



## LibQUAL in Ireland: performance assessment and service improvement in Irish university libraries

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24 interviewed described themselves as somewhat satisfied, as opposed to very satisfied, with  
25 the tool. At a national level, LibQUAL has repositioned the importance of the physical library  
26 environment within strategic planning and has placed the customer firmly at the center of Irish  
27 university library development.  
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# LibQUAL in Ireland: performance assessment and service improvement in Irish university libraries

## Introduction

The assessment and measurement of performance in academic libraries is well established. The last decade has seen a shift in emphasis from the measurement of library inputs such as loans, transactions, information skills sessions, etc. to customer-focused outputs such as student satisfaction and engagement. In North America and the United Kingdom LibQUAL has long been the predominant tool in assessing user perceptions of service quality. The introduction of LibQUAL to the Republic of Ireland has been more recent. Following early uptake by a few institutions, a coordinated approach to performance assessment using LibQUAL was taken from 2010 onwards, with varying degrees of success.

This article reviews the Irish university experience of LibQUAL, drawing from interviews with administrators and library directors in the seven Irish universities together with data from the Irish LibQUAL notebooks generated from 2009 to 2012. Some patterns in the results are identified, as are the individual changes and developments which were introduced in response to the results. This is primarily a qualitative study which explores the factors behind the decisions to run LibQUAL, the reactions to the results, the ways in which the results were used, the general attitudes of directors and senior staff towards the tool and the overall impact of LibQUAL on the institutions and at a national level. The small size of the sector lends itself well to a study of this kind and the findings have implications for Irish libraries and, more widely, for those administering and interpreting LibQUAL results, particularly from the perspective of a consortium.

## Methodology

Mixed methods were employed which included interviews with those library managers who administered LibQUAL, together with a number of library directors. The study also looked at the quantitative data in the individual notebooks generated from 2009 to 2012 to identify patterns in the overall scores of the seven libraries. The interviews were semi structured, asked open ended questions and explored the perspectives of five directors and seven library managers who were, with one exception, on the senior management team. Some managers worked in the area of library administration and others were in the areas of customer service or faculty support, with one working in systems. The study focuses on the seven university libraries in the Republic of Ireland, therefore it does not include other higher education libraries in the Republic or university libraries in Northern Ireland.

## Literature review

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3 There is a large body of literature on LibQUAL since its inception in 2001, most of which  
4 emanates from North America. Prominent authors in LibQUAL research include Colleen  
5 Cook, Fred Heath, Martha Kyrillidou and Bruce Thompson. Much of their work can be found  
6 in the LibQUAL bibliography in the results notebooks and on the LibQUAL website<sup>1</sup>. The  
7 literature on LibQUAL largely focuses on the instrument itself, its reliability and validity, and  
8 the approaches taken to analysis and interpretation of the quantitative survey results. There  
9 are numerous studies focusing on individual institutions, recent examples emanate from the  
10 University of Mississippi<sup>2</sup>, the University of Idaho<sup>3</sup> and the University of Notre Dame<sup>4</sup>. The  
11 methodologies used in LibQUAL studies tend to focus on quantitative analyses of the survey  
12 results, qualitative analyses of survey comments and case studies. Few studies employ  
13 interview methodology, explore the qualitative aspects of administering LibQUAL or combine  
14 quantitative and qualitative methods, as is the case here.  
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23 There is considerable scope to explore common and differing patterns in LibQUAL data  
24 across consortia and countries. However there are surprisingly few studies that look at  
25 LibQUAL on a national or international scale. Hiller, Kyrillidou and Self reviewed the state of  
26 library assessment in the North American research libraries as part of an ARL sponsored  
27 project<sup>5</sup> and identified factors that facilitate or impede effective assessment activities. Their  
28 study identified common patterns and experiences relating to library assessment broadly,  
29 rather than LibQUAL specifically. Killick<sup>6</sup> provided an audit of performance measurement  
30 activities in the UK and Ireland in 2009, while Lock and Town<sup>7</sup> presented an overview of  
31 participation and results from the 2003-05 UK and Ireland SCONUL (Society of College,  
32 National and University Libraries) cohort.  
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40 Studies which outline the experiences of planning and implementing LibQUAL consortia  
41 include Kalb's<sup>8</sup> 2007 paper on the Canadian LibQUAL experience and Garthwait and  
42 Richardson's<sup>9</sup> study on the 2006 statewide Pennsylvania Keystone Library Network  
43 consortium. In studies somewhat similar to this paper, in their use of quantitative data to  
44 identify patterns in results, Asemi, Kazempour and Rizi<sup>10</sup> collated national results in Iran and  
45 Rehman<sup>11</sup> collated national results in Pakistan. Also similar to the findings in this study, both  
46 the Iran and Pakistan studies revealed common patterns in low perceived scores for library as  
47 place. Gatten<sup>12</sup> reviewed the consortium experience of OhioLINK to identify the impact of a  
48 consortium on the perceptions of library services experienced by users of the member  
49 institutions' libraries. The literature suggests scope for further studies which analyse  
50 consortia results to investigate national and international similarities and differences relating  
51 to user perceptions and expectations across populations.  
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1 In addition to the international literature on LibQUAL, this paper adds to a very small body of  
2 work emanating from Ireland. Research on LibQUAL and more broadly performance  
3 assessment in Ireland is very sparse, with Russell<sup>13</sup> outlining a LibQUAL case study in the  
4 Institute of Technology, Tallaght and Hayden<sup>14</sup> reporting on user surveys in Waterford  
5 Institute of Technology.  
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## 10 **Background context**

