

## Student Perceptions of Service Delivery at the Zimbabwe Open University: Masvingo Regional Campus

R.A. Chabaya, P. Chadamoyo and C. Chiome  
Zimbabwe Open University

### ABSTRACT

This study investigated students' perceptions on service delivery at the Zimbabwe Open University Masvingo Regional Campus. The study employed the qualitative descriptive survey design. It generated qualitative data using a questionnaire with open and closed items. A sample of 92 students was selected from a population of 1500 returning students using the stratified random sampling technique. Data was presented in simple frequency tables and analysed thematically. The study found out that students were satisfied with the examination management, fees payment structure, module distribution, enquiries, student tutor relationship and academic advisement. They expressed dissatisfaction with registration process, tutorials, library services, assignment management, overcrowded offices and communication. The study recommended that urgent steps must be taken by the university to expedite the registration process, provide on line services, expand library, train staff in customer care and mobilise resources that adequately support the growing student population. Further research can be done in customer care and assignment management.

### Introduction

The Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) is an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution whose mandate is to provide education to everyone who is keen to learn. It operates in a flexible manner, that is, one, which is less restrictive and less prohibitive as compared to conventional institutions. Education is availed on to the doorsteps of the learners wherever they are. Despite the dispersion of its clients, ZOU remains resolute in its bid to become a world class Open and Distance Learning University (ZOU Strategic Plan 2005-2009). To achieve this vision and mission it means that the Zimbabwe Open University modes of service delivery must move towards world class as well. Students come for services, whether they are academic, administrative, or personal (Tierney, 1998). The service delivery therefore must satisfy and motivate clients so that they yearn for more and better quality education that makes them worthwhile stakeholders and collaborative partners in both public and private sectors of the economy (Tierney, 1998).

To this effect, ZOU's vision and mission are achieved if the clients it serves are satisfied and

motivated to participate in the service delivery systems dispensed. The extent of students' satisfaction will then act as a barometer, a yardstick and a benchmark against which world class is measured.

Given this premise the question is therefore, "are students in Masvingo Region satisfied by the services rendered by the regional centre?"

This question is critical because quality service is what the customer says it is (West-Burnham, 1992). Students being the University's customers should be given an opportunity to scrutinise the service they get from the university, and demonstrate to what extent they are satisfied with that service.

Studies have been undertaken in the Zimbabwe Open University on '*Students' views on the role of tutorials in teaching and learning.*' (Majoni and Chidakwa 2005); *Use of information and communication technologies in distance education: A comparative study* (Sukati and Chandraiah 2005) and *Drop in weekend school tutorials: can the whole story be told?* (Chiome and Mukeredzi 2006). However, the concept of service delivery appears to have been given little attention if any. It is against this background that this research would want to take the debate further

and investigate the service delivery aspect of the university. As the regional staff mix and mingle with students on a day-to-day basis, students are heard passing comments that express feelings of satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

These comments are strong indicators of student perceptions on service delivery and must be capitalised on. The more we hear these comments, the more we feel the pressure as a region to find out the true picture of our service delivery system hence an investigation into the service delivery system.

### **Objective Of The Study**

The study sought to determine the perceptions of students towards service delivery processes undertaken by Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), Masvingo Regional Campus.

The study also sought to find out whether or not students were satisfied with the service delivery systems.

### **Statement Of The Problem**

Regional centres were established to provide university service to students wherever they are. Students who visit the regional centre have only one need, the need to be served. If they do not get this service they are disillusioned, dissatisfied and disturbed considering the distances they travel to come to the centre. Such dissatisfactions can threaten the existence of the university through dropouts and withdrawals. Students' dissatisfaction becomes a problem if it is there. To this effect, the statement of the problem is, 'what are the perceptions of students in Masvingo Region towards ZOU's service delivery.'

### **Research Questions**

The study generated the following research questions:

- 1 What are the students' perceptions towards service delivery processes at Masvingo Region?
- 2 Are students satisfied with the various services offered by the university at regional level?
- 3 What services need to be improved on?

