

Bench-marking on a national scale: the 2007 LibQUAL Canada Experience

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Abstract

In 2006/2007, the Canadian academic library community came together in the largest ever LibQUAL+™ consortium to conduct ARL library service quality survey. From an initial proposal among some members of the Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL), LibQUAL Canada grew to a truly national project with 54 university, college and federal government libraries. The most apparent accomplishment of this project was successful collection of a large, diverse data set for comparative analysis of services and facilities; a meaningful data set both for individual libraries seeking appropriate Canadian comparators and for analyses by region, institutional categories, etc. However, an equally valuable result of the project was to engage more Canadian academic libraries in the process of service assessment. For the majority of consortium participants, this was their first experience with LibQUAL+™ or any comparative assessment instrument.

This paper discusses: how and why the national consortial project came about, including the challenges for recruiting and managing participants); the challenges planning and implementing LibQUAL+™ with such a large, diverse consortium, with its bi-lingual mandate and multiple library types; what made the project successful and its limitations; what we learned & possible future directions (based on a closing survey of consortium participants)

Introduction

The 2007 LibQUAL Canada Consortium was an historic achievement in the development of library assessment practice in Canada. As the largest ever LibQUAL+™ consortium, covering the majority of Canada's university libraries, the LibQUAL Canada Consortium has taken a very large first step in collecting service quality data for benchmarking on a national and regional level. This paper outlines the development of the consortium within the national context, what made it successful for its members and its experience with the LibQUAL+™ survey (what we have learned and where we would like LibQUAL+™ to go in the future).

Why not just develop a Canadian survey?

This question did arise during the initial planning of the consortium. However, LibQUAL+™ was the clear choice for the consortium's 2007 survey project. It had been refined and validated over the years with input from participants, focus groups and other analyses. The challenges and costs to build a better Canadian survey instrument and a national support infrastructure such as that provided by ARL for LibQUAL+™ participants would be huge. Above all, more Canadian institutions needed some experience with such a program before we could consider engaging in fruitful discussions about future assessment directions.

Sixteen Canadian university libraries were already members of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) and regularly contributed their quantitative data (expenditures, collections, etc.) to ARL's annual member surveys. So, it was natural for Canadian ARL members to adopt the service assessment tool widely used among other ARL libraries, LibQUAL+™. Indeed, York University was one of the handful of institutions involved in the initial development of LibQUAL+™.

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LibQUAL+™ and the Canadian Context

More than 20 Canada university libraries had participated in LibQUAL+™ since its inception. However, among the hundreds of mostly American participants, in any given year, there had never been more than ten Canadian participants. The latter fact is crucial to understanding the impetus behind the development of the LibQUAL+ Canada Consortium.

Education in Canada is under provincial jurisdiction and all academic institutions are publicly funded (other than a few small faith-based schools). Public policies, practices and funding relating to higher education have varied widely across Canada. These factors have notably shaped higher education in each province. So, the opportunity for academic libraries to benchmark their services with those of peer institutions in the same provincial/regional jurisdiction was a powerful incentive.

By 2006, LibQUAL+™ was the primary instrument used by Canadian academic libraries to assess library service quality, according to a recent study of assessment practices in Canadian university libraries by Jordan and McKenna¹. In fact, the study found that LibQUAL+™ was the first, and in many cases the only, systematic service assessment instrument used by Canadian academic libraries².

Anatomy of a Consortium

At the June 2005 Annual General Meeting of the Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL)³, members expressed interest in coordinating LibQUAL+™ participation in order to create a larger database of Canadian content that would offer more meaningful benchmarking of services for Canadian academic research libraries. The CARL Committee on Effectiveness Measures and Statistics proposed a CARL-sponsored Canadian "consortial submission" to LibQUAL+™ in 2007. I was appointed to head the consortial project.

