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## Review

# Assessing student support services quality in Open and Distance Learning (ODL): a learner perspective at Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) - Manicaland Region

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Monitoring and assessing quality of student support services in Open and distance learning (ODL) is increasingly becoming critical for ODL systems seeking to reach out to more students and maintain high levels of student retention. While many (ODL) systems in the developed world have methods of assessing student service quality in their respective environments, the (ODL) context in the developing world is facing constraints in defining and determining quality of learner support services that satisfy their students. With the proliferation of many 'for-profit' (ODL) providers reaching out to potential students in the third world, students as customers now have options to choose which institutions to study with. It is therefore critical for third world (ODL) systems particularly in the Sub-Saharan Africa to effectively monitor and evaluate the quality of student services in the light of environmental complexity and high student expectations. This paper sought to find out how students' satisfaction and expectations on service quality can be applied as constructs in assessing quality of student services at the Zimbabwe Open University -Manicaland Region. A customer focused situational analysis of service quality in tutorial, ICT, library and accounts and administrative service departments was done using a case study methodology that used focus group discussions, 'customer feedback' questionnaires and interviews as main data collection instruments. Data was collected from students who came for services at the regional centre during the semester. The study was able to determine students' levels of satisfaction and expectations on the quality of service delivery. The study recommends use of customer focused strategies in assessing student service quality in (ODL). These strategies must be applied in natural settings that allow students to express their sincere satisfaction and expectations during the service delivery process.

**Keywords:** Student support service; service quality

## INTRODUCTION

Student support services in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) are a range of services provided to complement

learning materials (Bradly2004). The services are considered as major offerings uniform for all learners(Simpson 2004).Alternatively, the services are viewed as support offered beyond provision of study materials to assist (ODL) students progress in their

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studies (Yawan and Linshu 2008). Specifically the services include inquiries, admissions, registration, orientation, tutorials, counseling, assessment, library, accounts and stores (Axelson 2007; SADE 2008). Wheeler (2008) claims that student support services provide interface between teaching activities and learning behaviors. Tait (2004) categorizes the services into cognitive, affective and systematic domains. Cognitive services facilitate learning by mediating study materials for example, face to face tutorials. Affective support services facilitate creation of supportive learning environments to increase student commitment for example ICTs and library services. Systematic support services are administrative and information management systems that make (ODL) more user friendly Tait (ibid).

Support services play a key role in the (ODL) context (Rumble and Latchem 2004). Studies on service quality conducted in Australia, New Zealand and India show that the reputation, expansion and survival of (ODL) systems hinge on the quality of services they deliver to students (Harran 2004). Success of (ODL) systems now hinges on students as customers with options to choose universities that offer quality services (Yavas 2004). Studies by Zeshan et al (2010) established that poor performance by some (ODL) systems is caused by not knowing what their customers want.

Quality is an elusive concept. It emerges from industry where it is viewed as fitness for use, predictable degree of conformity and conformance to requirements. (Deming 1982, Crosby 1984, Juran 1992). It can be conceptualized in dimensions for example, exceptional perfection, value for money or as transformation (Mersha 2004; Boshoff (2007). Attempts to add the service quality dimension has been done by viewing quality as characteristics that govern the functions, content and reliability of services offered. However, Hopen et al (2007) argue that this is a narrow service provider perspective. Barnabas (2007) is of the view that conceptualizing quality in terms of particular aspects of education is problematic because all elements associated with educational quality are interrelated. It seems there some challenges in coming up with a universally agreed definition of service quality in education.

Some studies have focused on relationships between service quality and learning achievement. Asker's (2005) study concluded that (ODL) learners achieve better when support services satisfy their individual needs and bring them closer to university functionaries. Moor (2003); Simpson (2002); York (2004) found out that providing effective support services to (ODL) students has positive effect on student persistence and retention. Mills (2003); McLaughlin (2006) concluded that continuous improvement in support services assist learners to persist in their studies. (Lentell (2003); Tait (2004); Rumble

(2005) concluded that (ODL) students as customers of teaching and learning require consumer focused services. While there seem to be a positive correlation between improvement of support services quality and effective (ODL), it seems there is need for empirical methods of monitoring and assessing and determining quality of services that satisfy students within their contexts.