### **Importance of good student' service delivery**

The University derives its mandate and legitimacy from the society through the provision of services and support that satisfy stakeholders

(Kurasha, 2005 in the *ZOU Strategic Plan 2005-2009*). For this reason, stakeholder satisfaction is one of the strategic elements enshrined in the Strategic Plan 2005-2009, and the main focus is to delight all the stakeholders, students being in the forefront. If students are satisfied with their studies, they are likely to stay on and complete their degree programmes, and if they are not, they are likely to drop out and it negatively impacts on the University's goals and existence. As Tierney (1998) suggests, Universities must therefore focus on students, listen to their needs and desires, and serve them in appropriate ways. This service orientation includes the ability to think through problems and issues from the student's point of view, because service is what the student says it is (West-Burnham, 1992).

### **Research Design**

The study used a descriptive qualitative design. The questionnaire used had both closed and open-ended sections that yielded qualitative data. Babbie (1997:62) says, "Descriptive survey is a method of research that describes what we see over and beyond".

Thus the researchers chose this method as it allowed students to say exactly what they felt about the services offered by the Zimbabwe Open University. Borg and Gall (1989) say descriptive surveys are excellent vehicles for the measurement of attitudes and orientations prevalent in a large population as was the case in this study. One of the characteristics of the descriptive survey method is to investigate the present status of the phenomenon. This was the primary goal in this study. The target population for this study was all the 1500 returning students for Masvingo Regional Campus of the Zimbabwe Open University for semester two of 2006.

A sample of ninety-two (92) returning students was extracted using the stratified random sample. Departments and gender formed the strata as shown in Table 1 overleaf.

Table 1 Age and gender student distribution n=48					
Age range in years					
Gender	20-30	31-40	41-50	51 plus	Totals
Males	2	16	7	2	21 (56%)
Females	4	13	4	0	21 (44%)
Totals	6 (13 %)	29 (60%)	11 (23%)	2 (4%)	48 (100%)

The 92 selected subjects were believed to be knowledgeable about the services offered by the Zimbabwe Open University because they had gone through at least one semester. Each individual who took part in this research was consulted and agreement was reached on what data to be collected and included in the research. The privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of respondents was upheld and guaranteed in this research.

#### Data Gathering

The instrument for data collection was the questionnaire. This instrument was pilot tested on 20 randomly selected students. Items that were not clear were eliminated. The questionnaire was preferred because apart from being cheaper to construct and administer, it is anonymous and economical. The processing and analysis of data is also less complex than in the case of observations (Hopkins, 1989). The 92 students were given the questionnaire to complete and return. One hundred and twenty questionnaires were administered. Twenty-eight questionnaires were declared defunct after they were not returned on time.

#### Defining Student Satisfaction

There is need to define the term 'student satisfaction' and understand clearly what it means, and this can be derived from the industrialist perspective propounded by McCormick and Ugen (McCormick and Ugen, 1982). The two authors define satisfaction as the attitude or feelings a person has towards his/her job. Likewise, student satisfaction can be defined as the attitude or feelings a student has towards the services provided. It is one's affective response towards his/her study, which of course is made up of a number of service delivery elements deduced from Matanda and Gwete (2005) as:

- The study itself, including level of difficulty, variety and work autonomy.
- Rewards such as good results, amount and prospects for promotion recognition for work done, and so on
- Work environment that includes administrators and their administrative and supervisory styles, lecturer competencies and their friendliness
- Responsiveness to student needs and expectations

It is important to note that the study elements mentioned above are of varying significance to different students. For example, some students may consider results to be more important than study conditions. This research will highlight the general consensus on selected service delivery processes.

#### Service Delivery Systems

With the above listed elements in mind, the need for an effective service delivery system at institutions such as ZOU Regional Centres becomes critical and has a number of benefits to students. Brown, Race and Smith (1997) describe these benefits as:

- Making mature students feel welcome and
- Treating mature students appropriately.

