
Benchmarking the standard SCONUL User Survey – report of a pilot study

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CONTEXT

Standard user surveys are widely used in the public library sector – indeed there is one which is effectively mandatory, as some of the new public library standards are based on it.¹ User survey data are also routinely included in the CIPFA *Public Library Statistics - Actuals series*.² SCONUL has never prescribed a standard survey instrument or methodology in this way, and does not include survey data in its annual statistical return. However, one purpose of a standard user survey template is not to prescribe what libraries should be asking their users, but rather to suggest a form of words which they may find useful, and to allow for comparisons to be made where several institutions ask the same questions in the same way.

In December 2003, a brief survey of SCONUL members was carried out into their practice concerning user surveys.³ Of 65 respondents, 62 (95%) carried out user surveys, and 39 of these (63%) did so on an annual basis. Although not specifically asked, 16 respondents (26%) indicated that they used the standard SCONUL user survey template, and the author of the report suspected that this was an under-estimate of the true position.⁴

One of the key findings of the report was that the ability to benchmark user survey data was thought to be one of the strengths of the ARL LibQUAL+ instrument.⁵ Given the continuing popularity of the SCONUL satisfaction survey template, the report recommended that SCONUL's Advisory Committee on Performance Improvement (ACPI) should consider easy mechanisms for

libraries which use the template to benchmark data.

During 2004, ACPI initiated a pilot study into the feasibility of benchmarking the results from the standard user survey template. Approaches were made to individual libraries to ascertain the level of interest, and LISU at Loughborough University was commissioned in September to carry out the study, with funding contributed by the participating libraries.

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Nine members eventually supplied data to LISU: University of Wales Aberystwyth; Bolton Institute of Higher Education; De Montfort University; Glasgow Caledonian University; St Martin's College; University of Northumbria at Newcastle; Southampton University; University of Wales Swansea; and York University.

METHODOLOGY

Summary data were extracted for all participants and entered in a standard form in an Excel spreadsheet. Given that this was a pilot exercise designed to test the viability of benchmarking user survey data, no account was taken of differences in survey periods. It was clear at the start that there were variations in the closeness of the adherence to the standard which would affect the analysis. Small differences in wording (e.g. to 'personalise' the template using local names for particular services) were felt to be insignificant in this context.

It was clear that not all participating libraries had used the standard template in its entirety. Some had omitted questions, or parts of questions; others had added elements of particular interest to their circumstances. These variations are not thought to invalidate any comparisons which might be made. Of more concern, however, is the way in which the samples were selected for the surveys. It seemed likely that at least one participant had not administered the survey within the library, as a high proportion of its respondents were infrequent users. There had also been some inconsistency over the use of the 'don't know' categories as pre-fillers for questions which might otherwise have been left blank. While such inconsistencies do not invalidate the process of comparison, for a more focused exercise they would need to be carefully monitored, as they will affect the interpretation of the results.

More seriously, one institution had used the SCONUL template questions but reduced the rating scales from five points to four, and so could not be included in any comparisons. Another questionnaire bore little resemblance to the standard template, and only one question could be benchmarked.

LISU's preference when undertaking any statistical benchmarking exercise is to look at trends over at least the previous five years, wherever possible. However, in this case, no trend data were available, so the analysis concentrated on providing a set of graphs illustrating each institution's pattern of responses on each question, compared to the others in the group. Average 'scores' were also calculated for each of the rating scale items in the survey. In order to provide a flavour of what is possible, the average for all participating institutions was included. It is recognised that the participating institutions form such a diverse group that average figures are likely to be of little value in this context.

RESULTS AND COMMENTARY

A full report was provided to participants, and to the ACPI. Below is a brief summary of the findings, with some examples of the graphs and tables which were provided. All results are here presented anonymously, as the data were supplied to LISU in confidence.

There was a wide range in the number of responses included, from just 118 in library D to 1,532 in library F. Some of these sample sizes raise the question of whether any valid or reliable information can be gleaned from such small surveys.

