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RESEARCH ARTICLE

RANKING SERVICE QUALITY DIMENSIONS IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING,  
CASE OF THE ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

The study sought to explore how students studying through Open and Distance Learning rank the various service quality dimensions. The study focused on the information gap on the ranking of students' expectations of service quality dimensions in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Zimbabwe. The accurate understanding of how students rank service quality dimensions is important in the crafting of service strategies by ODL administrators. The servqual model of calculating service quality was used as the main theoretical concept. The study employed a qualitative research methodology. Data were gathered through a questionnaire survey and focus group discussions. The study concluded that ODL learners have a unique ranking of service quality dimensions where Assurance is the most important dimension, followed by Reliability, Empathy, Responsiveness, and Tangibility respectively. The study recommends that ODL universities should aim to maximize students' satisfaction through prioritizing the most important dimensions.

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INTRODUCTION

Consumers of products and services in different sectors have a particular way of ranking the different aspects of the product or service delivery process depending on their needs, life styles, motivations and other factors. A study by Blesis, Ivkov-Dzigurski *et al.* (2011) however revealed that business managers in general were not informed of their clients' level of service expectations in the different service quality dimensions hence the managers drafted inappropriate service strategies. A clear understanding of customers (learners') ranking of the service quality dimensions in open and distance learning is therefore important as it has an implication on the appropriateness of service quality strategies. Taking into account the aforementioned this study therefore explored the manner in which ODL students at the Zimbabwe Open University ranked the different service quality dimensions.

Several methods of measuring and ranking customers' service quality expectations and perceptions in service dimensions have therefore been suggested. Nitin *et al.* (2005) evaluated 19 leading models of quality with an endeavor to developing one universally acceptable and applicable model. The research, however, did not lead to one universal model for all business sectors. The gaps model of service quality propounded by Parasuraman *et al.* (1988) has been adopted and used widely with notable success in measuring service quality and ranking service quality dimensions in various business sectors.

In the ODL sector in Zimbabwe, several studies have been carried out on service quality by Chakuchichi (2012), Mpofo (2012), Ndudzo (2014). These studies helped profile the ODL learners but none clearly explored the ranking of service quality dimensions by ODL learners.

Statement of the problem

The setting of appropriate service quality standards in the ODL University depends on management understanding of student needs, service quality expectations and ranking of service quality dimensions. Though studies have been carried out profiling the ODL, study has been carried out in Zimbabwe exploring how students rank service quality dimensions.

Purpose of the study

The study seeks assess how students rank service quality dimensions in the order of importance according to the perspective of the ODL learners. The study will help to inform ODL strategists on the areas regarded as more important by ODL learners so that resources can be distributed more efficiently to areas that impact more on service quality.

Objectives of the study

The study was guided by the following objectives;

- To establish the ranking of service quality dimensions by ODL learners
- To develop an information based way of maximizing service quality under conditions of resource constraints

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## Research Questions

- What is the service quality dimensions ranking order of ODL learners?
- What is the implication of the service quality dimensions ranking order on service quality strategy?

## Justification of the study

The study adds useful insights into the area of service quality strategy for Open and Distance Learning institutions. The knowledge is important for the Zimbabwe Open University and other ODL institutions in the development of service quality. The information from the study could therefore be used in upgrading the University's student services. The Zimbabwe Open University and other ODL institutions experiencing harsh economic environments have a pressing need to rationalize their service processes in line with the limited budgetary support. Though the service process should be rationalized, it should not be at the expense of effective service delivery hence the need to know the most important areas of the service process from the point of view of ODL learners.

## Literature Review

### The concept of Service Quality

Quality is generally used to describe the usability of a product or service for meeting specific needs at a certain place and time in the process of exchange (Injac, 1998). Gronross (2000), Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) and Johnston (1995) viewed service quality in the context of the gap between customer expectations and perceptions. High service quality is when customer perceptions exceed expectations.

