

Comparing Students' Expectations with the Students' Perceptions of Service Quality Provided in Open and Distance Learning Institutions in Zimbabwe's Mashonaland East Region

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ABSTRACT

This quantitative survey was conducted to compare students' service expectations against perceptions of level of satisfaction of the services delivered in an open and distance learning (ODL) institution like the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). The adjusted SERVQUAL scale as conceived by [22] was adopted to determine the gap and direction of the service quality delivered at ZOU. The study focused on the expectations and perceptions of ODL students in Mashonaland East Region, which has an enrollment of 360 active students. A random sample of 86 (22%) of the total enrollment responded to the instrument on the last tutorial of 2014. The research findings indicated that ODL institutions need to pay attention to all the dimensions of service quality since there is a negative gap in all the dimensions. ODL institutions should obtain information on the best interests and needs of its students and focus on satisfying them [Empathy]. ODL materials should be well bound and up to date [Tangibility], students should feel safe in conducting business with staff and academics [Security], excellent ODL institutions keep up to date students' records [Reliability], and academics and staff should have the knowledge to answer students' questions [Security]. While there is a gap between performance and expectation, statistically, students are satisfied with the overall performance of the institution based on the correlation coefficient [0.99] calculated. The research recommends that the institution invest in training academic staff on customer care. The institution should also invest in finding out customer needs and focus on satisfying the identified needs. The institution should adhere to the procedures for record generation and keeping in line with the university standards. The university should further invest in modules and campus aesthetics as these have a bearing on enrollment and quality of material learnt.

Keywords: Service quality, service expectation, service perception, open and distance learning institution

INTRODUCTION

The perception that ODL qualification has always been trailing conventional systems makes it imperative for ODL institutions to consider issues of service delivery, hence service quality cannot be overemphasized. Providing high service quality should be the preoccupation of ODL institutions to be as competitive as the conventional systems more so, that the conventional systems are also combining with ODL programmes in the form of block release. As such, the construct of service quality has generated interest in services research [3].

Service quality is an approach to manage business processes in order to ensure full satisfaction of the customer to increase competitiveness and effectiveness of the industry [23]. [1], [20] and [25] underscore the importance of service quality to a higher education institution as unlocking profitability, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, customer retention, customer attraction and positive word of mouth. [22] and [26] weighed in by pointing out that service quality is a key strategy for success and survival for service institutions. The influence of service quality on the outlined outcomes has given impetus to higher education institutions to consider measurement of service quality an area of great interest [1].

While there is no contest on the need to measure service quality, the methodology has not been linear. The SERVQUAL scale [22] though, has been widely used [8] and [24]. The SERVQUAL scale

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explains quality from a student’s point of view. Quality is what the students say it is. The students have needs and expectations that must be met. [11] Emphasizes the importance of customer focus by pointing out that HEIs should identify and strive to exceed students’ expectations and needs.

The SERVQUAL scale thus explains quality of services provided from the students’ perspective. In ZOU, a number of studies on the quality of services provided have been made. [9] and [27] studied on service delivery in ZOU. However, their studies explored service delivery from the management’s perspective in the sense that they identified factors that contributed to satisfaction. This study focuses on service quality as perceived by the student. Students’ expectations and their perceptions of the performance are measured.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

ODL institutions in Zimbabwe need to be customer focused in providing services to students. Are ODL institutions in Zimbabwe aware of students’ expectations for comparison with the students’ perceptions of service provided in order to take corrective action?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The current study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- What are the influential attributes to student customer satisfaction in ODL institutions in Zimbabwe?
- What is the service quality gaps in existence between students expectations and service delivered in ODL institutions in Zimbabwe?
- Which strategies can ODL institutions in Zimbabwe adopt improve on service quality to their customers?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Service quality is a combination of two constructs, service and quality. An attempt to briefly unpack the constructs in the context of this research is made.