CONTEXTUAL DATA

It was interesting that the questions relating to the respondents' role within the institution (e.g. whether staff or student, full time or part time, undergraduate or postgraduate), were not used in their original form by any of the participants. The wording of these questions is likely to be revised in an updated template currently being considered by the ACPI.

Contextual data are important descriptors for any benchmarking exercise, as no two libraries are ever truly alike. Knowledge of the background can help to explain unexpected or unusual results. In the data included in the pilot, Library D did not survey staff, and the proportion of staff responses was relatively low in library B. Staff and students

are likely to make different demands on, and have different experience of, library services which could affect comparisons between institutions.

The majority of respondents at all participating institutions were full time, from 79% at library B to 95% at library H. Similarly, the majority of student respondents were undergraduates, with a range from 76% at library E to 87% at libraries D, F and A. Respondents at library B were noticeably older than those at the other five libraries which had included this question in a comparable way.

All but one participant included a question on frequency of library use, with some allowing a more detailed breakdown than the standard template. There were some interesting variations in response patterns – in particular, at library A almost half the responses were from infrequent users, suggesting that its survey may have been carried out on a different basis from the others. Library H also had a significant proportion of infrequent users (20%), while at the other extreme, under 2% of responses at library B were from those who used the library less often than once a month.

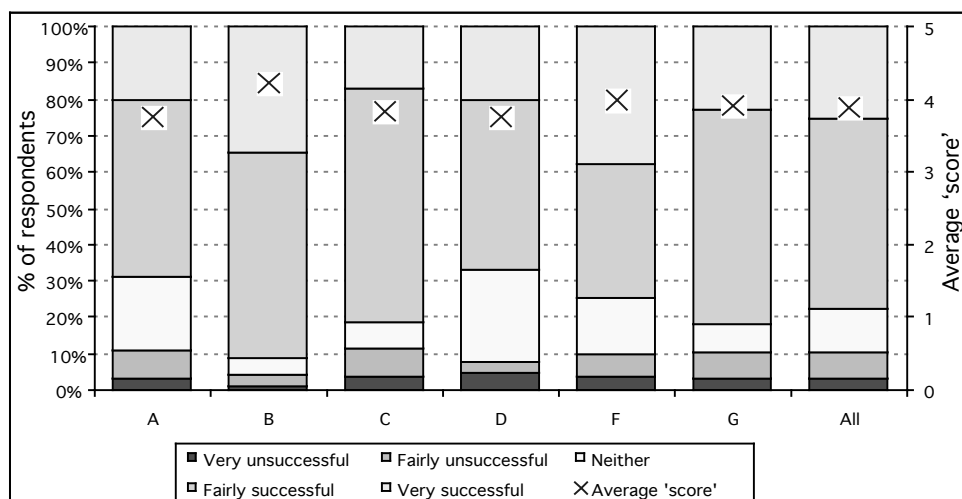
ACTIVITIES DURING CURRENT VISIT

The template lists five activities – looking for material on the shelves, using electronic information services, the catalogue or a computer, and seeking help from library staff – with respondents asked to rate their success on a five point scale, or indicate that they did not participate in the activity. This last option was not apparent in the data received from library A, again suggesting that the survey was conducted differently there. The analyses for this section omit the 'did not do' category, so library A's data have been included in the analysis.

Graphs were produced showing the proportion of respondents giving each rating, together with an 'average score'. This was calculated by scoring 'very unsuccessful' as 1 up to 'very successful' as 5, and averaging over all responses. Such an average allows participants to be ranked, if required, and gives a single figure overview of performance. In general, high scores were achieved throughout. Fig 1 gives an example of the results, showing success in looking for material on the shelves.

