

LibQUAL+ in South Africa: a View from the South

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This presentation will begin with the assumption that I do not need to go into the history and background of LibQUAL+ in any detail.

To summarize, LibQUAL+ is a rigorously tested web-based survey developed by academics at Texas A & M University in collaboration with the Association of Research Libraries (ARL). It is designed to measure library users' perceptions of the quality of collections, personal service, and facilities. Internationally, more than a million people at over 700 institutions have participated in LibQUAL+ since its launch in 2001.

My institution, the University of Cape Town (UCT), was among 255 libraries around the world, and among the first six in Africa, to conduct the survey last year. The huge dataset of standardized survey information produced by so many participants over the past half-decade has enabled LibQUAL+ to establish international norms for library service quality. By taking part in the survey, UCT Libraries could compare its performance against these norms as well as to the performance of chosen peer institutions in South Africa (SA) and abroad.

The Political and Social Context

Before I go into any detail of the survey at UCT and the at the other SA libraries, I need to give the context within which the survey took place, i.e. the political and social setting, which will, I hope, help to explain how and why our SA experience is both similar and yet dissimilar to the LibQUAL+ experience in, say, America or Europe. I will use the terminology used in SA to talk about race and demographic groups. These terms were used to explain apartheid, but are also presently used to inform transformation. The continued use of racial categories remains contentious.

There is a well-known book published in 1994 by a SA journalist, Alistair Sparks, called "Tomorrow is another country." The title gives the sense of urgency and the sense of magnitude with which SA has had to change. SA became a new country overnight. It has been a democracy for all its citizens for only 12 years. Nelson Mandela became president after universal franchise elections in 1994. The new democratic constitution came into effect in 1996. Between then and now every fundamental institution, laws, education, economy, health care system, to name a few, have had to be overhauled to ensure that the focus of government was no longer on 4.5 million people, but 44 million.

Apartheid set up a hierarchy of races. Opportunity, education and living areas were parceled out strictly in accordance with where one's race put one in this inviolable

hierarchy of white (Afrikaners and English), Indian, Coloured (mixed-race)(included Malays and Chinese), and black African (Blacks).

Under apartheid, there were 36 higher education institutions, called tertiary institutions. The configuration and location made no sense in educational terms, only in terms of the racial divisions imposed by the government. In a large metropolitan area there might typically be a white Afrikaans university, a white English university, (often very close to each other), perhaps a Coloured university, an Indian university, and a Black university. A few white English universities such as UCT always had a handful of non-white students, but from the early 1970s it began accepting more and more non-white students. First this was done through a permit system, and then by openly flouting the law.

As you can imagine, funding for universities for different races were not the same. There were hierarchies of funding. The Afrikaans universities were at the top, and the Black universities at the bottom. This differential funding of higher education and the different cultures at these institutions was reflected in the academic libraries, where some were very good and some worse than imaginable. As there was no contact across the spectrum of institutions, there was little sharing among libraries. There were no standards for university libraries; no benchmarks of comparing one against another; no knowledge of budgets or the size of their collections; and no consortia. There was not even one single professional association from which everyone could learn, as professional associations were divided by race.

Since early 1990s, changes in the country have impacted the SA academic library scene in huge ways:

(1) Foundations such as Ford, Mellon, and Carnegie have spent vast sums to help both libraries and to help transform the country. Mellon, for example, funded integrated library systems on condition that geographic consortia would be formed. The result was that it linked academic libraries of vastly differing expertise, languages, racial makeup, and cultures

Carnegie helped fund the setting up of a single library association, and they have recently given a shared grant to the 3 biggest former English-language universities, the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), the University of KwaZulu Natal (UKZN), and my institution to support research by the creation of a portal; a research commons; and training librarians in research methods as most librarians in SA only have an undergraduate library qualification.

(2) SA academic libraries were now exposed to the world. Sabinet, the national bibliographic utility, works closely with OCLC, and SA librarians have been elected to the OCLC Board. The electronic revolution was adopted very much later than in the northern hemisphere. In some ways this has been an advantage as SA librarians have been able to learn from everyone else. We now have a national e-resource licensing centre (SASLI), we are using Ariel, and for first time, sharing resources is part of the national library culture.

(3) In universities the demographics have changed. Students from previously disadvantaged groups are voting with their feet by going to the best resourced universities, i.e. the formerly white ones. Academics and professional staff who are mobile, such as librarians, are also moving. UCT has benefited from this change as just over 50% of our students are now non-white. UCT Libraries staff composition is very diverse, having staff across every racial group.