Service in Open and Distance Learning

[27] Define a service as an “act of performance offered by one part to another.” [18] on the other hand defines service as an economic activity, which creates value and benefits to the client. From the two definitions, service can be defined as an intangible way of creating value for the client. Services are assessed in conjunction with other complimentary activities that facilitate provision and at the end of its production. Education as a service is assessed in conjunction with the environment, equipment and the provider. This brings out the characteristics that differentiate services from goods. In ODL the quality of a tutorial is assessed in conjunction with the tutor presentation and behaviour, module, educational technology, environment amongst other variables. This is mainly due to the nature of services, which are inseparability between the supplier and the service, intangibility of the service, client participation in the production and simultaneous production and consumption [13] in [11]. [10] notes that, “in service management, it is important to understand how clients assess the quality of the service provided, that is, how quality is perceived by the client.” Such knowledge is important in adjusting all the variables that have a bearing on the assessment of the service by the client.

Quality Management

ODL institutions cannot afford to provide education in a manner it deems right, lest its enrollment declines. Every effort is made to satisfy customer (student) needs. [4] asserts that, “quality is generally considered an attribute in consumer choices.” To that end, if ODL institutions do not respond to the quality concerns of students, they end up as least ranked on consumer choices. [11] concurs by stating that, “quality in services provides a competitive factor for continued consumption, especially where intangibility relations are tightened between quality and the services.”

The quality of a service can only be assessed after consumption [10]. This creates a dilemma where adjustments to the quality cannot be made as consumption has already taken place. The level of

perceived satisfaction facilitates rating of the service, which is also indicative of the perceived gap between expectation and performance [11].

Service Quality in Open and Distance Learning

[16] Define service quality as, “a measure of how well the service level delivered matches customer’s expectations.” On the other hand, [22] argue that service quality is a result of some abstract comparison of a consumer’s general expectations with the actual performance. [19] contend that service quality can be measured by how much the service provided to consumers exceeds their expectations. Service quality can be defined as the value attached to a service by a consumer, guided by expectation of the consumer’s ideal. Reaching or better still surpassing the ideal leads to satisfaction.

[26] contend that the SERVQUAL is a utility tool to service organizations in their quest to determine their quality of service provision. According to [11], “SERVQUAL is the method that assesses client satisfaction as result of the difference between expectation and the performance obtained.” [14] is one of the earlier proponents of perceived service quality model, which proposes that the consumer compares their expectations with their perceptions of the service so received. The outcome of the evaluation process is the perceived quality service. The figure below shows the building blocks to both expectations and experiences.

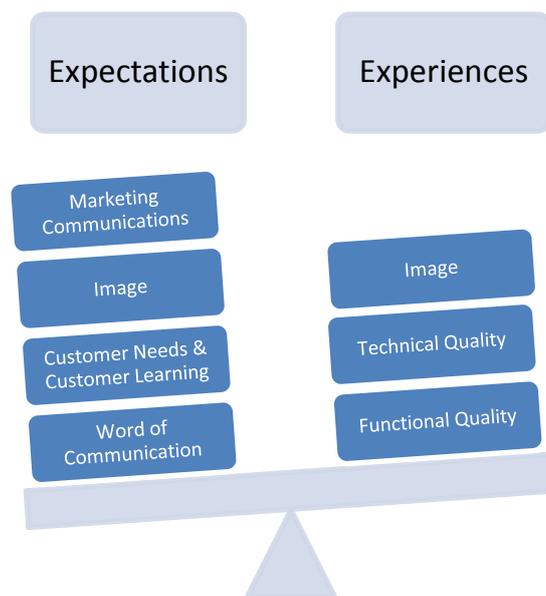


Fig1. Building blocks for expectations and experiences

Students’ Expectations of Service Quality

[17] define expectations as anticipation or prediction of future events. Students’ expectations can therefore be viewed as the subjective standard of a performance held by a student before a service is provided. Subjective it may be, but it will shape the perception of the performance experienced at point of delivery. Students’ expectations are influenced by marketing communications, images, customer needs and learning, word of mouth communications, past experiences, explicit and implicit promises made by the organization and technology among other factors [14]. Building too high expectations call for a match in performance. If expectations outweigh performance as demonstrated above, the experience is unfavorable.