11 There are seven universities in the Republic of Ireland. They range in size from the largest,  
12 with a student population of approximately 23,600 to the smallest, with a population of  
13 approximately 8,300. They range in age from 400 years to 40 years old. Three are located in  
14 the capital city, Dublin, with the remainder spread across the rest of the country.  
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### 19 **Table 1**

#### 20 **Irish universities and student numbers<sup>15</sup>**

23 University College Dublin (UCD)	23,600
24 University College Cork (UCC)	17,217
25 National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG)	16,479
26 Trinity College Dublin (TCD)	16,268
27 University of Limerick (UL)	11,103
28 Dublin City University (DCU)	10,199
29 National University of Ireland, Maynooth (NUIM)	8,322

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36 There is a long record of collaboration and cooperation between the university libraries and  
37 library directors, with well-established shared access and inter library loan schemes. The  
38 most successful recent collaboration between the university libraries has been IReL, the Irish  
39 Research eLibrary, which delivers an extensive collection of databases and ejournals to the  
40 Irish university community through consortium purchasing agreements. CONUL is the  
41 Consortium of National and University Libraries and includes the seven universities plus four  
42 other libraries, namely the Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland, Dublin Institute of  
43 Technology, the National Library and the Royal Irish Academy.  
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49 Prior to LibQUAL, assessment mechanisms across the Irish university libraries were varied,  
50 consisting of occasional customer surveys, focus groups and some usability testing.  
51 Mechanisms for generating feedback from users included faculty librarians, library user  
52 committees and comment forms. The Irish universities are members of SCONUL and some  
53 make submissions to SCONUL's comprehensive annual library statistics program. A national  
54 survey of researchers in the seven Irish institutions was run in 2007 and 2009 to measure the  
55 impact of IReL. None of the Irish libraries have staff dedicated to assessment or performance  
56 measurement. There is, however, a growing recognition of the strategic value of library  
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1 assessment as ARL initiatives with the balanced scorecard, ClimateQUAL and MINES and  
2 SCONUL initiatives with the Customer Service Excellence award and the BSC are watched  
3 with interest. However the Irish university libraries do not currently have a systematic program  
4 of library assessment at a national level.  
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7 The first Irish university to run LibQUAL was Trinity College Dublin in 2004. There was no  
8 further uptake until 2007, when the University of Limerick ran it for the first time, followed by  
9 University College Cork in 2008 and a second run for the University of Limerick in 2009. In  
10 2010 CONUL took a collective decision for its members to run LibQUAL in the same year, to  
11 generate a consortium notebook similar to the SCONUL and ARL notebooks. However, for a  
12 number of varied reasons, only four of the seven university libraries, together with another  
13 CONUL member, the Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland, participated in this 2010 exercise.  
14 Nonetheless, by 2011 all of the Irish universities had run LibQUAL at least once.  
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### 21 **Factors in deciding to run LibQUAL**