This diversity also brings challenges. There are 11 official languages, viz. English, Afrikaans, and 9 African languages. English is a second or third language to many of our Black students. Half of our undergraduates came from the best secondary schools in the country, with access to computers and good libraries. Many others have had no access to computers and no exposure to libraries. UCT is consistently rated in international surveys as the best university on the African continent. It is a research university, with a medical and law school. It must graduate students who have the same qualifications at the end of the day, i.e. that all graduates are competent. However, they start at very different places. One important factor for the university library is how to accommodate this range, where we have to provide support for research while actively reaching out to massive numbers of students who are woefully unprepared and often quite intimidated when they arrive.

In higher education as a whole there have been radical changes initiated by the government. In restructuring this landscape the number of institutions has been reduced from 36 to 22 by a system of enforced mergers of many of these institutions. UCT was not one of them. These mergers have been of two, three, even four institutions where often it has involved different racial and linguistic backgrounds.

It is in the midst of this huge transformation of the higher educational system that one has to position the SA experience of LibQUAL+ and what it means to SA libraries.

The LibQUAL+ Process

Six institutions participated, but I will only speak of five, as we knew only after the fact about the sixth one. There may have been 5 universities, but in reality there were 9 “institutions” for LibQUAL+ purposes.

The two English-language institutions were easily accommodated as they used British English as the language of the survey (Rhodes University, UCT). However, at the previously Afrikaans universities the survey was offered in English and Afrikaans (the Universities of Stellenbosch and Pretoria), including the Potchefstroom campus of the University of the North West (UNW). Where two languages were used, the results were merged into one notebook. The Mafikeng campus of UNW gave the survey in English. UNW was a result of a merger of a small white Afrikaans university with a small Black English speaking one.

Ten years previously, no doubt that survey would have been given only in Afrikaans. If Black communities in SA speak other than an indigenous language, in 90% of cases it is English, not Afrikaans. This has made a remarkable shift in both the language of instruction and the kinds of textbooks used in Afrikaans universities, and therefore, the LibQUAL+ survey had to reach these universities' new, diverse students as well as the traditional white audience.

The Survey

The LibQUAL+ survey was administered in August 2005 as our academic year correlates with the calendar year, and we wanted conditions to be similar to those in Northern Hemisphere (i.e. administered in the second semester).

Among the five institutions, there was overall agreement that it took up a lot more time than we anticipated, but it was not difficult to administer. There was no doubt that the quality of the effort we put into the planning, and the kind of communication we undertook in advance, had direct bearing on the quality of responses. We received great support from the LibQUAL+ office at ARL

To a large extent the success of the project at UCT was due to our having a champion who was relieved of other duties. Not making this the additional work of someone is important, or it will become an added chore. The quality of person chosen is of utmost importance as s/he needs to follow through on details of getting things out; being constantly available by email during the survey; and responding politely and completely to questions.

One of most useful things the five institutions did was to meet together as a group well in advance of doing the actual survey. My director, Joan Rapp, had had the opportunity of hearing about LibQUAL+ in several workshops both locally and abroad. In January she invited colleagues from across the country to a session in Cape Town, and she was able to share what she had learnt, as well as it being an opportunity for all participants to share their concerns and questions.

This meeting led to a communication process in which those involved in the survey had a basis to call on one another for assistance. Libraries sent out emails about experiences and how things were going; things to watch out for; and even changes in plans as they saw day-by-day numbers come in.

Issues

The meeting also gave us some basis for working out some consistent decisions about terms we would use in asking survey participants to describe themselves, because for example: Honours, lecturers, two types of master's degrees, shape of disciplines and organizations of faculties are in many cases different from those of most previous participant institutions.

Overall, there appeared to be a strong link between starting early, response rates, and the quality of data. Issues that had to be sorted, for example, were about the way our programmes work, what our academic departments are called, and the way academic programmes are organized. This required that we had to combine and extract categories.

As this survey is done electronically, we found out there were email issues. UCT did a pre-sample of the email database to see if we needed to compensate for bad addresses by spreading the net wider. Other institutions, in particular one with a strong distance education focus, found out in the process that as many as half of the postgraduate email addresses were wrong.

There was concern among the institutions that the survey was too long. UCT went with the 22 core questions plus 5 optional ones. The Afrikaans universities did not have enough time to provide translations for the optional questions, but will do so in future. UCT's additional 5 questions focused around research. We wanted to try to analyze how well we do with research support and what directions we need to take as this is in line with the institutional focus on attracting more postgraduates and producing more research.