The original objective of the project had been to establish a consortium of CARL member libraries from across Canada to participate in the 2007 survey. However, I envisioned this project as a unique opportunity to engage the broader Canadian academic and research library community in developing a national service quality assessment survey. CARL agreed to sponsor a more broadly based Canadian consortium to include non-CARL member universities, community colleges and federal government libraries.

When the survey opened in January 2007, 46 universities, 7 community colleges⁴ and 3 federal government libraries from across Canada, had registered as members of the LibQUAL Canada Consortium. More significantly, 66% of the libraries had never done the survey including some smaller institutions who might not have considered using this service assessment tool on their own. A few other universities had initially joined the consortium but were not able to accommodate the survey program in their 2007 operations.

The members ranged from one of the largest universities in North America to small colleges. Our largest participant, the University of Toronto, registered each of its three campuses separately for the survey. At least two universities registered with a community college that shares the university's library facilities and services. One large member university (University of Alberta) does the survey annually.

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Notably, Alberta is also one of the very few Canadian libraries with a dedicated library assessment position.

A highly significant feature of the consortium was the need to represent French-language, English-language and bilingual institutions. While informal communication within the consortium is generally conducted in English, all of the consortium's documentation and announcements are bi-lingual as are all of the consortium's web pages. While ARL offers the basic survey questions in French most of the optional/local questions did not have French translations. The consortium took on the responsibility, on ARL's behalf, of ensuring that all the survey and demographic questions used by members of the consortium had correct Canadian French translations.

Opportunities & Challenges

The opportunity to benchmark the library's services and programs with comparator Canadian institutions offering similar programs and services or within the same political/funding jurisdiction was the consortium's most valuable primary purpose.

The consortium also offered its members:

- the opportunity to learn more about library assessment practice, including data collection, analysis and application in planning services, etc. within a supportive collegial environment;
- the opportunity for locally hosted workshops, including a pre-consortial survey workshop held in June 2006 in Ottawa and a 2007 national assessment conference/workshop in Ottawa to help participants communicate and apply their findings effectively.

Although the LibQUAL Canada Consortium was by far the largest LibQUAL+™ consortium, it was the bilingual nature of the consortium that presented the greatest challenge. While ARL had French Canadian translations for the basic survey questions, the optional questions selected by the consortium had to be translated. In addition, the demographic data elements for U.S. government organizations were inappropriate for the Canadian federal library members. The consortium worked with ARL to develop a custom Canadian government demographic and to translate it into French. In addition, ARL had never before integrated the survey results from two languages into consolidated sets of consortial results.

Building the LibQUAL Canada Consortium

What factors went into establishing and conducting this large and successful consortial project?

- **Governance and Support.** The 2007 project was funded through annual budget allocations from CARL in 2006 and 2007. My time, as coordinator, was seconded to the project by my employer. Ongoing operational support was provided by CARL staff, most notably by Katherine McColgan. The Project reported to the Association through the Chair of the Committee on Effectiveness Measures and Statistics, Mme. Sylvie Belzile. Ms. Belzile, Ms. McColgan and I comprised the informal project team. The project team met periodically by phone to review the progress of the project and I

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prepared written progress reports for the CARL directors at pre-established milestones throughout the project.

LibQUAL Canada and its conference programs could not have succeeded without the continued support of Ms. Belzile, Ms. McColgan and Tim Mark, the CARL Executive Director, and the support of Martha Kyrillidou, ARL's Statistics and Measurement Program.

Project Management Approach. CARL's commitment to the project is reflected in the decision to appoint a Project Coordinator with both LibQUAL and large-project management experience whose time would be seconded to the project by his parent institution, as needed. Many participants were first-time participants; most did not have dedicated assessment staff to manage the process successfully on their own. By approaching the survey as a project, the consortium could guide its members through the planning process, via discrete, manageable sets of actions; each stage with its own timelines and deliverables. This approach was also important in coordinating the activities of all the consortium members throughout the planning and implementation process.