### The Gaps model of service quality

Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988) developed the Gap model of service quality in an endeavor to identify and close service quality gap in organisations. The model sought to analyse organizational processes and relationships which may be sources of service quality gaps. This model primarily demonstrates the process of the emergence of service quality and the service quality gap (Ljubojevis, 2004). The basic service quality gap, the customer gap in this model emerges as the difference between customer expectations of service quality and the customers' perceptions of service delivery. The customer gap is a result of the four gaps in the service process which is a result of discrepancies and imperfections in service design and delivery phases.

Five gaps were identified by Parasuraman *et al.* (1985):

**Gap 1** - The gap between customer expectations and management's perceptions of those expectations

**Gap 2** - The gap between management's perception of what the customer want and specifications of service quality

**Gap 3** - The gap between service quality specifications (quality, standards, forms of delivery) and the actual delivery of the service

**Gap 4** - The gap between service delivery and what the company promises to the customer through external communication.

**Gap 5** - Represents difference between customers' expectations regarding the service and their perception about the specific service. The last gap is the result of all the four gaps above.

## The Servqual Model

Parasuraman *et al.* (1985, 1988, 1991, 1991a, 1994) after studies in the banking, telecommunications, insurance, maintenance and other service industries developed the Servqual model for measuring service quality. The servqual model evaluates customer expectations and perceptions. This study however is limited to customer expectations. The original Servqual model was based on ten dimensions; the dimensions were later compressed to five which are; Tangibles, Assurance, Empathy, Reliability and Responsiveness (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988).

**Tangibles** - Appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials;

**Reliability** - Ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately;

**Responsiveness** - Willingness to help customers and provide prompt service;

**Assurance** - Knowledge, courtesy and trustworthiness of the personnel;

**Empathy** - Making the effort to know customers and their needs.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed the qualitative research methodology. A case study research design was used where Zimbabwe Open University was the case or entity under investigation. The target population was the Zimbabwe Open University students. Data were gathered through a combination of techniques which included a questionnaire survey, focus group discussions, observation and document survey. Credibility of the study was therefore enhanced through the triangulation of data collection techniques. A purposive sampling technique was utilized to select respondents. A sample of 330 students from the University's ten Regional Centres was selected for the questionnaire survey. Five students per Region were selected for the focus group discussions. Data presentation was in the form of narratives focusing on the thoughts, attitudes and perceptions of ODL learners. The study was carried out within the legal framework and requirements of the laws of Zimbabwe. The researchers took extra care in maintaining independent relationships with respondents so as to uphold the credibility and independence of the research.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data from the questionnaire survey revealed that ODL learners prioritised assurance more than any other dimension with an expected Level of service delivery of [8.8/10]. Findings from focus group discussions corroborated with data from the questionnaire survey. Assurance variable such as the chances

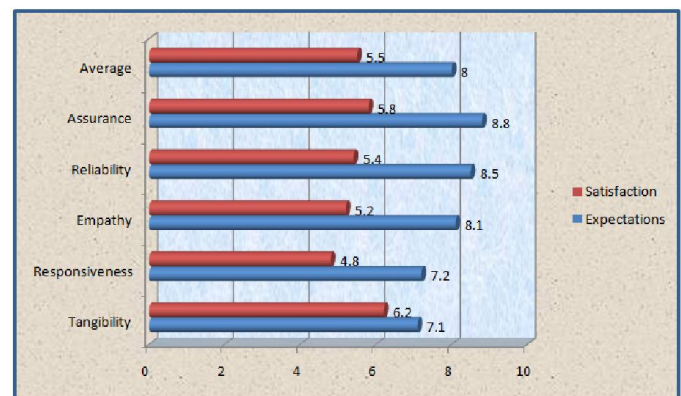
of getting employed after completion of a degree programme were viewed as integral to the satisfaction of ODL learners considering what respondents believed as negative perceptions against ODL qualifications.

