

Report on the 2007 LibQUAL Canada Project: the consortial experience and possible future directions

Introduction

The report summarizes the project in three parts: (1) Results of the LibQUAL Canada Participants Survey, (2) Consortial Deliverables and (3) What Could Be Done to Improve the LibQUAL™ Survey for Our Members?

The results of the participants survey and anecdotal feedback indicate that libraries generally found the survey and participation in the consortium to have been a worthwhile experience. There was also general willingness to repeat the LibQUAL™ survey as members of a Canadian consortium. The form (full LibQUAL™ or LibQUAL™ Lite) and frequency of future consortial surveys merit further discussion.

As Consortium Coordinator, I found the experience and support provided by my own University (thanks to Paul Wiens), CARL (thanks to Sylvie Belzile, Katherine McColgan and Tim Mark) and ARL (thanks to Martha Kyrillidou) to have been very gratifying. I feel that the consortium has accomplished its goals of supporting and encouraging Canadian academic libraries in assessing and benchmarking their services using the LibQUAL™ survey instrument, and begin to develop a rich set of Canadian library service assessment data for use by individual libraries, library councils and researchers.

1. Results of the LibQUAL Canada Participants Survey

On November 7, 2007, each LibQUAL Canada official contact was asked to complete a survey to assess whether 2007 participants would be interested in doing the survey again, their satisfaction with the LibQUAL+™ instrument and the level of support provided by the consortium and ARL. If yes, how frequently and in what form.

With 48 of 54 member institutions having responded to date, the results¹ indicate that:

- 93.6% of our members do want to take the LibQUAL+™ survey again as members of the consortium ([Figure 5](#)). The remaining respondents are undecided for some of the reasons below.
- While 80% of respondents prefer the LibQUAL+™ survey over developing a home-grown alternative, there was a slight preference among these respondents for a more abbreviated *LibQUAL+® Lite* survey instrument that ARL will be testing in 2008, over the present 22 question-format ([Figure 6](#)).
- Members would prefer to do the consortial survey every 2 or 3 years, with 53.5% favouring the longer period ([Figure 7](#)). While the registration fee is not particularly onerous, the demands on staff time required to plan the survey, review the results, analyze the implications for the library, prepare action plans to address concerns and communicate these to the community, is often onerous.
- While the consortium had excellent representation from Canadian universities, there may have been more limited benchmarking value for the relatively small number of community college participants (Comments attached to Figures [1](#), [3](#) & [4](#)). Adding to the benchmarking challenge for

¹ http://library.queensu.ca/webir/canlibqual/consortial_survey/SurveySummary.html

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this group of libraries are the widely differing mandates of community colleges among the Canadian provinces, variously serving distance education students, continuing education, international students, students in certificate programmes, diploma programmes, academic degree programmes, etc.

- The online consortial resources and other support generally received very high satisfaction scores for utility, responsiveness and timeliness ([Figure 1](#)). However, the ARL LibQUAL+™ manual and the consortial web site did not offer sufficient guidance or examples relating to the needs of community colleges ([Comments attached to Figure 1](#)).
- Despite the strong support provided by the consortium, small academic institutions face the challenge of finding sufficient staff time to assess their own results, review other best practices, plan and effect improvements to services and facilities. It is reasonable for such libraries to question whether to continue collecting LibQUAL+™ data on a regular basis or only do the survey after they have the opportunity to act on the results. Typical of the small library comments was: *We need an assessment librarian or someone who has more time to work with the results* ([Comments attached to Figure 4](#)).
- There is uncertainty among our federal government participants as to the value of the consortium and perhaps the survey itself in meeting their special and diverse needs. The consortium had to work with ARL to develop a custom demographic for the Canadian government libraries to accommodate their many employee classifications and specific terminology. In addition to their small number, our government library members have very different mandates and user populations. One of our members, the Supreme Court of Canada Library, is investigating whether LibQUAL+™ could be adapted to the needs of a consortium of the Law Society and Courthouse Libraries in Canada ([Comments attached to Figure 5](#)).
- Feedback regarding the LibQUAL Canada Conference/Workshop held in October was generally very positive with regard with the speakers and value of the presentations ([Figure 2](#)).

2. Consortial Deliverables

- **ARL Report Notebooks:** ARL delivered the standard consortial results notebook with the aggregate data broken down by library type and user category. Within each group, the data was also broken down by survey language. In addition to the standard report notebook, the Consortium contracted with ARL to produce separate notebooks representing the aggregate results for CARL members, the Ontario Council of University Libraries (OCUL), and the Conférence des recteurs et des principaux des universités du Québec (CREPUQ). CARL, CREPUQ and OCUL each paid the \$2,000 (US) fee for the report representing their respective members. The councils also approved the public posting of the report notebooks on the LibQUAL Canada web site to make the data freely available to members and other researchers: <http://library.queensu.ca/webir/canlibqual/results-e.htm>.
- **Data Sets:** The consortium also made available to its members a pre-processed form of the raw consortial data to do their own analyses. The consortium had received the complete data set representing the results for all 48,000 respondents. While it was important to provide the data to member libraries for comparative analysis, we also wanted to protect the privacy of individual

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libraries who might not want to share their own library's raw data. Ron Ward, from the University of Guelph, kindly volunteered to prepare the data for distribution. The fields with individual identifiable data, such as the institution name, names of campus libraries, local discipline groups, etc. were replaced with masking codes. Subsets of the processed data were also generated by region (Atlantic Canada, Quebec, Ontario, Western Canada) to facilitate comparison. The processed data is presently available to members upon request in SPSS or spreadsheet form. If the members of a regional group agree to share their complete data sets, Ron can provide this data without the masking codes.

