

Report on the LibQUAL survey 2004

Introduction

The Library undertakes an annual survey of user opinion. Though we have used nationally available survey instruments in the past (e.g. the SCONUL satisfaction survey in 2002), in most previous years we have developed our own survey to investigate a specific area of service (e.g. use of electronic resources in 2003 and Library publications in 2001). However, this year we decided to take part in the LibQUAL survey principally on the grounds that it would provide us with data with which we could benchmark our performance against that of other participants. It was also hoped that the use of a well developed “off the shelf” survey would be easier (though admittedly more costly) to administer and analyse than an in-house alternative.

So what is LibQUAL? It was originally developed by the American Association of Research Libraries¹ (ARL) and Texas A&M University². It is based on the SERVQUAL survey instrument, a popular tool for assessing service quality in the private sector. In its own words, the goals of LibQUAL³ are to:

- Help foster a culture of excellence in providing library service
- Help libraries better understand user perceptions of their service
- To collect and interpret library user feedback systematically over time
- To provide libraries with comparable assessment information from peer institutions
- To enhance library staff members analytical skills for interpreting and acting on data

The survey has become very widespread in the US since it first ran in 2000 and is also becoming increasingly popular worldwide with more than 300 academic libraries having participated by the end of 2003. Some 14 other HE libraries in the UK also decided to take part as part of the 2004 SCONUL cohort.

Methodology

LibQUAL is designed around what its developers habitually refer to as “30 questions and a box”. For each question, LibQUAL asks users to measure on a scale from 1 (low) – 9 (high) three aspects of service quality for each question asked, namely:

- The minimum level of service they would accept in that area
- The level of service they perceive they have received
- The desired level of service they would expect

¹ <http://www.arl.org/index.html>

² <http://library.tamu.edu/>

³ <http://www.libqual.org/>

The analysis then identifies the gaps between minimum, perceived and desired levels of service. Such gaps can then be given priority when planning how to enhance service delivery.

The questions are refined each year and in 2004 were intended to assess three main “dimensions”, namely the affect of the service (9 questions), information control (8 questions) and the Library “as place” (5 questions). In addition, the survey asked 3 general satisfaction questions and we were allowed to select 5 other questions from a predefined list. The Loughborough questions asked about:

Access to photocopying and printing facilities
Provision of information skills training
Helpfulness in dealing with users’ IT problems
Efficient inter-library loan / document delivery
Convenient service hours.

A full list of the questions asked is given in Appendix One. The “box” allowed respondents the opportunity to comment about any aspect of the Library service.

The survey opened at the beginning of March 2004 and participating institutions were allowed to close it at any stage up until the end of June. A preliminary training session advised that we should select a sample of users rather than sending out an email message to all users. We decided to follow that advice and used data available on Aleph to select, at random, approximately 25% of each category of user (undergraduates, academic staff etc), a total of 3680 users. An email was then sent inviting them to complete the form online. It appears that Loughborough was unusual in selecting a sample as most 2004 participants sent messages to their whole user community.

Eventually, following a reminder email, some 359 responses were received by the time we closed the survey on 23 April, a response rate of just under 10% once a number of failed email addresses were excluded. This response rate appeared disappointing, especially when compared with previous in-house surveys which often attracted response rates in excess of 40%. However, such figures are generally to be expected for “total market surveys” and bear comparison with the response rates obtained for similar surveys elsewhere. It was also unfortunate that the dissemination of the survey coincided with an upsurge in virus infections affecting the whole campus. Despite advance publicity, the LibQUAL message was mistaken for a virus by a number of users and this may well have adversely affected the response rate.