Students’ Perception of Service Quality

Perceived service quality by students is the difference between what they feel the organization should be offering and their perceptions of the performance of the university [2]. Students thus rate the service they receive in relation to what they heard or the promises made by the organization. [14] contends that service quality exists in two states, that is technical and functional quality. In the provision of ODL there is technical quality involving knowledge (designing and producing modules), tangibles (modules) and technical solutions (administrative aspects). While these are fairly easy to

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measure, functional quality may not be that easy for it encompasses how the service is provided such as empathy of tutors during tutorials. The preoccupation of the organization is to manage the gap between expectations and perceptions [14]. Management of the image that is an emergent of the technical and functional quality is of essence as these are also the building blocks to the experiences.

[22] Developed the SERVQUAL model which pinpoints five gaps in the delivery of service that influence customers’ perceived service quality. The figure below outlines the gaps.

Gap 1: The discrepancy between management perceptions and students' expectations.

Gap 2: The discrepancy between management perceptions of students' expectations and service quality specifications

Gap 3: The discrepancy between service quality specifications of the university and the service actually delivered.

Gap 4: The discrepancy between actual service performed by the university and external communication about the service

Gap 5: The result of the other four gaps.

Fig2. Gap analysis of expectations and experiences

These gaps on their own can be barriers to service quality. Add to the list other factors as those identified by [7] who contend that poor training and limited resources can hinder effective service quality delivery. The SERVQUAL instrument uses five service quality dimensions which have been found to be carte blanche the boundaries of industries specificities.

[18] identified reliability, tangibility, responsibility, security, and empathy as five broad-based dimensions which can be used to assess service quality using the SERVQUAL scale.

Tangibility: [17] explain that this dimensions assesses the perceptions of students as a result of their encounter with the service provider’s surroundings, equipment, buildings, appearance of staff and faculty and the staff communication with students. [6] underscores the importance of surroundings such as campus aesthetics, by stating that “some institutions have developed a \$20 000 walk: a path through the campus that showcases to visitors and prospective students its most desirable features in a pristine setting.”

Reliability: [15] defines reliability as the ability to provide a pledged service in time, accurately and dependably. Dependability captures the element of consistency. [18] observes that consumers consider reliability as one of the most important dimension. Customers should not be surprised with the variations of the same service, only if it is an improvement.

Responsibility: [5] explain that this dimension captures how receptive the university and its employees are to its students. Employees are expected to be helpful and provide fast service to students.

Security: This dimension assesses the how informed, educated, competent and trustworthy the employees are [5]. Competency, courtesy and precision are the key dimensions involved. This dimension also includes reputation of the institution since it encompasses employability of graduates.

Empathy: [22] define empathy as the provision of caring, individualized attention to customers. [12] corroborates by stating that this dimension includes approachability of staff and faculty, convenient opening hours [more so in ODL] and keeping students informed about offerings and changes.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The quantitative paradigm was used. The survey design was employed to get the perceptions of respondents on the level of satisfaction of the services delivered. The SERVQUAL scale as conceived by [22] was adopted. The instrument was used to determine the gap and direction of the service quality delivered at ZOU. The instrument with adjustments is as shown below.