The timelines were sufficiently generous to accommodate members new to LibQUAL+™ while providing the LibQUAL+™ veterans with targets for each phase in the consortial process.

- **Communication & Engagement.** Building an effective communication infrastructure was my primary goal. My first action as consortium coordinator was to establish a moderated discussion/announcement list to which I subscribed each library contact. To maximize engagement, any librarian from a Canadian academic library was welcomed to join. Members were encouraged to contribute in shaping each phase of the project. Timelines and action items were revised at each stage based on member input. My highest priority was to ensure that every query was answered in a timely fashion and, in most cases, that the exchange was shared with the membership.
- **Active recruitment of participants.** As persuasive as the benefits listed on the web site may have been, recruiting the broad range of participating libraries involved:
 1. Building a critical mass. The Consortium sent invitations to the various library groups through their national and regional councils emphasizing the opportunity for peer benchmarking with libraries in the same regional/provincial jurisdiction. Follow-up announcements were sent to the councils, reporting who had signed up and encouraging others to enrol in the consortium. Once a critical mass of libraries from a region had joined the regional councils (e.g. the Ontario Council of University Libraries), in turn, encouraged their other members to join the consortium.
 2. Individual invitations and follow-up communication were sent to encourage maximum participation by leading institutions that other libraries tend to use as benchmarks.
 3. Rapid response to queries from potential participants.

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- a) To assist them in persuading reluctant, wary administrators; in each case, we were able to supply the library with the information and documentation required to gain approval to participate, including documentation submitted by other Canadian academic libraries to gain research ethics board approval or exemption for their survey. The anonymous nature of the survey was certainly a consideration in gaining broad participation from the Canadian academic library community - particularly in a period when Canadian institutions were becoming concerned about the potential scrutiny of private Canadian data held in American databases, under the *U.S. Patriot Act*.

Academic institutions are often sensitive to activities that may affect their reputations. The Consortium was able to offer explicit assurance that the survey results would not be used by the members for public comparisons.

- b) To demonstrate how the consortium could help them accomplish the necessary preparation for the survey within the allotted time frame, including pointing them at specific resources available on the consortium's web site (promotional ideas and material, invitation letters to respondents, incentive prizes offered, mass emailing, and much more).
- **Web Site.** A major tool for recruiting members and for success of the project, was presenting the Canadian library community with a full-featured web site at the start of the project. While ARL's LibQUAL+™ site contains a vast amount of useful information, its very size makes it a daunting resource to navigate.

The consortial site was based on the highly-regarded 2004 Queen's University LibQUAL+™ site⁵ with additional content adapted from ARL and other LibQUAL+™ sites. The goal of the site was to provide an easy to use, one-stop resource for Canadian libraries – with material that could be readily adapted by individual libraries for their use. As an example, the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) page is designed to allow a library to simply insert their own name and specifics in the highlighted spaces to have an informative LibQUAL+™ FAQ for their own community – with little additional work (Figure 1).

Figure 1

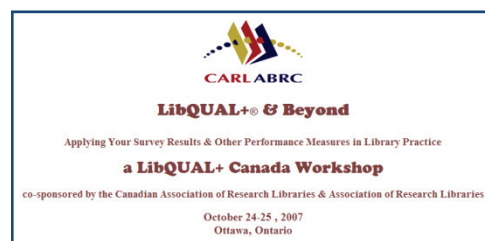
4. How and when is the [institution's name] survey being conducted?
A random sample of email addresses has been drawn from the Library's patron database, representing [number] undergraduate students, [number] graduate students, [number] staff and [number] faculty members ...

The home page of the consortial site changed at key points in the life of the project. At the beginning of the project, the focus of the site was to attract participants and highlight the benefits of membership. During the planning and preparatory phases, the timeline became the primary link at the top of the navigation sidebar. After the survey closed, the consortial results page became the primary link in the navigation bar. The pages were continually updated throughout the project to maintain accurate timely access to resources for the members.