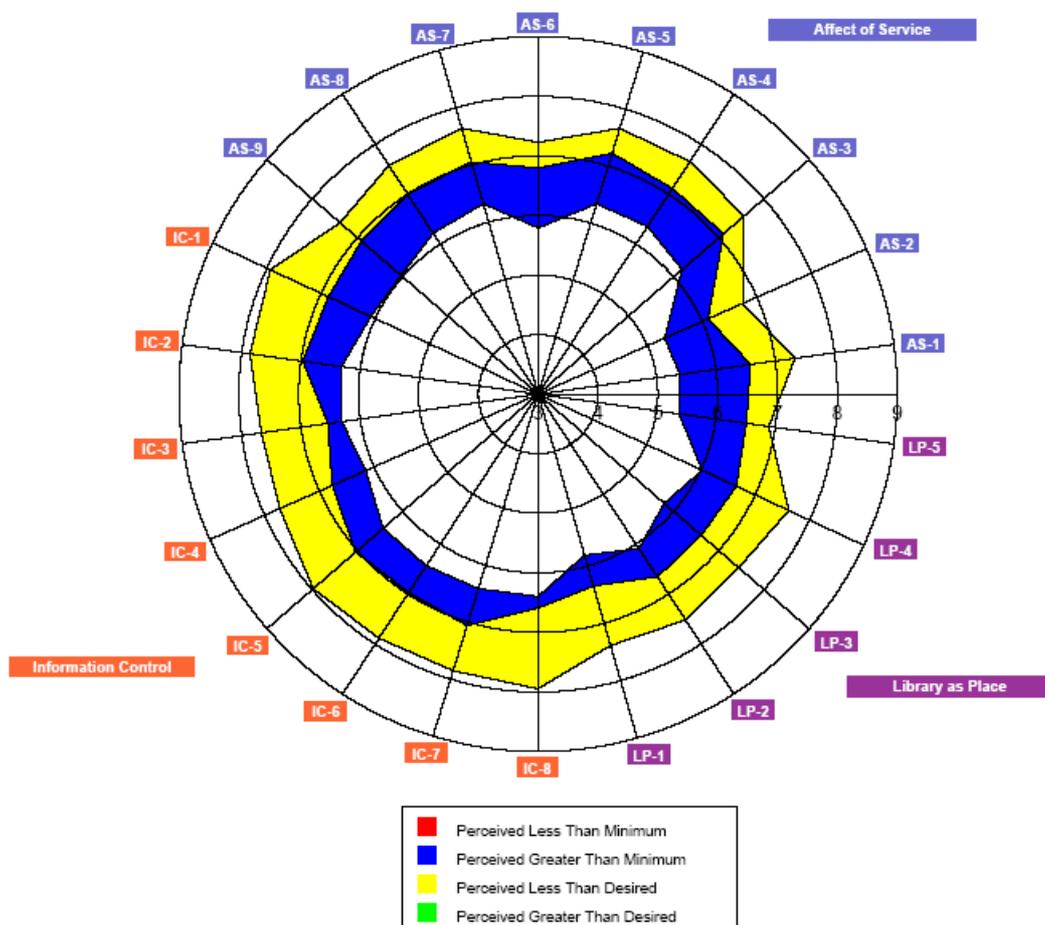
In demographic terms, the respondents were comprised as follows: undergraduates 54%, postgraduates (including research students) 29%, academic staff 13% and others 4%. In very broad terms this is representative of the University population, though postgraduates were over represented and undergraduates slightly underrepresented, especially finalists, possibly for very understandable reasons given the timing of the survey. Curiously, female

respondents accounted for 47% of the total though they only make up 36% of the student population. It certainly seems that women are more assiduous in the completion of surveys!

Following the closure of the survey, we received two workbooks giving an in-depth statistical analysis (running to 92 pages) of the responses obtained from Loughborough users and a similar report to enable us to compare our results against the aggregate results for SCONUL participants. A file was also supplied giving details of the 120 free text comments supplied. This report offers a very brief overview and analysis of these findings.

Loughborough results

The results obtained are represented in the workbooks in variety of ways, including “radar charts” (see below). These charts cover all the questions asked about the affect of service, the Library as place and information control. They do not cover the general satisfaction questions or the “local” questions. The average minimum, perceived and desired scores for each question are plotted on the chart, with each question representing a “spoke in the wheel”. The blue means the extent to which the Library’s perceived performance has exceeded the minimum, the yellow indicates how the Library has fallen short of the desired performance.



Clearly, there is much work to be done but it is worth noting that there is no red on Loughborough’s chart, which means that in no area did our performance fall short of the minimum expectation. Neither is there any green which would signify that our performance was exceeding the desired level – surely its absence indicates that we are allocating available resources effectively!