To realise the above benefits, the University of Otago, New Zealand, (2006) in its website, emphasises that the University Information Centre should be the starting point for enquiries about enrolment, examinations, graduation, academic transcripts, key dates, course of study, that is, course approval and change of course, and any other administrative matters regarding studying at the University. Likewise, at Regional centres, the Student Services and Support Centre may act as the starting point for enquiries about the above-mentioned services. or whatever service students require. In other words, service delivery, as Davies and West-Burnham (1997) observe, is about doing things differently and trying to use the power of ideas to change the ways service is provided. In fact, as West-Burnham(1997) asserts, the argument is to move away from the mass market of the 1990's and move towards a quality product approach aimed at student satisfaction as defined through the student perspective rather than from what Regional centres think they give.

In other words, service delivery should be driven by what students want, when they want it, and how they want to pay for it. If this is not the case, students become dissatisfied.

Student dissatisfaction also arises from some of the factors that affect staff. Brown, Race and Smith (1997) suggest such factors as:

- Growing student numbers without commensurate growth of staffing
- An increasingly diverse student population
- The demand to be seen as cost-effective within frameworks more properly applied to commercial business than to educational institutions
- Increasing control by the funding authorities

Staff who are often demoralised, stressed and overworked as they try to maintain the quality of what they do, while the circumstances in which they work are not all that conducive.

If such a situation exists in the Zimbabwe Open University, then service delivery also becomes affected.

### **Service Delivery Processes**

If the whole concept of student satisfaction has to be addressed, a number of service delivery processes has also to be examined. The present study reviewed literature on some of these processes among which are the registration process, assignment management, weekend school tutorials, library and information services, and examinations and results management.

With regards to the registration process, the *New Student Orientation Book* (2005) clearly states that all students should register during the given registration period and no student will be registered after the expiry of that time. Because of this condition, the registration period at the Regional Centre is characterised by long queues of impatient students demanding quality service from a depleted staff. That is a litmus test for the University's service delivery systems.

On assignment management, Chiome and Mukeredzi (2006) found out that management of assignments at the Regional centre was

unsatisfactory and the turn around period for marked assignments was too long. This again shows that more attention should be paid to the way service is delivered.

With regards to weekend school tutorials, Chimedza in the *New Orientation Handbook* (undated) challenges students to remember that when they come for the face-to-face sessions, they should not expect to be lectured but to be tutored. This is perhaps where students used to conventional systems get lost, and misconstrue the whole purpose of tutorials. In trying to clarify this position, Makoni (2000) says a tutorial refers to a small group-learning context that supports and extends learning offered through distance learning modules. As such, tutorials differ from lectures in that they provide opportunities for students to construct and refine their own knowledge by means of feedback from peers and more knowledgeable tutors. Thus, a tutorial has a potential to involve students in the active process of constructing their own understanding, as opposed to regurgitating notes dictated in a lecture.

In connection with library services, Chabaya and Ncube, in the *New Student Orientation Book* (2005), inform that the University has provided service to students through decentralising library services to Regional centres. However, it is yet to be established whether Masvingo Regional Centre can say with certainty that it is satisfying the needs of students of such diversified characteristics. Maenzanise, in the *New Orientation Handbook* citing Perraton and Creed (2000) argues that it is a tall order for the library service to try and satisfy such varying needs of a diversified clientele of mature people who know what they want, where to go, how to look for it and when to look for it. However it must be noted that, a library plays a pivotal role in any academic institution. Library services forms the backbone of every institution's success and service delivery must take note of it. On the other hand, according to Women's University in Africa (2006) most academic institutions in developing countries find it difficult to establish well-stocked libraries.

As far as examination and results management is concerned, the *New Student Orientation Book* clearly

spells out the role of the Regional Centre as one that conducts examinations and attends to all queries concerning examination results.

The question to ask is whether or not such a service is adequate. In other words, are students satisfied with the way examination results are managed?

Current practices in student management systems calls for more attention in transforming the way student services and support are rendered in a bid to satisfy their needs and demands.