Reliability was ranked second with expected service delivery of [8.5/10], while the Level of student satisfaction (perception) was [5.4/10]. The gap in service quality therefore, was [3.1/10] which was a significant gap. The main factors contributing to the low Level of reliability perceived by students were the errors in learning modules, underperformance by some tutors and the University's underperforming online services. The findings confirm what was noted by Mclean (2006) that lack of interaction among students and teachers was the greatest challenge facing distance education students during the learning process. This Mclean (2006) said was revealed in lack of vibrant discussions during tutorials as students generally get disinterested.

Empathy was ranked as the third most important dimension with [8.1/10] as the expected Level of service delivery. Performance, however, did not meet expectations as the perceived service delivery Level was [5.2/10]. The service delivery gap was [2.9/10]. Factors that adversely the overall service delivery rating was the lack of visible social programmes for disadvantaged students, lack of feedback platforms for students and inadequate one-one counselling with students.

Responsiveness was rated as the fourth most important dimension of service delivery with a [7.2/10] as the expected Level of service delivery. The Level of students satisfaction derived from the questionnaire survey was [4.81/10]. The service quality gap on responsiveness therefore, was [2.4/10]. The gap was mainly attributed to the dissatisfaction on the practical work given to students, lack of assistance on Mathematics and Science courses and as noted during focus group discussions, the unavailability of social support and other facilities to accommodate disabled students and disadvantaged students. The University and the ODL mode of education, in particular was generally described as not responsive to the social needs of the ODL learner. The study therefore, partly confirmed what Mclean, (2006) revealed when his study noted that teachers felt that the lack of social events in ODL institutions and therefore, an inadequate feeling of being part of the institution's community were a barrier in the process of developing a good social environment in distance education.

Tangibility was ranked as the fifth most important dimension of service delivery with a [7.1/10] level of service delivery expected by ODL students and the Level of students' satisfaction was [6.2/10]. The service quality gap therefore, was [0.9/10]. The University therefore, overall failed slightly to meet students' expectations but the gap was not significant on tangibility. Key among the factors contributing to high satisfaction was the accessibility of Regional Centres in all the major towns in the country.



**Fig. 1. Relative importance of service quality dimensions to the ODL learner**

The findings on the relative importance of service quality dimensions mirrored Ping and Kaushik (2006) findings. Ping and Kaushik (2006) in their study on service quality on the Business Programme in distance education at Wawasan Open University, Malaysia found that assurance was the most important service quality variable. Reliability was also found to be second in importance after assurance. The findings however, differed on the third dimension in importance where this study ranked empathy third, Ping and Kaushik study found empathy as the fifth most important dimension. Responsiveness was ranked 4th in importance in both studies. There was also a significant difference in the relative importance of tangibles, at Wawasan Open University, Ping and Kaushik (2006) found tangibles to be the second most important dimension while this study found tangibles to be the least important dimension at the Zimbabwe Open University. The differences in the relative importance in some dimensions could be influenced by the geographical gap and social differences between Zimbabwe and Malaysia and the needs of the ODL student in these different countries.

## Conclusion

The study concludes that ODL learners have unique needs and expectations on the service delivery process which can be ranked according to the service quality dimensions model propounded by Parasuraman *et al.* (1988). Learners prioritise some aspects of the service process, mainly those which impact on assurance and reliability of the University more than responsiveness and tangibility attributes in general. There are however other factors within the low ranking dimensions such as accessibility to Regional Centres which are viewed equally as important as assurance and reliability variables.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings the and conclusion, this study recommends the following;

- Service delivery processes should be informed by evidence from periodic market research.
- ODL Universities should prioritise their image, brand and other attributes that reinforce the assurance and reliability

dimensions as there is a general lack of trust in ODL qualifications.

- The ranking of service quality dimensions can be used to optimize the service delivery process in a manner that minimize costs while maintaining high levels of customer satisfaction.

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