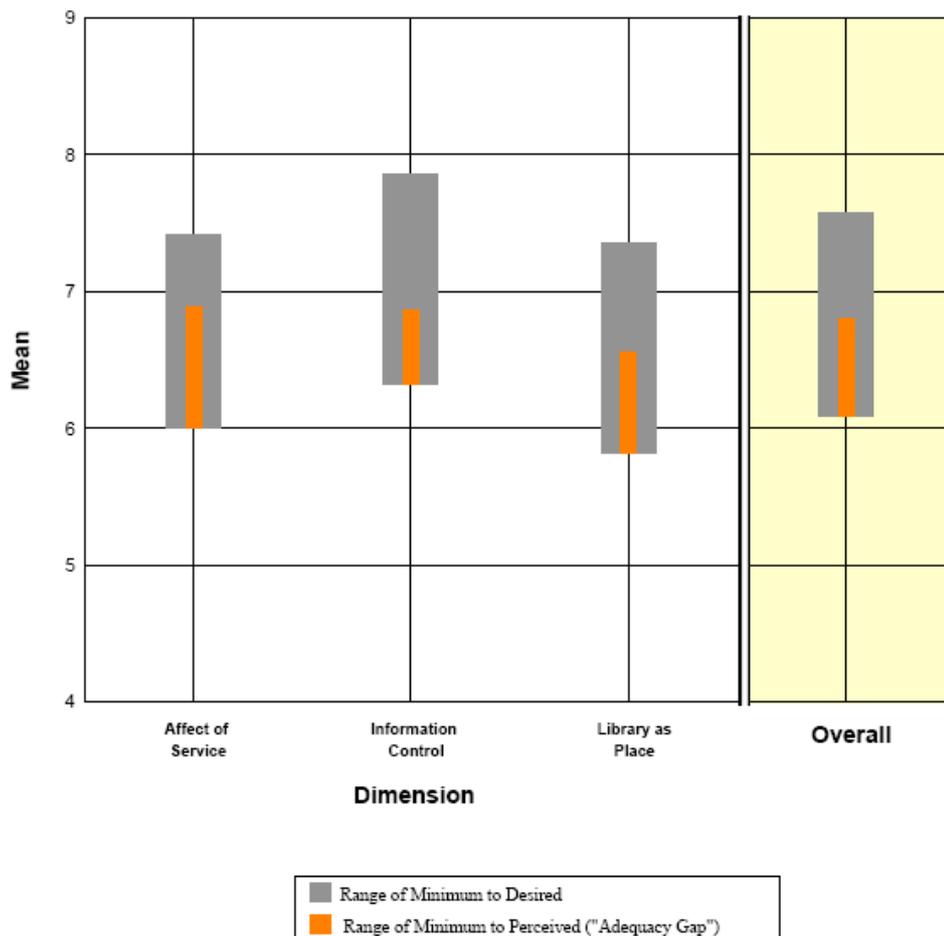
In terms of what all users value most (i.e. give the highest desired scores), the top five mean scores all come under what LibQUAL calls “information control”

rather than the “affect of the service” or “Library as place”. These are in descending order of importance:

- Modern equipment that lets me easily access needed information;
- Print and /or electronic journals I require for my work
- Making electronic resources accessible from my home or office
- Easy to use access tools that allow me to find things on my own
- A Library website enabling me to locate information on my own

When analysed by type of respondent, the results do not vary as much as might be expected. These are still the top five desired services for academics. For undergraduates, four of the above feature with the exception of print and electronic journals. This is replaced by the need for quiet space for individual work. For postgraduates the only change is that the Library website is displaced by “the electronic information resources I need”. From these results, it would seem that our users, first and foremost, want us to organise and deliver the information they need to enable them to find and use it in their own time!

When the three dimensions of our service are analysed in more detail, the following responses emerged:



In this chart the exterior bars represent the range of minimum to desired scores for each service dimension. The interior bars show the range from minimum to perceived scores.

Affect of Service

This dimension asked users questions about the attitude and competence of Library staff. It was pleasing to note that this was the area which received the highest mean perceived score (6.88). Library staff consistently scored well above minimum levels in answer to questions about the extent to which they instil confidence in users, are courteous, ready to help, understand the needs of users and have the knowledge to help them. This is a fitting recognition of the efforts made by staff and is also reflected in most (though not all) of the free text comments submitted by respondents. (See below)

Information Control

This measured the availability and accessibility of information both in electronic and print form. The mean perceived score was only slightly lower than for the affect of service but this was the dimension in which the “adequacy gap” (i.e between the minimum and perceived performance) was at its smallest. This is clearly the area about which our users have the most concerns. It is also the area they regard as the most important aspect of Library service.