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Consortial Conferences & Workshops⁶

CARL, with invaluable support from ARL, sponsored two conference/workshops. The first was a one-day program, held in Ottawa in June 2006, in conjunction with the Canadian Library Association annual conference. The goals of the conference/workshop were to: (a) prepare consortium members to conduct the survey and (b) to recruit and inform prospective consortium members about the potential benefits of LibQUAL+™ and the consortial project. The conference was very successful in meeting both goals. It attracted 60 delegates and the consortium grew by 30% after the program.



The second consortial conference had more ambitious goals. Held in Ottawa in October 2007, *LibQUAL & Beyond* was a two-day stand-alone conference/workshop whose goals were: (a) to help consortium participants to analyze their LibQUAL+™ results effectively; (b) to serve as a first Canadian library assessment conference; (c) to encourage libraries to use their LibQUAL+™ results and other kinds of assessment tools effectively, and start to build a “culture of assessment”. The conference was a great success, attracting 70 delegates from across Canada and engendering lively discussion. As significant as the actual program was the opportunity for delegates to meet other colleagues engaged in library assessment and talk about local practices, potential collaborations and what an “assessment librarian” actually does.

Conducting the Consortial Survey or Hurdling the Milestones

The consortium chose to conduct survey in Session I 2007 (January to May 2007). We selected this session, over a June to December session, because most incoming students would have had at least the Fall term to experience the library and any new programs implemented over the summer. Member libraries were able to choose the exact dates most suitable to their local environment to run the survey.

- **Maximizing Response Rates.** Since LibQUAL+™ is a web-based survey, usually offered to potential respondents via email announcement or invitation, careful timing, effective communication and promotion of the survey and its goals are critical factors in an institution’s final response rate. The initial focus of the project, between September and December 2007, was on helping members develop their strategies for communicating and promoting the survey to their communities and engaging their library staff. The consortium was able to offer a collection of documentation, strategies and incentive programs applied successfully by past Canadian participants.

Intolerance for unsolicited email has increased the challenge to attract potential respondents to take the survey. Increasing numbers of Canadian academic institutions have developed mass emailing policies and approval processes. The consortium’s mass emailing page provided advice on mass mailing including the sometimes neglected requirement to accommodate emailing approval in the timeline.

- **Research Ethics Board Approval.** Every Canadian university has a board or committee mandated to review and grant approval for research involving human subjects. Since the LibQUAL+™ survey does not retain personal information about individual subjects, no Canadian university has been denied

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approval to conduct the LibQUAL+™ survey. However, the local approval process can vary from very quick approvals (or exemptions) to very protracted processes requiring substantial documentary support. The Consortium provided documentation from Canadian sources to support the argument for exemption from full ethics approval and documentation from successful ethics board approval processes.

- **Consortial Optional or Local Survey Questions.** The Consortium discussed the benefits of compiling a consortial set of optional questions and whether we wanted to add any custom questions to ARL's list. After polling the members, the consortium identified four questions from the ARL's existing list plus one new question to comprise a consortial set of local questions:

Ability to navigate library Web pages easily
Adequate hours of service
Making me aware of library resources and services
Teaching me how to access, evaluate, and use information
Ease and timeliness in getting materials from other libraries (New)

The new question was created to meet demands for a "jargon-free" equivalent to the optional question about interlibrary loan and document delivery. While it would have been ideal, for comparative purposes, if the whole consortium had chosen the consortial set of questions, the diverse needs of the membership made this goal impractical. The membership agreed that libraries would be free to choose the consortial set, any combination of five optional questions, or none at all. In the end, more than 40% of the LibQUAL Canada results included all of the consortial questions.

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, Ontario university libraries (OCUL), and Quebec university participants, Conférence des recteurs et des principaux des universités du Québec (CREPUQ).