22 While the factors which led the libraries to decide to run LibQUAL varied, the general need for  
23 metrics and performance assessment was the main reason that most directors cited in their  
24 decision to run the survey. There were also some individual factors. One director wanted a  
25 baseline survey ahead of the construction of a new building so he could measure the impact  
26 afterwards. Three were going through quality reviews which influenced their decisions to run  
27 LibQUAL. A few libraries did it simply because CONUL as a group was participating in it and  
28 may not have run LibQUAL if not for the collective decision.  
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34 The comparative nature of LibQUAL and the potential for benchmarking with other libraries  
35 nationally and internationally was particularly appealing to all of the directors interviewed and  
36 the credibility of LibQUAL as an internationally recognised tool designed by statisticians were  
37 factors in the adoption of the survey instrument.  
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### 42 **Patterns in results**

43 The LibQUAL survey measures customers' perceptions of service quality and the notebooks  
44 for each institution indicate some general themes and patterns in users' perceptions common  
45 to all of the seven libraries. As is typical of the SCONUL experience of LibQUAL, the pattern  
46 of customer service (Affect of Service) scoring highest and the library building (Library as  
47 Place) scoring lowest is apparent in all but one of the Irish LibQUAL notebooks. Collections  
48 and resources (Information Control) are of utmost importance to users, based on the high  
49 desired scores given in these questions.  
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56 Response rates from each institution ranged from a high of 20% to a low of 5%. In all cases  
57 the response rates from undergraduates were much higher than postgraduates or faculty.  
58 The user group with the lowest perceptions of service, measured by the adequacy mean,  
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1 varied from library to library, with postgraduates being least satisfied in four cases, faculty in  
2 two cases and undergraduates in one case. Similarly, user groups with the highest  
3 satisfaction levels also varied, in three instances undergraduates were most satisfied, in a  
4 further three it was faculty and in one instance undergraduates and faculty were equally  
5 satisfied.  
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9 The most notable pattern which emerged from the Irish notebooks relates to perceptions of  
10 the library building and environment. The notebooks indicate that five out of the seven  
11 libraries are not meeting their users' minimum expectations in the area of Library as Place.  
12 This trend is lessened in the CONUL consortium notebook since two of the four university  
13 libraries that participated were the only two libraries that scored above minimum expectations  
14 in this area. Had all seven libraries participated in the exercise, the national average scores  
15 for Library as Place would certainly be lower than the 2010 CONUL notebook indicates.  
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21 At the individual question level in each of the Irish LibQUAL notebooks, for six out of the  
22 seven libraries, the poorest performing question of the 22 core questions was "quiet space for  
23 individual work". It is important to note that this is also consistently the lowest scoring  
24 question in the SCONUL notebook each year, but the Irish scores are lower still. The  
25 interviews with LibQUAL administrators confirmed that the comments reflected the strong  
26 dissatisfaction with the library building but most particularly with noise.  
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31 It is difficult to determine the reasons for this pattern of low scores for Irish university library  
32 buildings and the results provoke a number of questions which warrant further research. Are  
33 Irish library buildings generally substandard or in some way inadequate for the needs of their  
34 customers? Comparisons with the ARL and SCONUL consortium results do indicate that  
35 Irish users' expectations of library buildings are higher than elsewhere, as measured by the  
36 minimum and desired means. Why are Irish library users more demanding in what they  
37 expect from their university libraries? Could this phenomenon relate more to student  
38 behaviour than to library buildings? Is there a broader question to be asked about why  
39 LibQUAL scores in the area of Library as Place appear to be so much lower in Britain and  
40 Ireland as compared to North America? Further research is clearly needed in this area.  
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### 48 **Responding to the results**