Table1. *The Adjusted SERVQUAL Scale*

Item		Expectation How important is this aspect to you?					Performance Level of satisfaction with this item.					
		1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	
Tangibility	1. ODL institutions should have modern equipment and facilities such as laboratories.											
	2. ODL physical installations, such as offices, grounds, should be visually attractive.											
	3. ODL academics and staff should be well-dressed and clean.											
	4. ODL printed materials associated with the services provided , such as journals, modules and printed should be good looking, well bound and up to date.											
Reliability	5. When an ODL institutions promises to do something in a certain time, they must do it.											
	6. Excellent ODL institutions demonstrate a genuine interest in solving their issues.											
	7. Excellent ODL institutions keep accurate students’ records											
	8. Excellent ODL do their job right first time and all the time.											
Responsibility	9. ODL staff should provide prompt services such as, registration, assignments, and modules.											
	10. ODL academics and staff should always be willing to help students.											
	11. ODL academics and staff should always be available to help students.											
	12. ODL academics and staff should be able to respond expeditiously to student queries and requests.											
Security	13. ODL academics and staff should inspire confidence in students.											
	14. Students should feel safe in conducting transactions with ODL staff and academics, eg. Submitting assignments, paying fees, registering a complaint.											
	15. Academics and staff should be polite.											
	16. ODL staff and academics should obtain adequate support from the institution to perform their tasks correctly, eg. Documented quality management system.											
	17. ODL academics and staff should have the knowledge needed to answer your questions.											
Empathy	18. It should not be expected for the companies to pay attention to the clients.											
	19. ODL academics and staff should give personalized attention to students											
	20. It is absurd to expect the employees to know client needs.											
	21. ODL institutions should obtain information on the best interests and needs of its students and focus on satisfying them.											
	22. ODL business hours should be convenient to all students eg. Library opening hours, lunch time, tutorial dates.											

POPULATION AND SAMPLE

The study focused on the expectations and perceptions of ODL students in Mashonaland East Region, which has an enrollment of 360 active students. A random sample of 86 ODL students was issued with the instrument on the last tutorial of 2014. Eighty (93%) of the students returned the instrument. The sample is 22% of the total enrollment which can be argued to be statistically representative enough.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The five major dimensions of service quality were examined. Findings for each component were recorded. Using raw scores for the individual questions the top five expectations in order were ; ODL institutions should obtain information on the best interests and needs of its students and focus on satisfying them [Empathy], ODL materials should be well bound and up to date [Tangibility], students should feel safe in conducting business with staff and academics [Security], excellent ODL institutions keep up to date students’ records [Reliability], and academics and staff should have the knowledge to answer students’ questions [Security]. None of these had satisfaction scored higher than expectation. Raw scores also indicated that none of the aspects of responsibility was of great concern to the respondents.

Table2. Averages for the various aspects and dimension average

Dimension	Aspect	Expectation Average	Performance[Satisfaction] Average	Gap [P-E]
Tangibility	1	3.625	3.0	-0.625
	2	3.75	3.125	-0.625
	3	4.375	3.375	-1.000
	4	4.75	3.375	-1.375
		16.5	12.875	-3.625
Reliability	5	3.875	2.875	-1.000
	6	4.375	3.0	-1.375
	7	4.625	3.5	-1.125
	8	4.25	3.75	-0.5
		17.125	13.125	-4.0
Responsibility	9	4.5	3.5	-1.000
	10	4.5	3.625	-0.875
	11	4.25	3.375	-0.875
	12	4.5	3.5	-1.000
		17.75	14.0	-3.75
Security	13	4.375	3.5	-0.875
	14	4.75	3.5	-1.25
	15	4.5	3.25	-1.25
	16	4.0	3.75	-0.25
	17	4.625	3.75	-0.875
		22.250	17.75	-4.5
Empathy	18	2.875	3.0	0.125
	19	3.375	3.125	-0.25
	20	3.875	3.125	-0.75
	21	4.875	3.125	-1.75
	22	4.0	2.75	-1.25
		19.0	15.120	-3.88

The negative average for the gaps shows that expectation is higher than performance thereby showing that there is need for improvement. The greater the value, the greater the gap.