We can also provide individual member libraries with the data set for their own library in SPSS form at no charge. ARL charges an additional fee if a library asks for its data in SPSS form after the initial LibQUAL+™ registration.

Longer term plans include making the complete masked SPSS data set available to all researchers in a searchable format.

3. What Could Be Done to Improve the LibQUAL™ Survey for Our Members?

A major challenge in maintaining a viable survey instrument that libraries will want to continue using is balancing the need for standardization and providing sufficient flexibility for respondents to identify themselves in the survey's demographics and for libraries to see their interests reflected in the questions. This challenge was amply reflected in the comments by consortium members in response to this question. How to adequately reflect all the variant user classifications, library configurations including the virtual library, etc. while still generating meaningful comparative data? While the tension between the LibQUAL™ as a benchmarking tool and its relevance to local needs is unavoidable, there are some improvements in flexibility that could make the survey more useful and appealing to Canadian libraries and perhaps other participants as well.

The [Comments attached to Figure 4](#) given a good overview of member suggestions.

- **Alternative, briefer LibQUAL+™ surveys**

While running a large comprehensive survey like LibQUAL™ periodically (every 3-5 years) may be useful to gauge changes in performance across all the service dimensions, the length and scope of the present survey are potential deterrents both to respondents and to librarians who must review, analyze and act on the results.

LibQUAL+™ Lite, ARL's planned alternative or complement to the full LibQUAL+™ survey generated considerable buzz when Martha Kyrillidou mentioned it briefly at the October 2007 LibQUAL Canada conference/workshop. Shorter surveys, perhaps focusing on specific service dimensions, may make more effective use of staff resources and provide more timely feedback on program and service changes. Alternatively, as suggested in participants survey, libraries may want to alternate between the full LibQUAL+™ survey and Lite version.

Increasingly, libraries will have to use new channels and approaches for delivering surveys to spam-weary patrons and patrons who rely increasingly on mobile communication devices. LibQUAL+™ will have to adapt accordingly if it is to remain relevant.

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- **User Categories**

Like the standardized discipline groups that a participating library may link to its own set of local disciplines, LibQUAL+™ should allow for a fully customizable set of user types linkable to a set of standard user categories. This approach would allow libraries to define their own set of user classifications without necessarily having to negotiate the addition of yet another completely new LibQUAL+™ demographic set of questions.

- **Terminology**

While ARL has attempted to deal with major differences in linguistic expression through separate language surveys, e.g. British and American English, there are more subtle but no less important variants that are not accommodated through this approach. For example, the Canadian libraries found the term “Sex” instead of “Gender” to be outdated and inappropriate. Accommodating variant labels mapped to the same survey concepts would be a more flexible way of dealing with such differences.

- **Language of Survey Questions**

Having to deal with a bilingual consortial environment, revealed a significant limitation in the design of the LibQUAL+™ program which ARL is committed to addressing. While a participating library can elect to take the survey in more than one language, there was no direct program link between the library’s corresponding survey questions in the chosen languages. This meant that there was no automatic link between the local or optional questions in English and the equivalent French. English members of the consortium were able to select the consortium’s package of optional questions in English by simply selecting the consortial package when configuring their survey. However, for a member library to select the French version of the same questions, the library had to choose them individually from the list and know which individual French language questions corresponded to the consortium’s package of English optional questions. The consortium had to compile and post a table of equivalents for all of the English corresponding French optional questions. The latter was complicated by the fact that ARL’s lists of French and English optional questions did not correlate and the numbering of the questions in both lists changed from the previous year as new questions were added.

Because the corresponding questions in both languages are not linked in the system, the original consortial report generated by ARL’s program could only provide separate aggregate scores for the French language and English language surveys. To generate total aggregate scores of the survey results from both languages, ARL had to regenerate the consortium’s report notebooks manually which, as expected, took much longer than the machine generated reports and had to be corrected a few times.

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4. Recommendations

I recommend the following to the CARL Committee on Effectiveness Measures and Statistics:

- that CARL sponsor another LibQUAL Canada consortial survey project in 2009 or 2010;
- that CARL continues to liaise with ARL to effect improvements to the current LibQUAL™ survey based on the recommendations in this report;
- that CARL monitors and provides input to the development of ARL's planned LibQUAL+™ Lite on behalf of the Canadian academic library community;
- that CARL seek input from the Canadian academic library community on the format of the next LibQUAL+ Canada survey (current or "light" version) after a review of the LibQUAL+™ Lite instrument.