL+™ survey instrument is a well-designed and robust web-based survey which has been rigorously tested and developed since 2000 by the Association of Research Libraries. LibQUAL+™ garners feedback from library users across a range of issues covering library services, resources and facilities.[1] The library in ITT Dublin participated as part of a SCONUL consortium, which enabled us to benchmark our results against other participating Ireland and UK institutions.

To date, only a small number of Irish higher education institutions have taken up LIBQUAL+™ as a means of measuring service quality, while their counterparts in the UK have been quicker

to embrace library user-satisfaction surveys. As Hayden et al. point out, 'Irish academic libraries have not been involved in survey research to the same extent but the situation is changing.'[2]

Methodology

The LIBQUAL+™ survey took place over three weeks, from 9 March to 31 March 2009. A project team was established, made up of a senior librarian and library assistants, with a member of IT services available to provide any technical assistance. The senior librarian acted as the LibQUAL+™ survey liaison and had the main responsibility for the survey's administration. We decided not to sample but instead surveyed the entire institute population, which is made up of over 4,000 full-time and part-time students and 400-plus staff.

Using a web interface, the survey instrument consists of 22 core questions, connected to three main dimensions – 'Library as place' (questions covering the library study environment), 'Information control' (questions dealing with print and electronic content and access to this content) and 'Affect of service' (questions relating to the library's customer-service provision).

Respondents are asked to rate their minimum requirements, desired expectations and perceptions of current service levels. This allows for the analysis of the results using a 'gap theory' approach, which pinpoints where library services are meeting, surpassing or failing to meet users' levels of expectations. Questions for each dimension were spread randomly throughout the first 22 questions in the survey. Additionally, users were also asked five local questions that were selected by the library at ITT Dublin from a predetermined list. General satisfaction and information literacy questions were also included and the survey gathered information on library usage patterns and demographics. Space was provided at the end of the survey for free text comments and from these we were able to glean some very useful qualitative data.

Before the final version of the survey went live, library and academic staff and a random selection of students tested it a number of times and completed a pilot of the survey. The survey was examined using various platforms and web browsers on and off campus. The project team engaged our IT services department to identify any local network issues, organise e-mail distribution lists and anticipate any further ICT issues. The comments and feedback collated in the testing phase helped refine the final version of the survey. The instrument was now ready and a URL to the survey was generated for users to complete.

Distribution

The survey was distributed to our entire user community, with invitations to complete the URL to the survey being sent via e-mail to all full-time and part-time students and staff of the institute in ITT Dublin.

The local project team began an aggressive marketing campaign, the planning of which had begun in earnest in the weeks prior to the running of the survey, with the aim being to maximise user participation. Marketing materials were downloaded from the LibQUAL+™ website and the survey was publicised at academic meetings and at events sponsored by the student union. The survey was promoted extensively in the library and around the campus via posters, flyers and other signage, with weekly survey booths in operation in the main reception area of the institute. Dedicated laptops were made available in these booths for users to complete the survey online and these were also offered within the main library.

A web page with the survey URL and details about LibQUAL+™ was created on the library's website and links to it featured prominently on the library home page (the survey was also available for download as a PDF file). In addition, the survey URL was publicised on the library blog and on the institute's Virtual Learning Environment, Moodle. A print version of the questionnaire was also made available for all participants to complete, which would help negate any technical problems faced by users in addition to any issues faced by participants with visual impairments or other disabilities. As an incentive to complete the survey, prizes were offered to respondents, including book tokens and a Nintendo DS.

The institute's user community were sent regular reminders inviting them to participate and thanks were offered to those respondents who had already completed the survey. A dedicated e-mail address was also made available to users to provide feedback and deal with any queries or needs of assistance.

Response rates

The library at ITT Dublin received a response rate of over 10%, with good proportional representation across all years, courses and academic departments (see Figure 1).

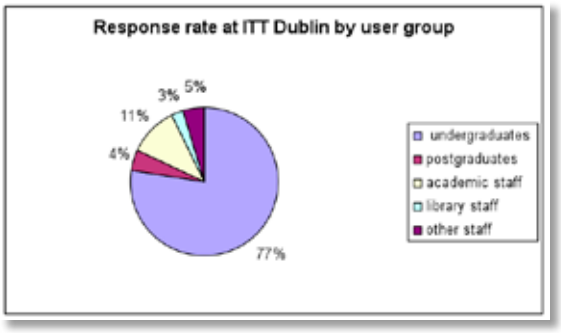

Figure 1.

A total of 477 responses was received, with the highest response coming from the departments affiliated with the School of Business and Humanities (see Figure 2).