Furthermore, when the results are analysed by type of respondent, perceived performance even fell short of the minimum in the answer to one question about adequate access to print and/or electronic journals required for their work. This was the case for both academic staff and postgraduate respondents. This response is perhaps surprising given the level of resource committed to the development of e-journal provision in recent years and the exponential growth in their numbers. However such findings mirror the responses given in the 2003 survey on the use of electronic resources. Perhaps this is as much a marketing issue as one related to resources. It is incumbent upon the Library to continue to make access to its 6500 e-journals as easy and transparent as possible whilst at the same time trying to ensure that these are “branded “ as Library resources.

Library as Place

This asked questions about the Library space, namely the extent to which it provided a range of study environments and was both comfortable and inviting. This was the dimension to which respondents gave the lowest perceived score (6.55) but also the one about which they appeared to have the lowest minimum requirements. However, perhaps to be expected were the variations in the importance given to this dimension by different groups, for example with undergraduates giving significantly higher desired scores (7.56) than academic respondents (6.43). It is also worth noting that the question that asked for views on group study space produced a significantly lower

desired score than that which asked about quiet space for individual study. This was the case for all groups including undergraduates.

When the three general satisfaction questions were analysed, the Library's perceived performance fell almost exactly half way between the minimum and desired scores. This may seem disappointing but is actually much better than the results obtained by most institutions undertaking the LibQUAL survey. (See below).

The responses obtained for the local questions were as follows:

Local Question:	Minimum mean score	Perceived mean score	Desired mean score
Access to photocopying and printing facilities	5.89	6.10	7.47
Provision of information skills training	5.15	6.57	6.47
Helpfulness in dealing with users' IT problems	5.71	6.63	7.12
Efficient inter library loan / document delivery	6.26	6.96	7.67
Convenient service hours	6.46	7.37	7.94

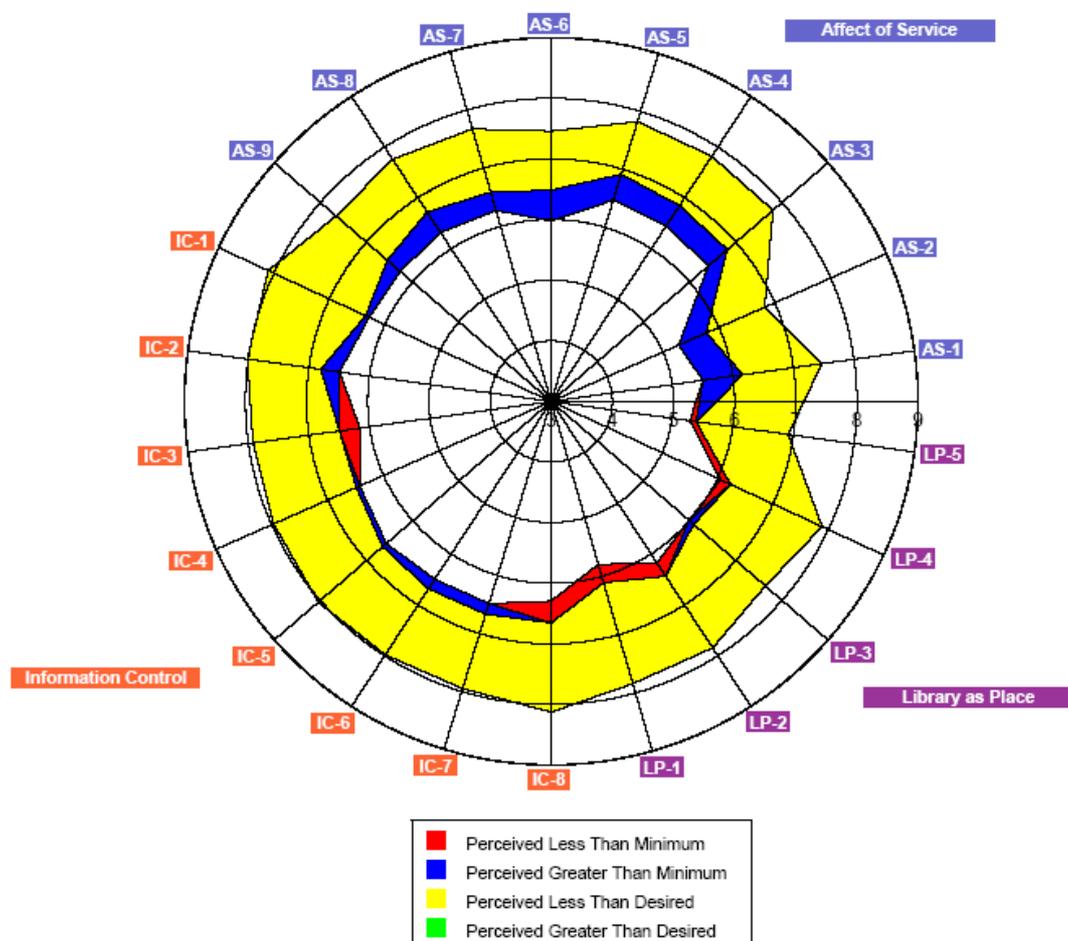
These questions clearly indicate the importance of "convenient service hours" to our users and the need for these to be kept under regular review. Efficient document delivery is also clearly important as are printing and photocopying facilities. Our perceived performance in giving access to the latter falls well short of the scores for all other local questions. Criticism of the cost and availability of photocopying and printing is commonplace throughout HE libraries but, nevertheless, this is an area where we will seek to improve our performance as resources permit.