LibQUAL+® 2007 - Consortial Results
Aggregate results compiled by ARL on behalf of the LibQUAL+ Canada Consortium
• LibQUAL+ Canada Consortium (rev. 9/17/07). Results from all 54 participating libraries
• CARL (rev. 9/21/07). Results from the 25 CARL member participants
• CREPUQ (rev. 9/21/07). Results from the 11 CREPUQ member participants
• OCUL (rev. 9/21/07). Results from the 16 OCUL member participants

The councils also approved my request for the public posting of the report notebooks on the LibQUAL Canada web site; making the data freely available to members and other researchers.

- **Data Sets:** 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, the consortium also wanted to protect the privacy of individual libraries who might not want to share their own library's raw data. So, the consortium made a pre-processed form of the consortial data available to its members to do their own analyses. The fields with

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The Consortium also offered to 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. The consortium was able to provide the data in SPSS form shortly after receiving the data in (CSV) spreadsheet format from ARL.

It is our goal to eventually make the complete masked SPSS data set available to all researchers in a searchable format.

Future of the LibQUAL Canada Consortium

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. If yes, how frequently and in what form?

48 of 54 member institutions responded to the survey. The results⁷ indicated that:

- 93.6% of our members wanted to take the LibQUAL+™ survey again as members of the consortium. The remaining respondents were undecided for some of the reasons below.
- While 80% of respondents preferred 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 over the present 22 question-format.
- Members preferred to do the consortial survey every 2 or 3 years, with 53.5% favouring the longer period. 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, it offered more limited benchmarking value for the small number of community college participants. Adding to the benchmarking challenge for 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 programmes etc.
- The online consortial resources and other support generally received very high satisfaction scores for utility, responsiveness and timeliness. However, the ARL LibQUAL+™ manual and the consortial web site did not offer sufficient guidance or examples relating to the needs of community colleges.
- Despite the strong support provided by the consortium, small academic institutions faced the challenge of finding sufficient staff time to assess their own results, review other best practices, plan

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and effect improvements to services and facilities. It was 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.*

- There was 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.

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.

- **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.

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.

- **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.

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- **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 question 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 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.

Conclusion

The 48,000 consortial responses to the 2007 survey provide a rich new resource of assessment data for Canadian academic and research libraries. The availability of such a large data set offers Canadian library researchers a unique opportunity to study Canadian academic service quality data on a granular level not possible from individual library results or even from the combined results of the few past Canadian LibQUAL participants. This data set is large enough to provide opportunities to study potential difference in expectations and perceptions by gender, age, standard discipline group, undergraduate year, library type, region, etc. (e.g. 1st year undergraduates, female graduate students in the humanities).

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This data may prove valuable to support advocacy efforts by academic library councils on behalf of their members, with governments and other funding sources.

When the consortium conducts the survey again, probably in 2010, we will have an additional set of valuable time-series data to help libraries assess the success of new cooperative initiatives and changes in client expectations and perceptions over time.

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References

¹ McKenna, Julie and Jordan, Isla. *Assessment Strategies FOR LIBRARY SERVICES*
(http://www.accessola2.com/superconference2007/fri/1408/mckenna_jordan.ppt)

² Ibid.

³ CARL is an association of 30 research-intensive institutions; 27 universities, Library and Archives Canada, Canada Institute for Scientific and Technical Information (CISTI), and the Library of Parliament.

⁴ Canadian community colleges normally offer diploma and certificate programs, but not programs leading toward a university degree.

⁵ Association of Research Libraries. *LibQUAL+™ Update* 1, Issue 3 (March 4, 2004)

⁶ The pre-survey <http://library.queensu.ca/webir/canlibqual/carl-workshop.htm> and post-survey <http://library.queensu.ca/webir/canlibqual/carl-workshop-2007.htm> conference programs and presentations are posted on the consortial web site.

⁷ http://library.queensu.ca/webir/canlibqual/consortial_survey/SurveySummary.html