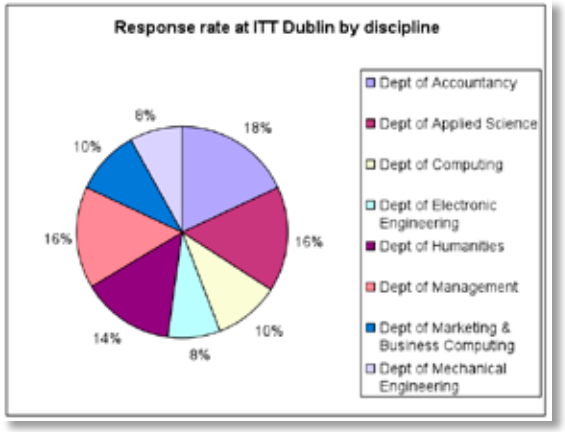

Figure 2.

Main findings

The results for the library at ITT Dublin were positive in each of the three dimensions of library service quality. Overall, satisfaction levels were higher in the 'Affect of service' dimension than in the 'Information control' or 'Library as place' dimensions. The highest satisfaction levels were registered by respondents for 'library staff who instill confidence' and 'giving users individual attention'. Low levels of satisfaction were noted for 'quiet space for individual work' and 'space for group learning and group study'.

All library user groups were very satisfied with the service being provided, with academic staff and support staff being the most satisfied of all the user groups, closely followed by postgraduates. The library scored well in terms of the support it provides for learning, teaching and research and also scored impressively when it came to rating the overall quality of the library service.

When broken down by user groups, there are differences in the results. Undergraduates expressed slightly lower satisfaction levels overall than academic staff, support staff or postgraduates. Undergraduates were most satisfied when it came to rating library customer-service provision under 'Affect of service' and, as in 2006, were least satisfied with the 'Library as place' dimension, indicating their dissatisfaction with the 'library space for group learning and group study' and 'quiet space'. Undergraduates also expressed concern about the lack of PCs in the library and of photocopying and printing facilities.

Under 'Affect of service', postgraduate respondents indicated high levels of satisfaction, with positive responses in rating 'courteous staff' and 'willingness to help users'. In comparison with the 2006 survey findings, the biggest area of improvement with this group was across the 'Information control' and 'Library As place' dimensions, particularly when it came to 'making electronic information resources that the user needs available' and 'library space that inspires study and learning'. Postgraduates were also satisfied with interlibrary loans, information skills training and library service hours.

Academic staff were overall the most satisfied of all the user groups; under 'Affect of service', the feeling was that the customer service and instruction provided by library staff exceeded expectations, particularly when it came to 'instilling confidence' and 'giving users individual attention'. Unlike in 2006, academic staff were also satisfied when it came to rating the library environment under the 'Library as place' heading and expressed satisfaction with the 'provision of information skills training'.

Extensive use of the library is evident – over 25% of respondents use the resources within the library on a daily basis and 47% of respondents on a weekly basis, while 39% of users access library resources through a library web page on a daily basis.

The comments received were particularly useful. In total, 206 comments were collated, with almost half of the respondents (43%) providing qualitative feedback at the end of the survey in the free-text comments box. The comments have been

analysed by topics, linked to the survey structure, with library staff being lauded for the strong level of customer service provided (66 positive comments received). The main concerns raised by respondents were the need for an enhanced library collection, to include more core textbooks and up-to-date editions, and improved access to library print and electronic resources. The limited number of PCs in the library was also highlighted, as were issues with photocopying and printing, noise-management and the need for additional group study spaces and longer opening hours. A selection of their comments:

'Library staff are always extremely helpful, well informed and courteous. In my ten years or so, it has been transformed into a highly efficient and professionally run place of study and source of information.'

'Perhaps info skills training made a pre-requisite – all students have to attend at some stage in year 1.'
'The library needs to invest in some kind of "one search searches all" technology as I waste a lot of time going from one electronic resource to another …'
'Effort should be made to reduce the noise level by students in the library especially during exam period … the library needs way more group study spaces …'
'I thought the questionnaire was very complex to complete … too many survey questions [in first section] basically the same.'

The library previously ran the LibQUAL+™ survey in 2006. The response rate in 2009 was a 17% increase on that survey. A comparison between the results of the 2009 and 2006 surveys indicates that the biggest area of improvement overall was in relation to the 'Library as place' dimension, which reflects the physical enhancements made to the library study environment since 2006.

The LibQUAL+™ survey methodology is employed by many academic libraries, in Ireland, the UK and further afield. McKnight makes the point that a 'major benefit of LibQUAL+™ is its benchmarking capability'.[3] The library at ITT Dublin participated as part of a SCONUL consortium and this facilitated benchmarking our results with similar libraries, yielding comparative performance data across institutions.