**Data Presentation**

*Students' Responses On Services Offered*

Table 2 Showing amalgamated frequencies of students' level of satisfaction.						
Services offered	Very Satisfied & Satisfied		Dissatisfied & Very Dissatisfied			
	F	%	F	%	F	%
I am happy with the quality of reception	61	66	6	6,5	25	27.2
Equiries are addressed promptly	64	69,5	9	9,8	19	20.6
Registration processes are promptly undertaken	40	43,5	3	3,3	49	53.3
I am satisfied with the fees payment structure	69	75	2	2,2	21	22.8
Module distribution is pleasing	66	71,7	7	7,6	19	20.6
Assignment management is professional	51	55,4	7	7,6	34	36.9
Weekend school venues are conducive	58	63	7	7,6	27	29.4
Weekend school tutorial are beneficial	41	44,6	11	12	40	43.5
Quality of tutoring is okay	47	51,1	12	13	33	35.9
Library services are adequate	47	51,1	11	12	34	36.9
Academic advisement is professional	60	65,2	16	17,4	16	17.4
Management of exams is beyond reproach	78	84,8	8	8,7	6	6.5
Student-Tutor relationship is good.	62	67,4	14	15,2	16	17.4
Guidance and Counselling is satisfying	49	53,3	26	28,3	17	18,5
Communication on academic issues is available on time.	49	53,3	4	4,3	39	42,4

Inadequate and incommensurate service would result in student dissatisfaction and discontentment that would impact negatively on the overall attainment of the University goals.

From the results in Table 3, 78 (84.8%) of the students appear to be satisfied with the manner in which examinations are run in the region (*See overleaf*). They have also applauded the following services: fees payment structure with 69 (75%) of the respondents, module distribution with 66 (71.7%), enquiries with 64 (69.5%), student-tutor relationship with 62 (67.4%), quality of reception with 61 (66%) and academic advisement with 60 (62%).

Students appeared to be dissatisfied with the registration process with 49 (53.3%) expressing dissatisfaction of which 25 (27.2%) of these were very dissatisfied. Other areas in which students expressed dissatisfaction include weekend school tutorials with 40 (43.5%), assignment management with 34 (36.9%), communication with 39 (42.4%) and library services with 34 (36.9%).

**Open-Ended Responses**

In open-ended responses, students confirmed their satisfaction with examination management, fees payment structure and academic support. They also mentioned satisfaction with marking of examinations, the Regional Director's response to their problems; services from Administrative officer and Advisor, tutor-student interaction, results follow up and staff zeal.

The students expressed displeasure with the payment of fees at Barclays Bank, registration queues, missing modules, communication on in-class tests, fees for student's representative council (SRC), missing results and project supervision. The following expressions bear testimony:

- 'Stagger lunch hour especially during registration time'
- 'Have your own premises'
- 'Do not close during lunch hour'
- 'Attend to missing results'
- 'Some tutors come to tutorials just to show off'
- 'The SRC is not functional at all'
- 'Improve on research supervision'

### **Areas Needing Urgent Improvement**

Students were also asked to suggest any area they strongly felt needed urgent improvement. They had this to say:

- 'Improve library facilities'
- 'Speed up registration process'
- 'Registration must be a one stop shop'
- 'Tutors must seriously consider students with problems'
- 'Security guards to improve communication skills with students'
- 'We need a campus of our own'
- 'Fix weekend schools on month end'
- 'Provide on-line services'
- 'Staff must be courteous'
- 'Venue for weekend school must be closer rather than Victoria High School'
- 'Quality of tutoring is suspect'
- 'Too small offices'
- 'Improve weekend school tutorials'

### **Discussion Of Findings**

Students of Masvingo Regional Campus expressed various feelings on a number of service delivery processes among which are the registration process, assignment management, weekend school tutorials, library and information services, and examinations and results management.

With regards to the registration process, the students were particularly dissatisfied with the way the process is conducted, the long winding queues and the many stages they go through. *The New Student Orientation Book* (2005) worsens the situation as it clearly states that all students should register during the given registration period and no student will be registered after the expiry of that time. Because of this condition, the registration period at the Regional Centre is characterised by long queues of impatient students demanding quality service from a depleted staff. That is a tall order for the university's skeleton staff. However, in as much as staff would like to assist students, shortage of resources and materials sometimes militates against quality service delivery.