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50 This study found a wide variation in the approaches the seven libraries took to analysing,  
51 interpreting and responding to the results. None of the directors or library managers reported  
52 being surprised by the results, generally accepting that they were an accurate reflection of  
53 user perceptions of their services. Each institution took a different approach to how they  
54 disseminated the results, in that there were varying degrees of dissemination, within and  
55 outside the library. All bar one disseminated the results to library staff, through general  
56 presentations and five shared the results with university departments outside of the library.  
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Some libraries were successful at engaging faculty and senior university management with the results, others less so. The individual institutional responses to the results and the subsequent impact of the survey also varied. Five of the seven libraries, to varying degrees, all created action plans in response to the results. The remaining two reported that they did not generate specific action plans or use the results in a direct or immediate way.

There are many case studies in the literature outlining what individual libraries did with their results, which Nixon and Saunders categorised as typically “very specific changes to very specific services”<sup>16</sup>, and this is somewhat replicated in how the Irish libraries responded to their results.

## Table 2

### Examples of actions taken by Irish libraries in response to LibQUAL results

- Substantial funding secured for a preliminary study into the library building.
- Redesign of interior of a new build to prioritise more study spaces over social spaces.
- Noise management, review of policies, zoning, fines, noise campaigns, etc.
- Space redesigned to create a postgraduate reading room.
- Plan for the building to go fully wireless countered by results.
- Improved wireless and wired connectivity at every study desk.
- Change in the ratio of undergraduate : postgraduate spend on books.
- Additional funding secured for ebooks.
- Centralised and relocated desk services.
- Increased number of self-service machines.
- Increased number of group study rooms/spaces.
- Tracking system for online queries.
- Change in the role of subject librarians in the book ordering process.
- Plans to introduce a different library desk model in a new building, to include IT staff.
- Introduction of library staff badges.
- Introduction of federated search engines.
- Change in the role of desk staff in handling information queries.
- Activities around increasing the visibility of faculty librarians.
- Opening hour extensions.
- Changes to how users accessed resources from home.

While many of the changes listed in Table 2 appear to be significant, attitudes around whether LibQUAL is a catalyst for change, as has been suggested in some literature<sup>17</sup>, varied. It was difficult for those interviewed to determine cause and effect with LibQUAL. It was very difficult to say in retrospect what would not have happened if LibQUAL had not been run. The three institutions that run it regularly appear to view LibQUAL as a change agent, more so than the libraries that have run it once. Among these three libraries, the feeling

1 amongst the LibQUAL administrators was that regular running of the survey created a culture  
2 of assessment and improvement in their libraries, which in turn led to a culture of change, a  
3 concept explored by Lakos<sup>18</sup>, and that this in itself is where LibQUAL had the greatest impact.  
4 Among the directors, there was a shared view that LibQUAL was more of a broad indicator of,  
5 as one director put it, “what direction do we shift the oil tanker” rather than a source of specific  
6 indicators of real actions that need to be taken. What is clear from the responses is that the  
7 experience of running LibQUAL prompted all of the Irish university libraries to place a greater  
8 strategic emphasis on directing resources into the physical library environment. As one  
9 administrator put it, LibQUAL gave them “a new way of looking at space and place.”  
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### 14 **Experiences and perspectives**