ITT Dublin library had 477 respondents and this represented a total of 2.22% of the total number of consortium respondents: this was an encouraging response when the size of our institution is compared with some of the other participants. The library at ITT Dublin measured up to the SCONUL participating libraries, performing well in every dimension of service quality that was evaluated and the valuable comparative data obtained will facilitate ongoing improvement and will position us to better meet our users' expectations.

Lessons learnt

ITT Dublin originally undertook a library user survey in 2004. However, there was a low response rate and library staff undertook the analysis with SPSS and Excel, which proved to be both time-consuming and statistically inaccurate. The main advantage of the LibQUAL+™ survey is that it is a 100% bought-in survey and requires a minimal amount of library-staff time to administer. All the statistical analysis is conducted for the local institution and the survey results notebook is delivered promptly (in about 2–3 weeks) in PDF format after the survey closes. Raw data is also provided in Excel and SPSS format to facilitate further analysis.

In a difficult economic environment, the survey also offers value for money, with minimal expense incurred to the local institution, and the benchmarking opportunities it has provided, with that of peer institutions, provides useful comparable assessment data. The 2009 results were also benchmarked against the 2006 data offering further valuable opportunities for performance comparison.

Once the survey is completed there is an opportunity for the survey liaison and project team to provide feedback about their LibQUAL+™ experience via the post hoc and evaluation questionnaires. Much of the feedback from participants (captured verbally or via a dedicated e-mail address) has related to general comments about the survey and to technical problems that respondents had in completing it. A number of surveys were finalised in print format, with some users indicating their preference for this format; this did, however, lead to an additional workload for the project team, who spent considerable time inputting the completed paper surveys.

In general, feedback from participants was that the online option for undertaking the survey worked well as it was flexible and convenient, with users taking the time to visit the library website and the institute's VLE, Moodle, to complete the survey. From an administrative point of view, the online instrument could be implemented quickly and effectively, the survey URL facilitated

a single e-mail distribution and the web-based survey was capable of handling a large number of responses. LibQUAL+™ recommended that we run the survey for three weeks and this generated increased response rates, as did regular monitoring by the project team of the LibQUAL+™ website for survey responses being gathered in real time (reminders were sent out where appropriate to certain user groups to boost response rates).

When it came to the survey instrument, many of the participants expressed concern about the complexity of the survey (the three dimensions measuring satisfaction caused confusion in particular), complained about the length of time it took to complete the survey and felt there was repetition with regard to some of the questions.

Another issue highlighted by the survey liaison was that considerable time was spent obtaining demographic data about the local population. In addition, the survey instrument was limited when it came to focusing on local issues, with some of the questions not being customisable for institutions to tailor to their own requirements. To achieve more effective results it would be of value for LibQUAL+™ to make enhancements to allow for question customisation.[4]

The local LibQUAL+™ project team felt that the marketing techniques employed and the time spent planning and promoting the survey within the institution – via a campaign that included posters, flyers, websites and survey booths – helped ensure that the survey was highly visible on the campus, led to the cooperation of the academic community and helped elicit a better response rate.

Future actions

The library service at ITT Dublin is committed to ongoing engagement with our users to ensure that they make optimum use of library resources and services. As in 2004 and 2006, the 2009 LibQUAL+™ survey results will facilitate enhancements across all aspects of the library service. McKnight points out that 'the major factor towards delivering customer satisfaction is to do something constructive with the data'.[5] To maximise the potential of the ITT Dublin results, further data-analysis will be undertaken, with recommendations and actions drawn up.

The results and feedback obtained will guide and inform the future development and strategic planning of the library. As part of this process, certain areas of the library service will be targeted and actions are already under way, including the implementation of open-source software that provides seamless searching of the library's print and electronic holdings in a single user-friendly interface; the design and development of an online information literacy tutorial; the provision of more study spaces in the library; and the enhancement of computing, photocopying and printing facilities.

The library at ITT Dublin is likely to take part in the survey again, particularly with our commitment to continuous improvements to library service delivery. It would be of value for other Irish academic libraries from the institutes of technology and university sector to participate in order to maximise the potential for benchmarking.

References

1 For more information, visit www.libqual.org.

2 H. Hayden, T. O'Brien and M. O'Rathaille, 'User survey at Waterford Institute of Technology libraries: how a traditional approach to surveys can inform service delivery', *New library world*, 106 (1/2), 2005, pp 43–57, p47

3 S. McKnight, 'Are there common academic library customer values?', *Library management*, 19 (6/7), 2008, pp 600–19, p618

4 LibQUAL+ has not developed a system to allow question customisation yet, but a shorter survey, LibQUAL+ Lite, was launched in 2010. Further details are available at http://libqual.org/about/about_lq/LQ_lite.

5 'Are there common academic library customer values?', p619