Publicity

Even before publicizing the survey on campus, it was important to let people in the administration of the university know that you are going to do international benchmarking. People are used to local surveys and they do not put much store in them. This is even more so in SA where decisions and arguments have a history of being politically and not data driven so that by being committed to exposing oneself to this kind of benchmarking was politically important on campus. Doing an internationally benchmarked survey is especially important in this time period of fast and dramatic change in higher education. As institutions such as UCT send academics to do sabbaticals and participate in research groups at the best institutions in the world, and as academics from major research institutions come to UCT to teach and research, questions inevitably arise about quality and comparability of academic support, especially libraries.

Two universities actively involved their communications and marketing department. These departments helped develop publicity materials that were professional looking and they also suggested ways for communicating with the campus community. At UCT they helped us develop a random set of addresses, and sent out our emails at the precise intervals we specified. They also took care of any information technology related problems.

For weeks before the survey UCT library staff and student assistants wore big buttons. Staff wore them to all campus meetings. Banners and posters were hung in all libraries. We tried to get people's curiosity up. Other ways we publicized the survey were to:

- Put scores of balloons with the LibQUAL+ insignia throughout libraries,
- Put coloured reminders on desks and computers and inside of borrowed books
- Place posters in residences

- Put details on the Library web page
- Place a banner at the entrance to the main library

One institution (Rhodes) used their student radio station, and they aired jingles about LibQUAL+. Stellenbosch had special posters made that undermined their own efforts. It was a poster with a big picture which linked the survey with a picture of a big dog with sad eyes and the lyrics to “Who Let the Dogs Out. “Have your say about the library.” Posters disappeared in about a day; presumably they are in the residences!

It was important to get staff involved early and to get their support. This came up as an issue from several of the universities. At UCT we held multiple sessions; talked about benefits; had “ASK ME” signs at some of the desks before the survey took place. Staff viewed the survey as opportunity, not a threat. Each service desk became a little mini-help center

Institutions that did not do this in a fairly thorough way expressed regret that they had not done so, and they have plans to do this in next iteration. They felt their staff could have been ambassadors.

Sending out a routine email with a message, even if it comes from the Director, is not going to make the same impact as a professional looking letter with colour graphics. At UCT we worked hard on getting right mix in the message for our specific university, showing that we regarded the survey as important.

Incentives

Almost all of the participating libraries offered incentives. Rhodes did not do incentives, as they felt they may be invading their users’ privacy, but they said they believed this was a bad decision and would use incentives in future. Those, who offered a large number of small incentives such as book store or music vouchers, reflected that the next time they would probably use 2-3 larger incentives.

UCT offered iPod minis. One must be careful not to make incentives too appealing as one might get useless surveys from people just wanting the prize. We thought about this a lot in the African context, and the iPod seemed to be just the right level. Some students may come from disadvantaged backgrounds, but they quickly become as hip and cool as all the other students, and the iPod mini is the hottest thing around now, even at the southern tip of Africa!

The UCT campus newspaper and student paper interviewed the three winners and published photographs. We had the result of each winner being from a different part of the university, one from a different African country, and three different ethnic groups. This was useful publicity for the survey.

The Sample

The decision to do the full population or a sample varied on the campuses, and the decision was determined to a certain extent by the number of students each institution had as they varied from 6 000-36 000. All except UCT chose to do the whole population.

At UCT we have 21 000 students and 1 400 faculty, and given the numbers we felt we could do valid sampling. We also made this decision for two other reasons:

(1) We wanted people who got the emails to understand that they were part of a smaller group and that each of their responses was important. Really sampling was a marketing tool, but one must be confident that sampling will produce enough results to give one valid data. . In the SA context we emphasized anonymity. It was not easy to balance the message relating to user incentives and the need for information from them. The key is getting the tone right, which is linked to each institution's own culture about this.

(2) We wanted to do a detailed analysis of our data, including text analysis, and we worried about our capacity to cope with a larger numbers of responses.

At UCT a random sample of some 8,000 people were invited by e-mail to complete the online survey, and 2 499 anonymous individuals, over 30% of the sample group, did so. This high response rate and the respondents' close demographic mirroring of the whole UCT population, warranted confidence in the validity of our results. In addition, nearly 60% of the respondents fleshed out their answers on the questionnaire with comments of their own, providing us with a wealth of information for qualitative analysis.