Defining ,monitoring and assessing service quality in education appears to be a problematic area in (ODL) (Houston 2008; Koslowski 2008; Hopen et al 2012;). For example, quality of services cannot have a single measure of quality as of products in industry because outcomes of the service encounter are complex, varied and value driven (UNICEF2000). It is also problematic to agree on a universal mechanism of assessing service quality in (ODL) because stakeholders and students as primary customers may have conflicting perceptions (Hopen 2012). Attempts to assess service quality from a quality management perspective has been criticized on the grounds that quality management assessment tools pay little attention to pedagogical issues (Harvey 2005; Houston 2008; Koslowski 2008; Law 2010). Service quality assessment in the learning enhancement paradigm as viewed by Houston (2008) focuses on change behaviors among learners. This service quality enhancement is concerned with transformation of the life experiences of students (Houston ibid). However research needs to empirically determine how service quality assessment driven by this enhancement philosophy can make students owners and participants in service delivery assessment (Houston (2008; Koslowski 2008).

The role of stakeholders in service quality assessment is characterized by lack of consensus. Gronroos (1984) used a technical dimension of service quality to assess what the customers gain from the services. Estalani (1985) developed a functional dimension to assess the manner in which the service is delivered to the customer. Hurly (1998) developed a corporate image strategy to assess technical, artistic and marketing services of the organization. However, Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons (2008) argues that service quality ought to be assessed by monitoring customer satisfaction levels during the service encounter. Reynose and Moores (2009) on the other hand argue that customer satisfaction is characterized by intangible factors and is difficult to measure because it extends beyond the immediate encounter with an impact on a person's future quality of life. In the same vein, York (2009) argues that it is technically challenging to effectively measure the level of student's satisfaction or dissatisfaction by each contact with the university's functionaries.

There is lack of consensus with regards to methods used to assess service quality from a customer

perspective. Marayandas (2004) measured service quality as perceived performance from the providers' perspective using statistical techniques. Studies by Hurley (1998); Duffy (2002) and Miller et al (2006) measured service quality from a customer perspective by comparing gaps between customer expectations and actual delivery performance. However, O'Neil and Palmer (2006) challenges the appropriateness of the later approach to service quality arguing that it is a narrow perspective. O'Neil and Palmer (ibid) propose a model that measures service quality from various perspectives such as; content (analyzing if established procedures are being followed), structure (analyzing appropriateness of facilities), outcome (analyzing changes effected by services), and impact (analyzing long term effects of services). However the proposed model seem to predetermine what service quality ought to entail from a provider's perspective disregarding the customer dimension (Reynose and Mores 2009; Miller 2006; Harvey 2008). The SERVQUAL instrument has been widely used in surveying customer satisfaction with service delivered due to its strength in capturing multiple dimensions such as reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and tangibles (Duffy 2002; Miller 2006; Harvey 2008) Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons (2008). However, Ott (2008) observes its weakness of using predetermined scales. It seems there is need for further research on instruments that appropriately engage stakeholders in service quality assessment in (ODL).

There is a dilemma in conceptualizing service quality in the light of customer satisfaction. Carrillatt (2009; Moral et al 2011) are of the view that service quality and customer satisfaction share common elements of customer perceptions and expectations. However there is a problem on which of the two constructs must be considered first. For example, Chia et al (2008) argue that service quality leads to customer satisfaction while Marginalia et al (2008) claim that service quality is an outcome of the service encounter and therefore is related to prior customer expectations. Cronin et al (2000); Yava et al (2004) and Farrell (2008) perceive service quality as an antecedent to customer satisfaction while Ferrell (2006) and Al-alack (2009) consider customer satisfaction as an antecedent to service quality. However, a study by Zeitham et al (2008), consider customer satisfaction as a broader concept that include service quality. This leaves a gap on how service quality and customer satisfaction should be treated when assessing service quality in (ODL).

It is against this background of controversy surrounding the service quality phenomenon, lack of consensus in determining appropriate methods of measurement and weaknesses of the commonly used SERVQUAL instruments that this research seeks to find out how

service quality in student support service systems can be assessed using students' satisfaction and perceptions of quality during the service encounter.