Fig 1: Success in looking for material on the shelves

	A	B	C	D	F	G	All
Very unsuccessful	3%	1%	3%	4%	4%	3%	3%
Fairly unsuccessful	7%	3%	8%	3%	6%	7%	7%
Neither	20%	5%	7%	26%	15%	8%	12%
Fairly successful	49%	56%	64%	47%	37%	59%	52%
Very successful	20%	35%	17%	20%	38%	23%	26%
<i>No. included</i>	446	126	970	90	942	665	3,239
Average 'score'	3.75	4.21	3.84	3.74	3.99	3.91	3.90



There were some clear differences in performance between the libraries for all of the activities compared, although there was little consistency between the activities in those libraries with better or poorer results. For example, Library B recorded the best performance among those who looked for library material on the shelves, with an average score of 4.21, and 91% of users 'fairly' or 'very' successful, while Library C performed best for users of electronic information services, the only library with less than 10% unsuccessful, and an average score 3.93. However, library D had the highest proportion of respondents reporting they were 'very' successful in this activity, but the poorest success for use of the library catalogue; the only respondent to average a score of less than 4 on this activity. Only 70% of users were 'very' or 'fairly' successful, compared to over 80% in all the other libraries.

FACILITIES AND SERVICES

In the standard template, users are asked to rate both their satisfaction with a wide range of services provided, and its importance to them. Seven of the participating libraries used this question in whole or in part, with one using only the satisfaction element of it. Some libraries did not include

all the standard services; some included additional services of particular relevance to themselves. As above, average scores were presented, together with the distribution of responses. Both satisfaction and importance ratings were generally high, although there were some notable exceptions. 'Don't know' and 'not applicable' responses were omitted from the analysis.

Average scores on the satisfaction elements were generally below the success scores described above, with only three – the library catalogue and the two items concerning staff – achieving average scores above 4 overall. Few institutions stood out as having particularly high or low scores on any items:

- Library B scored particularly well on the provision of course books, with 25% 'very' satisfied and 49% 'fairly' satisfied
- Library B also scored well on provision of photocopying with an average score of 4.13, while library H had the poorest rating, achieving an average score of just 3.16
- Library B performed best on printing, with 81% of users 'very' or 'fairly' satisfied,

compared to 71% in library C and 67% in library D

- Library H recorded a particularly low score for the provision of computers, of just 2.88 – the only average score below 3 on any item. Just 9% of its users were ‘very’ satisfied with this service
- There was a wide range of satisfaction levels with library opening hours. Libraries E and B had the most satisfied customers, with 48% and 46% of users respectively ‘very’ satisfied with the opening hours.

It is also interesting to relate some of these differences to the absolute levels of provision as recorded in the *SCONUL Annual Statistics* – although this may invite further questions, rather than providing answers. For example, although library E has the longest general opening hours of the group and so a high level of satisfaction might be expected, library B has the shortest, by a considerable margin. However, library B has much longer opening hours for those areas with

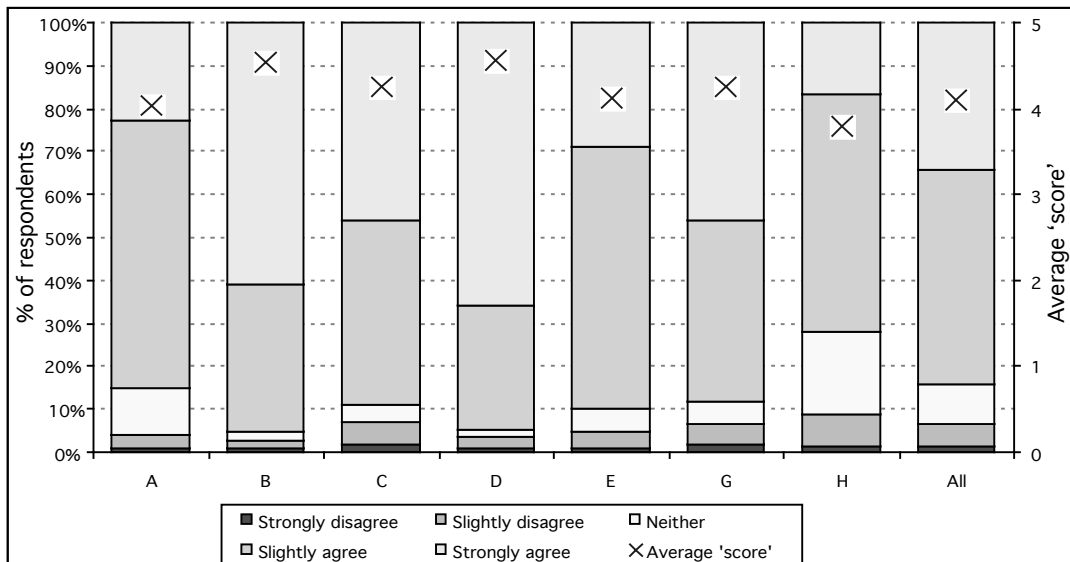
computer workstations, and it may be this provision which is being rated here. It seems likely that the picture is even more complex, related to the convenience of the hours and the range of services available during extended hours.