15 Of the seven Irish universities, three have embraced LibQUAL, run it regularly and have  
16 integrated it into their operational and strategic planning. For each of these institutions the  
17 overall scores have improved each time they run the survey, which is an indication for these  
18 institutions that this cycle of measure/improve/measure is working in improving user  
19 perceptions of library services.  
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25 Of the remaining four libraries, two reported finding LibQUAL very useful, in an occasional  
26 sense, as a top level tool to be deployed every three to five years or so. Two of the seven  
27 universities found LibQUAL to be less useful for their needs and were doubtful about its  
28 impact on their libraries. It was not possible in this study to determine the factors which  
29 contributed to the success of LibQUAL in some libraries and not in others, a topic explored by  
30 Hiller, Kyrillidou and Self<sup>19</sup> in the ARL context.  
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36 The strengths and weakness of the LibQUAL tool are well documented in the literature  
37 (Creaser<sup>20</sup>, Nixon and Saunders<sup>16</sup>, Edgar<sup>21</sup>). All those interviewed identified the ease of  
38 running LibQUAL and the wealth of information contained in the comments as being the  
39 greatest strengths. The Irish libraries had the same difficulty in dealing with the lack of  
40 specificity and some ambiguity of the language that is a necessary part of the universality of  
41 the tool. The complexity of the data, the difficulty in sharing the data with others and the time  
42 and expertise required to analyse the data correctly were common challenges. Almost all of  
43 those interviewed described themselves as somewhat satisfied, as opposed to very satisfied,  
44 with the survey instrument.  
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51 Beyond the tool itself, there were other unexpected aspects of the LibQUAL experience which  
52 many of the institutions found valuable. The ability to use the data as evidence to convince  
53 both university management and library staff of the need for change was identified as a very  
54 useful aspect of the tool. There was a view among some that a low score in certain areas was  
55 more useful than a high score. Correspondingly, one library cited high results as less useful  
56 to them, saying it was “great that satisfaction levels were high, but might have had more value  
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1 if the results were more dramatic.” However, interpretations of the results, in terms of what is  
2 a high score and what is a low score, also varied among the institutions. Three libraries were  
3 undergoing quality reviews around the time of the survey and found the international  
4 recognition of the tool among peer reviewers to be very useful. One director reported that in  
5 comparison to the type of assessment activities in other departments in the university, the  
6 very act of running LibQUAL generated a view amongst senior management that the library  
7 was very much in control of its performance, improvement and quality cycle.  
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11 All directors and many administrators commented on the potential to benchmark against  
12 CONUL, SCONUL and ARL as being most useful for their purposes, but some felt that they  
13 did not take full advantage of this potential when analysing their results. Most libraries looked  
14 at the SCONUL, CONUL and ARL notebooks to position themselves against these national  
15 and international averages. A few looked at the results of other institutions with a view to  
16 identifying benchmarking partners and best practice elsewhere, but not in great depth. While  
17 the idea of the comparative potential of LibQUAL was very appealing, the lack of time, staff  
18 and statistical expertise meant that this potential may not have been fully exploited.  
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### 25 **Summary of findings**

26 The results from the Irish LibQUAL notebooks indicate common negative perceptions about  
27 library buildings amongst users and in particular a collective dissatisfaction with noise levels  
28 in the seven libraries. However Irish users’ expectations of library buildings appear to be  
29 higher than elsewhere and the issue of user perceptions and expectations of Irish university  
30 library buildings warrants further investigation. Satisfaction levels among undergraduate,  
31 postgraduate and faculty differ, with no single user group being more or less satisfied across  
32 the sector. The 2010 CONUL consortium notebook includes four of the seven institutions and  
33 may not give a full picture, particularly in the area of Library as Place. The approaches to  
34 analysis, interpretation and response to the results varied from library to library.  
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42 Of the seven Irish universities, three run it regularly and have integrated it into their planning  
43 activities, two found LibQUAL to be very useful in an occasional sense, as a top level tool to  
44 be deployed every three to five years and two found LibQUAL to be less useful for their needs  
45 and were doubtful of its impact on their libraries. While most institutions reported  
46 implementing changes as part of their LibQUAL action plans, attitudes around whether  
47 LibQUAL was a catalyst for change in their libraries varied. The majority of those interviewed  
48 described themselves as somewhat satisfied, as opposed to very satisfied, with the tool.  
49 Nonetheless all agreed that it was very likely that they would run the survey again. While  
50 there are questions in the minds of Irish directors and library managers about some aspects  
51 of the tool, particularly with regard to the benchmarking potential, all accept that it has  
52 become the predominant assessment tool in university libraries.  
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## Conclusion

Engagement with LibQUAL has provided the Irish university sector with a new and rich resource of evidence about user needs and library performance. LibQUAL appears to have had impact at a national level, most immediately by repositioning the importance of the physical library environment within strategic planning and, more broadly, by placing the customer at the center of Irish university library development.

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