The response rate at the other institutions was not good. Rhodes had a rate of 10%, and Stellenbosch a response of 8% with the undergraduates responding well. The Potchefstroom campus of the UNW had a 32% response against less than 1% from the Mafikeng campus. Across the institutions between 45 and 58% of the respondents made comments. At the Mafikeng campus of those few who did the survey, most of them made comments, possibly reflecting the poor service they were getting from their library.

Administering the survey

In most cases the survey would have had to be completed on the campus as off-campus access to computing is almost impossible at less well-funded institutions. In addition bandwidth problems are common to SA institutions and they are worse at the previously disadvantaged ones.

Because English was not the first language of many of those completing the survey, it is clear from some surveys administered in print, and by inference from others that some students did not understand some of the survey items at all and did not have familiarity with some of the concepts. Almost everyone thought "Affect of service" could be better-phrased. It did not help that the pop-up assistance was not working.

Results

In those institutions where the library directors have talked about the source, nature, and international use of the survey, results have been listened to. Unfortunately, librarians in many SA institutions, particularly those in previously disadvantaged ones, do not have much credibility. A second factor in lack of credibility is that historically librarians in SA are not viewed as part of the academic community in a real sense as library education does not require domain expertise.

At UCT we were pleased we undertook the survey. It was regarded as authoritative and unbiased by the university executive and the Senate Library Committee.

The results were a very fair view of UCT's libraries. We received lots of comments about the fact that we wanted to listen at all, and this in itself has become a source of increase credibility. The cross-institutional comparisons are forcing executive bodies to look at the library as a potential factor in their success or failure, and therefore, in their ability to gain funds from the government.

We received a lot of supportive comments about changes that had been made in last few years, but respondents went on from there to talk about issues they still have, many of which we were aware.

Our users know what a well-resourced library is in a global context, and they are not fooled by being told that they have access to possibly the best academic library in SA, when the budget of that library is in fact smaller than that of any ARL comparator, while the activity levels and usage are in the top third of ARL libraries.

The survey emphasized issues that require money to change and to which the university administration might not have listened without the survey. It also gave us a map for quick and easy short-term wins for example, with a big project to reduce noise, and one to publicize off campus web access, as well as support for any long term strategy.

For UCT the results were quite consistent with aggregate data for academic libraries presented in the 2005 survey highlights. The overall radar chart tends to mask the problems as the perceptions differed within the different communities. However, the benefit was the ability to drill down within questions and see the difference between the responses from undergraduates, postgraduates and academics. These responses became even more useful through the myriad of comments received.

For all SA libraries, there was a bit more emphasis on library as place than in other countries

One of big surprises was the extent of comments about noise. Students want us to manage this better. Perhaps this reflects the importance of this space to them, especially when they live in noisy residences or the poorer ones in what are essentially corrugated tin shacks without electricity and many people in a room.

Access to library resources was raised as a big issue by all of all the institutions which did the survey. There were frequent comments about the web site which highlighted the

need to develop multiple approaches, one for the sophisticated users and another for those just beginning. There is a need to move to federated searching as soon as possible which will be addressed by the Carnegie grant.

Another need that was identified, which will also be addressed by the Carnegie grant, is skilling some subject librarians in research skills and improving their subject knowledge as the survey results showed a lack of confidence in the librarians' subject knowledge, and therefore, they are unable to assist meaningfully postgraduates and academics with the subject matter they are working on.

Some final comments

Given the SA situation, the five institutions are not sure that LibQUAL+ asks all the questions we need to ask, but certainly the information we have gathered is a relevant and a rich resource. All of the institutions that took part in 2005 intend to undertake the survey again. UCT will be doing it next year.

More importantly, LibQUAL is helping to stimulate a cultural change in the SA library community. At the request of other universities, Joan Rapp spoke about the SA experience of LibQUAL+ at a national conference in July. As mentioned there are no benchmarks, no standards, no data comparison and it is very difficult to agree on standards, given the huge differences in collections, capacity, and expertise in SA academic libraries. However, for the first time in SA, quality assurance (an audit and accreditation) is being done at the universities and they are being forced by the government into data-driven decisions for the purpose of increasing the number of people who pass through the system and of improving research levels. For many previously disadvantaged institutions, having the LibQUAL+ data will be hugely important.

I think the results will have a big impact in reshaping the conversations in the academic library community, as all of us can now see the warts and all. It will also help SA academic libraries to move forward the process of establishing comparator groups, such as is happening with the Carnegie grant to UCT, Wits and UKZN.

However, maybe one of the biggest breakthroughs is the willingness of a group of SA libraries to expose themselves to this survey after living so long in a political environment of self-protection and separation.