### **Statement of the problem**

With the proliferation of 'for profit' national and transnational (ODL) providers, enhancing services quality is at the heart of not only Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), but all (ODL) organizations competing to become world class (Tait 2000; Yawan and Linshu 2003; Yavas 2004; Mills 2008). (ZOU)'s mission of continuous quality improvement benchmarked to ISO/IEC 9001:2008 standard requires that it defines, document and fulfill all stakeholders' requirements (ZOU Quality Policy 2012). The National Quality Assurance Body's customer focus strategy of enhancing service quality through student input and participation in programme processes calls for rigorous research in student participation in service quality enhancement. As echoed by Angel et al (2008), monitoring, measuring and evaluating service quality have become critical areas that generate investments returns in (ODL). While methodologies of service quality assessment are characterized by lack of consensus, little research, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa and Zimbabwe in particular seem to be going on. This research sought to find out how staff courtesy, quality of inquiries, administrative, accounts, library, ICT, tutorials and assignment management services can be assessed using students' satisfaction and expectations as constructs.

The study sought to answer the question:

How can student support service quality be assessed using students' expectations and satisfaction with the service encounter at the Zimbabwe Open University?

### **Objectives of the study**

1. To assess students' levels of satisfaction with inquiries, administrative, accounts, library, ICT, tutorials and assignment management services delivery at Zimbabwe Open University
2. To explore students' expectations in quality of inquiries, administrative, accounts, library, ICT, tutorials, and assignment management services at the Zimbabwe Open University

### **Sub-questions**

1. To what extent are students satisfied with the quality of inquiries, administrative, accounts, library, ICT, tutorials,

and assignment management services at the Zimbabwe Open University?

2. What are students' expectations of quality of inquiries, administrative, accounts, library, ICT, tutorials and assignment management services at the Zimbabwe Open University?

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Research design**

The research was a case study. According to Robson (1997) a case study is a detailed empirical investigation of the problem within its real life context using multiple sources of data. The case study adopted a situational analysis approach which is viewed by Borg and Gall(Eds) as a form of study where the problem is studied from the viewpoint of the subjects [students] in their natural settings and their views pulled together to provide an in depth perception that contributed to understanding the problem.

The case study used qualitative and quantitative methods. Quantitative methods made use of customer feedback questionnaires that enabled collection of detailed extensive data from students coming for services at the regional centre during the semester. Qualitative methods made use of focus group discussions and interviews of randomly selected students at each point of service delivery.

### **Research instruments**

#### **Focuss group discussions**

This was the first stage data collection instrument to solicit students' understanding of meaning of service quality and critical support services in (ODL).

#### **The questionnaire**

Customer feedback questionnaires were used to collect data from students coming for services at the regional campus during the semester. The questionnaire had closed questions for collection of quantitative ratings on students' satisfaction and open ended questions for exploring students' expectations. The open ended questions were so broad that they provided enough room for students to describe their expectations.

### **The interview**

The interview instrument was used to collect qualitative data from randomly selected students at points of service delivery. The interview schedule had open ended questions to collect extensive qualitative data on students' expectations. This data was triangulated with data from questionnaires.

### **Target population**

The target population was all students who came for services at the regional campus during the semester.

### **Data collection procedures**

A focused group discussion with 14 students was initially carried out to determine students' understanding of service quality and critical support services in (ODL).Data from the discussions was used to construct questionnaires and interview schedules. Each student who came to the regional campus during the semester was given a questionnaire to complete on leaving the campus after receiving service. Students put completed questionnaires into a locked suggestion box placed at the main entrance. Researchers also visited points of service delivery to carryout short interviews with randomly selected students after a service encounter.

### **Data analysis procederes**

Descriptive statistical analysis was used to interpret quantitative data. Descriptive analysis techniques enabled data to be organized in tables and summaries that used frequencies and percentages. Qualitative data were presented in summaries of students' views.