The question about the provision of information skills training was the only one in the whole survey that delivered a response in which the perceived score was actually higher than the desired one. It could be inferred from this that many of our users believe that they already know as much (if not more) about information literacy as they need for learning or research purposes. However, such a view conflicts with that of key practitioners in this Library and elsewhere. They can point to a wealth of anecdotal and other evidence to suggest that the real issue is that users are simply unaware of range of skills now needed to locate and use high quality information effectively. They have been seduced by Google (and the like) into believing that finding such information is always going to be easy. It is incumbent upon the Library to continue to challenge such complacency whilst at the same time ensuring that all the elements of its IST programme remain focussed and relevant.

Comparison with SCONUL results

The following UK academic libraries were also members of the 2004 SCONUL cohort: Anglia Polytechnic University; Brunel; Glasgow; South Bank; Napier; Queen Margaret College; Sheffield; Trinity College; Manchester; University College Worcester; East London; Strathclyde; Westminster and York.

This is the radar chart plotted for all responses obtained by SCONUL in 2004 (approx 16,000):



It is immediately apparent from this chart that other libraries had red areas, namely where perceived performance was less than the minimum level that users would accept. This was particularly in response to questions about the Library as place and about information control. Red did not appear anywhere on the Loughborough chart indicating that we are doing better than our comparator group in these areas. Also, the areas of yellow (where perceived was less than desired) were generally more extensive than on the Loughborough chart. Again, this would appear to show that although not achieving the ideal standard our users desire, we have come closer to it than most of the other libraries that took part in the survey.

Though such comparisons appear very positive, there is a limit to how far we can extrapolate the data. It must be considered that most of the other SCONUL participants surveyed their whole user population rather than just a sample as Loughborough did. This may have had an impact on the results obtained. Also, it would probably be more instructive if we could compare our results against individual (and similar) libraries rather than against the aggregate responses obtained for the whole cohort. Whilst such data is available for 2004 participants, members of LibQUAL are specifically asked not to use other libraries' data in any way that would compromise and harm the reputation of other institutions, for example by inclusion in reports.

It is also worth mentioning that when the SCONUL results for 2004 were compared to the previous year, the overall results obtained were significantly worse especially for all dimensions, particularly Library as place. As a number of institution chose to undertake the survey in both 2003 and 2004, this would appear to show that, across the sector, service provision has deteriorated and / or user expectations have risen. Perhaps Loughborough should consider repeating the survey in the years to come to see if a similar pattern emerges here.