For tangibility, the respondents showed that the first two aspects were not very important to them even though there were fairly performed. They showed that they care most on quality of modules. In ODL this is an important component for students’ learning as it replaces the lecturer. As such, the physical quality should be excellent as it should last the duration of studies of the student. It should also be up to date. However, respondents viewed this aspect as not being well done. In order to attract new students for perpetual existence, the institution should invest in aesthetics for both surroundings and other university tangibles in line with [6] strategy to lure new students. This dimension compared to the rest is the one with the smallest gap suggesting that respondents received greatest satisfaction on this dimension.

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Reliability was perceived to be of importance by the respondents. The finding concurs with [18] who noted that consumers consider reliability as one of the most important dimension. The average expectation was fourth out of the five dimensions. Respondents regarded the keeping of accurate records as the most crucial aspect of this dimension. This is especially important due to the nature of transactions students conduct with the university. For instance, students would expect their fees accounts to be accurate to avoid embarrassment when examinations come only to be told that the one has not paid up fees in error or to have a missing coursework mark. Such errors disadvantage students immensely. Respondents also noted that expression of genuine interest in solving their issues is very essential. However, they rated the same as the worst two in this dimension. All in all, the perceived service provision for this dimension was rated fourth out of the five dimensions. The discrepancies show that the institution needs to invest in improving on the systems and work processes and procedure so that excellence is achieved first time, in order to maintain a satisfied clientele.

Responsibility was also high on students’ expectations (Average 17.75). If one aspect with the least expectation is removed from security and empathy so that they also have four aspects measured then, responsibility would be second in terms of high expectation. They rated it as being performed better than reliability. The gap is the second smallest, which may mean that this dimension is only being second to tangibility. Students were generally appreciative of the efforts of academics and staff willingness and availability to help students. Respondents indicated that the registration process and responsiveness of academics should be prompt (each with a gap of -1). The institution should look at how the registration process can be improved and also academics improve on assignment turnaround time.

Security proved to be a big issue with respondents’ average expectation of 22.25. They indicated that safety must be guaranteed when conducting transactions especially submitting assignments, which was not being performed well too with a gap of -1.25. They also indicated that staff should be able to address students questions knowledgeably. This finding concurs with Bateson and Hoffman (2001) security provides peace to clients if they are dealing with informed, educated and trustworthy the employees. Respondents indicated that security was the worst performed dimension as it had the largest average gap -4.5. Staff members should generally be polite when dealing with students.

Empathy had one aspect with the least expectation by respondents. They least expected staff to pay attention to the clients. However, this is the only aspect which had a positive value of 0.125 showing that respondents expectation was more than satisfied by the service they received in that respect. The gains made in that aspect were hard done by the wide gaps recorded on the last two aspects on obtaining information on the students’ needs and interests and satisfaction of the same and flexible operating hours. These aspects had large gaps.

While the gaps just indicated the state of satisfaction these did not indicate to what extent the students were satisfied. The correlation coefficient was used to determine if any level of satisfaction had been achieved. The five dimensions’ sum of raw scores for both expectation and performance were computed separately and the correlation coefficient calculated. The correlation coefficient for the data is 0.99 indicating that there is a strong positive association between expectation and performance.

CONCLUSIONS

From the research findings it can be concluded that ODL institutions need to pay attention to all the dimensions of service quality since there is a negative gap in all the dimensions. ODL institutions should obtain information on the best interests and needs of its students and focus on satisfying them [Empathy]. ODL materials should be well bound and up to date [Tangibility], students should feel safe in conducting business with staff and academics [Security], excellent ODL institutions keep up to date students’ records [Reliability], and academics and staff should have the knowledge to answer students’ questions [Security]. While there is a gap between performance and expectation, there is good reason to believe students are on the whole satisfied with the overall performance of the institution based on the correlation coefficient [0.99] calculated.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The institution should invest in training academic staff on customer care.

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- The institution should invest in finding out customer needs and focus on satisfying the identified needs.
- There should adhere to the procedure for record generation and keeping in line with the university standards.
- The university should further invest in modules and campus aesthetics as these have a bearing on enrollment and quality of material learnt.

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