### **Data presentation and analysis**

#### **1. Bio data for students**

##### **1.1. Demographic characteristics**

The focus group consisted of 7 male and 7 female students. There were 650 responses to the survey. The majority of the responses 410(63.1%) were male while 223(34.3%) were female. A large majority 446(68.6%)

were in the (35-40) years age range. The majority 502(77.2%) of the students were married. Many students 320(49.2%) resided outside the city where the Regional Campus is situated. A large majority 480(73.8%) lived in rural and farming areas. This shows that that the majority of the students who came for support services at the regional centre were mature and married adults staying in rural and farming areas.

## **1.2. Results of the focus group discussion**

Students identified critical support services as Cognitive (tutorials; modules; assignment processing), Affective (library; ICT), Systematic (administrative; enquiries; accounts), Staff courtesy (approachability; responsiveness) and tangibles (Condition of physical surroundings and equipment)

## **2. Students' satisfaction and expectations on service quality**

### **2.1. Students' satisfaction with ZOU staff's responsiveness**

Out of the 650 responses, the majority 450(69%) said ZOU staff was willing to assist students. 422(65%) said the staff provided prompt service, while 402(62%) said the service was reliable.

#### **2.1.2. Students' expectations on courtesy from university staff**

Students expressed the following expectations. [We expect more individualized attention from university clerks.] University clerks are expected to be very sensitive to adult students' needs. [The University must provide clerks with cubicles for confidentiality]

### **2.2. Students' perceptions on service quality at the reception/enquiries offices**

The following comments were raised by students: [Good service was provided.][Keep up the good standard.][A very warm reception has been provided unlike in the past.][The reception from the gate to the offices was good.][So far so good keep it up.][Staff must maintain the good attitude.][Some improvements have been noted.][Courtesy by ZOU staff in handling clients has improved.][The staff must keep up the good work.]

### **2.3. Students' expectations on quality of administrative services**

Students raised the following expectations. [The university must advise all its students on publication of results, time tables, exam dates, through text messages.] The University must open its administrative offices on Saturdays, Sundays and during launch hours.] The university must offer registration, library, tutorials and assignment management at district centers.

#### **2.4.1. Students' satisfaction with accounts services quality**

Table 1 shows that a large majority of the students were satisfied with the efficiency of the accounting system. However the majority were concerned with the courtesy of accounts staff.

#### **2.4.2. Students' expectations on accounts service quality**

The following expectations were raised by students: [The University must put in place flexible payment systems user friendly to students from all socio-economic backgrounds.] [The university must suspend late registration and other miscellaneous fees to assist disadvantaged students] [Accounts office staff must improve courtesy when communicating with students on fees issues.]

#### **2.5.1. Students' satisfaction with library service quality**

Table 2 shows that the majority of the students were satisfied with book lending policies. However a large majority were concerned with the unavailability of books with current literature.

#### **2.5.2. Students' expectations on library service quality**

Students raised the following expectations: [The library must provide adequate copies of books on high demand to allow longer borrowing periods by students who stay out of town.] [The library must open during public holidays and Sundays] [The university must provide more photocopying and printing services in the library to assist students travelling from out of town].

**Table 1** Frequency of students' satisfaction levels with accounts service quality

Quality Dimension	Agree	Strongly agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Accounting procedures were executed as promised	105 (23.3%)	65 (10.1%)	23 (3.6%)	17 (2.6%)	645 (100%)
Accounting system was error free	560 (86.8%)	45 (7%)	21 (3.3%)	19 (2.9%)	645 (100%)
Physical facilities in the accounts department were convenient to students	44 (6.8%)	31 (4.8%)	366 (56.7%)	204 (31.6)	645 (100%)
Accounts staff were able to serve students in time	18 (2.8%)	56 (8.7%)	403 (62.5%)	168 (26%)	645 (100%)
Ques were dealt with promptly	126 (19.5%)	0 (0%)	50 (7.8%)	489 (75.8%)	645 (100%)
Accounts staff were able to communicate effectively with students	53 (8.2%)	0 (0%)	30 (4.7%)	562 (87.1%)	645 (100%)
Accounts staff were polite and respected students	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	5 (0.8%)	640 (99.2%)	645 (100%)
Caring and individualized attention was provided to students	29 (4.5%)	0 (0%)	216 (33.5%)	400 (62%)	645 (100%)
Accounts staff exhibited attention to detail	540 (83.7%)	105 (16.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	645 (100%)