Analysis of free text comments

A third of Loughborough respondents provided free text comments when completing the survey. A brief analysis revealed the following types of comment and the number of times they appeared:

Comments:	
Positive feedback about staff and the service	46
The need for more printed resources	21
The need for more e-resources or better access to these	15
Longer opening times (both in term and vacation)	12
Noise (and the use of mobile phones in the Library)	10
Photocopying and printing facilities	10
Comments about completing the survey	10
More study carrels and group study facilities	8
Loan periods unhelpful	5
More PCs	4
Negative comments about Library staff	3
Library website hard to navigate	2
Cost of inter library loans	2
Temperature in the Library	1
Need to refurbish the building	1
Too many online resources!	1

This list is not exhaustive and it should be remembered that a number of respondents commented on more than one aspect of the service. It was very pleasing to see the number of positive responses given about the service and its staff. A number of these related to the excellent customer service that

users had received from named members of staff. At least 5 individuals were named, some more than once. Such comments greatly outnumbered the small number of negative comments made about Library staff, though their appearance should help to guard against any undue complacency.

The areas of the service where users most want to see improvements closely mirrors the findings of previous surveys particularly with regard to the need for more print and electronic resources. The Library (with the help of Users' Committee) will continue, as always, to lobby the University on this issue. We are also seeking to address the other comments made, for example about the need for better opening hours; more private and group study facilities; less noise and more PCs. Many of these issues feature in the recommendations at the end of this report and it is pleasing to note that we have already begun to address a number of these during the course of summer 2004.

Conclusion

LibQUAL represented a new departure for the Library. It was the first time we had used an "off the shelf" survey that was disseminated solely by electronic means. In general, the online form worked reasonably well and generated few technical problems though we did receive some feedback to suggest that it was both too complicated and repetitive. However the respondents still managed to complete the form in around 10 minutes on average.

One of the supposed advantages of using LibQUAL was that it would be simpler and less time consuming for Library staff. However, the amount of time and effort required to provide accurate demographic information on the University (to ensure that the data obtained was representative), to set up an ID to distribute the messages and to respond to queries about the survey, should not be underestimated. It was not really an easy option though it should be recognised that the training, technical support and the in-depth analysis of the results provided by LibQUAL was of a high standard. Overall participation in LibQUAL was a positive experience for Loughborough. It reassured us that our service bears favourable comparison with that delivered by a range of other university libraries whilst still offering us some pointers as to areas that can be improved.

Recommendations

Promote the availability of full-text electronic resources and the ways in which these can be easily accessed. (e.g. via SFX)

Continue to ensure that all Library staff receive mandatory training in customer care.

Seek to improve awareness of the quiet and silent study areas in the Library.

Maximise the availability of individual study carrels for all users.

Ensure that we are deploying an optimal level of resource to information skills training.

Update the photocopying and printing facilities available in the Library and, where feasible, reduce the costs of these services.

As space becomes available, increase the number of rooms available for both group study and training purposes.

Seek resources to permit the Library to open longer during term time.

Consider participating in the LibQUAL survey in the future in order to enable the performance of the service to be compared over time.

PR Sept 2004

Appendix One List of LibQUAL questions 2004

On Affect of Service

- AS-1 Library staff who instill confidence in users
- AS-2 Giving users individual attention
- AS-3 Library staff who are consistently courteous
- AS-4 Readiness to respond to users' enquiries
- AS-5 Library staff who have the knowledge to answer user questions
- AS-6 Library staff who deal with users in a caring fashion
- AS-7 Library staff who understand the needs of their users
- AS-8 Willingness to help users
- AS-9 Dependability in handling users' service problems

On Information Control

- IC-1 Making electronic resources accessible from my home or office
- IC-2 A library Web site enabling me to locate information on my own
- IC-3 The printed library materials I need for my work
- IC-4 The electronic information resources I need
- IC-5 Modern equipment that lets me easily access needed information
- IC-6 Easy-to-use access tools that allow me to find things on my own
- IC-7 Making information easily accessible for independent use
- IC-8 Print and/or electronic journal collections I require for my work

On Library as Place

- LP-1 Library space that inspires study and learning
- LP-2 Quiet space for individual work
- LP-3 A comfortable and inviting location
- LP-4 A haven for study, learning, or research
- LP-5 Space for group learning and group study

Local Questions

1. Access to photocopying and printing facilities
2. Provision of information skills training
3. Helpfulness in dealing with users' IT problems
4. Efficient interlibrary loan / document delivery
5. Convenient service hours

General satisfaction questions

1. In general, I am satisfied with the way in which I am treated at the library.
2. In general, I am satisfied with library support for my learning, research, and/or teaching needs.
3. How would you rate the overall quality of the service provided by the library?