The importance ratings given to individual items tended to be rather higher than their satisfaction levels. It is noticeable that for almost all items, the lowest importance ratings were recorded at library A, with a high proportion of infrequent users. The highest rating for any item was the importance of the range of books at library B, where 92% of respondents thought this ‘very’ important, and the remainder thought it ‘fairly’ important.

Also interesting is the importance rating for computers at library H. 18.2% of respondents thought this ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ unimportant. This may suggest that improving the poor level of satisfaction noted above with this service might not be the highest priority for this library. Users at library H also placed a relatively low importance on the range of electronic information services.

Fig 2: Overall, the library provides a good service to me

	A	B	C	D	E	G	H	All
Strongly disagree	1%	1%	2%	1%	1%	2%	1%	1%
Slightly disagree	3%	2%	5%	3%	4%	5%	8%	5%
Neither	11%	2%	4%	2%	5%	5%	19%	9%
Slightly agree	62%	34%	43%	29%	61%	42%	55%	50%
Strongly agree	23%	61%	46%	66%	29%	46%	17%	34%
<i>No. included</i>	483	121	1,022	117	581	802	1,143	4,269
Average ‘score’	4.03	4.53	4.26	4.56	4.13	4.26	3.79	4.11



OVERALL SATISFACTION

No library scores particularly poorly on the final question from the SCONUL template, 'overall the library provides a good service to me', illustrated in Fig 2. Fewer than 10% of respondents disagree with this statement at any library. Libraries D and B have the highest levels of overall satisfaction, with average scores of 4.56 and 4.53 respectively, and 95% of users 'slightly' or 'strongly' agreeing with the statement. Library H shows the poorest results, with an average score of 3.79, and 72% of users 'slightly' or 'strongly' agreeing with the statement.

CONCLUSIONS

This pilot study has shown that it is possible to use the data from the standard SCONUL user survey template to make valid comparisons between libraries. There are a number of areas where care must be taken in order for the analyses to have the greatest value, for example in the choice of comparators. It is also important to ensure that the survey methodology has been applied in a consistent way in all institutions included. Variations in the time period over which the survey was conducted, or the physical medium through which it was administered are acceptable, however. Making such comparisons – benchmarking – is a useful addition to the information gleaned from user survey data, and if a time series element could be incorporated, further benefits would be gained. One aspect which has not been explored here in any detail is to inform the results with additional information from the SCONUL *Annual Statistics*.

Following on from this pilot study, LISU has offered to provide an analysis and benchmarking service, at reasonable cost, should there be sufficient interest from SCONUL members who are using this survey in whole or in part. Librarians are invited to contact LISU⁶ if they would like further information.

Note that since the surveys analysed here were carried out, the ACPI has considered a revision to the standard template which will take into account the increase in use of electronic services both within and beyond traditional library buildings. It will also revise the contextual data collected about respondents. This revised version is expected to be published during 2005.

- 1 Department of Culture, Media & Sport (2004) Public library service standards. Available at http://www.culture.gov.uk/global/publications/archive_2004/library_standards.htm
- 2 Chartered Institute of Public Finance & Accountancy (2003) Public library statistics 2002-03 actuals, ISSN 0260-4078, London: CIPFA
- 3 Christopher West, User surveys in UK and Irish HE libraries, January 2004. Available at <http://www.sconul.ac.uk/activities/performance/papers/>
- 4 Available at <http://www.sconul.ac.uk/activities/performance/papers/>
- 5 See <http://www.libqual.org/Information/index.cfm>
- 6 Contact lisu@lboro.ac.uk for more information