**Table 2** Students' satisfaction levels with the library services quality

	Agree	Strongly agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Totals
Books with current literature were available	3 (1%)	7 (1%)	20 (3%)	600 (95%)	630 (100%)
Adequate volumes were available	28 (4%)	21 (3%)	15 (2%)	566 (90%)	630 (100%)
Latest additions of periodicals were available	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	630 (100%)	630 (100%)
Requests for new books were responded to in time	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	630 (100%)	630 (100%)
Library working hours were adequate	610 (97%)	20 (3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	630 (100%)
Studying facilities inside the library were convenient to users	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	630 (100%)	630 (100%)
Adequate electronic library services were offered	630 (100)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	630 (100%)
Adequate printing and photocopying services were available	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	630 (100%)	630 (100%)
Book lending policies were convenient to students	560 (89%)	70 (11%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	630 (100%)

**2.6.1. Frequency of students' levels of satisfaction with ICT services quality**

All responses 630(100%) expressed dissatisfaction with adequacy of computers. All responses 630(100%) were concerned that there were no software packages to facilitate studies in their specific programmes and in doing research.

**2.6.2. Students' expectations on ICT services quality**

The following expectations were raised by the students: [The University must provide more computers in the lab.][New students need orientation on how to use the internet.] [The University must provide more (ICT) staff to assist students on how to use the internet.][Teaching and learning materials (course outlines, exam and tutorial

**Table 3** Frequency of students' levels of satisfaction with tutorial service quality

Quality dimension	Agree	Strongly agree	disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Duration for face to face tutorials was adequate	540 (0%)	540 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (100%)	540 (100%)
Learning materials were obtained timely before commencement of face to face tutorials	200 (37%)	5 (1%)	305 (56%)	30 (6%)	540 (100%)
Handouts and extra learning materials were provided during face to face tutorials	26 (5%)	30 (6%)	104 (19%)	380 (70%)	540 (100%)
Tutors demonstrated high levels of commitment to duty	115 (21%)	265 (63%)	90 (17%)	70 (13%)	540 (100%)
Tutorials had opportunities for interactive sessions and group discussions	245 (45%)	120 (22%)	130 (24%)	45 (8%)	540 (100%)
There was in depth coverage of topics during tutorial sessions	25 (5%)	203 (38%)	300 (56%)	12 (2%)	540 (100%)
Tutors gave adequate feedback on marked assignments during tutorial sessions	10 (2%)	40 (7%)	320 (59%)	170 (31%)	540 (100%)

time tables must be made available on the internet.][The university must provide free printing services to benefit students who have no electricity or laptops to use soft copies at home].

### 2.8.1. Students' satisfaction with tutorial service quality

Table 2 shows that the majority of tutors were satisfied with high levels of commitment to duty demonstrated by tutors. However the majority were concerned that the duration of face to face tutorials were not adequate.

### 2.8.2. Students' expectations on quality of tutorial services

The following expectations were raised: [Tutorials must have scheduled sessions for developing communication skills to write quality assignments.][Tutorial sessions must have opportunities for development of examination skills][Tutorial sessions must provide opportunities for practical activities or field work.][Provision of handouts and additional reference material must be compulsory to all tutors.][The University must increase hours for tutorials.]

### 2.9. Students' expectations on assignment management

The following expectations were raised by students: [Assignment markers must explain their expectations on assignment presentation before students write, it's not fair to be penalized over something that has not been

explained.][Assignments in some courses are taking longer marking periods.][Students in certain programmes expect supplementary reading materials before assignments are written.][The University must provide assignment covers for in class tests so that markers can write comprehensive feedbacks.]

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the findings from this service quality assessment, the study recommends that students' perspectives of service quality be viewed as tools for quality enhancement in (ODL).This assessment recommends regular staff training on courtesy issues. Service facilities at the University's district centers need upgrading to world class standards to benefit students residing in rural backgrounds. Continuous improvement of library facilities such as book stocks, photocopying, printing services, ICT software packages that improve support service delivery must be prioritized. Provision of practical activities where necessary together with courses on communication skills for first year students must be a priority. The study recommends further research in quality assessment of specific service areas.

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