On the spot 100 percent service is what students expect and this is only possible if Regional Centres are well equipped with all necessary materials, that is, both staff and students need to execute their duties effectively.

The University of Otago (2006) (as indicated in their website) provide a wide range of academic, electronic, recreational, and welfare services in their quest to satisfy their clients. This therefore, should be the case with every service delivery institution, ZOU included.

On assignment management, although 51% of the students were satisfied with the management of assignments, this was against a background in which Mukeredzi and Chiome (2006) found out that management of assignments at the Regional centre was unsatisfactory and the turn around period for marked assignments was too long. Thus looking at this issues at a distance, one gets a feeling that there is something wrong somewhere. Students are not happy. Therefore something still needs to be done. Further research studies need to be carried out on assignment management, maybe workable satisfying solutions can be found.

With regards to weekend school tutorials, the students expressed displeasure with the quality of tutorials. Chimedza (in the *New Students Orientation Handbook 2005*) challenges students to remember that when they come for the face-to-face sessions, they should not expect to be lectured but to be tutored. This is perhaps where students used to conventional systems get lost, and misconstrue the whole purpose of tutorials. A tutorial has a potential to involve students in the active process of constructing their own understanding, as opposed to regurgitating notes dictated in a lecture. Apparently, findings in this study seem to indicate that students are not convinced that this is the case and this could be the reason why the attendance rate at weekend schools is very low. Non-attendance of any kind, that is, either by lecturers or by students is an indicator of dissatisfaction, hence something should be done. One way would be to motivate lecturers to attend and deliver quality tutorials through the provision of better incentives with the hope those students would also be attracted to attend weekend schools.

In connection with library services, the students were particularly bitter about the lack of adequate services, absence of Internet and the reading space. Chabaya and Ncube, in the *New Student Orientation Book* (2005), inform that the University

has provided service to students through decentralising library services to Regional centres. However, the students in Masvingo Regional Centre could not confirm with certainty that the library is satisfying the needs of students of such diversified characteristics. Maenzanise in the *New Orientation Handbook*, citing Perraton and Creed (2000), argues that it is a tall order for the library service to try and satisfy such varying needs of a diversified clientele of mature people who know what they want, where to go, how to look for it and when to look for it. Every college and university in America is equipped with a library that contains thousands of books, periodicals and newspapers that are available for students to do research (Rich, 1997). The students have access to the internet as well. The world class status for Zimbabwe Open University can be enhanced by this kind of arrangement.

As far as examination and results management are concerned, the students expressed satisfaction with this service. This finding confirms that the regional centre's examination management is beyond reproach. McIlroy (2003) clearly spells out that well structured examination systems help motivate learners. Hence there is some value in running examination processes well.

### Conclusions

Basing on the findings discussed above, this research reached the following conclusions:

- Good management of examination management of examinations received overwhelming support from the students. This will go a long way towards ensuring reliability and validity of the Zimbabwe Open University quality assurance systems.
- Zimbabwe Open University appears to demonstrate responsiveness in terms of staggered fees payment structure, academic support, tutor-student interaction and module distribution. Such a responsive culture will go a long way towards ensuring student retention.

The research also concluded that, irked by the long registration queues, some impatient students may elect to opt out of the system. Further, with the absence of adequate library and allied services the quality of the end product becomes a victim.

The thinly spread regional staff is overworked on the background of an emphasis on enrolment figures that are not matched by resources. In view of this, it should be realised that Regional centres now experience growing numbers in many courses coupled with greater diversity among the student population and their expectations. It therefore calls for more attention in transforming the way student services and support are rendered in a bid to satisfy student needs and demands. Failure to do that would result in student dissatisfaction and discontentment that would impact negatively on the overall attainment of the University goals. Based on the finding and the need to upgrade student's service delivery, the study suggested these recommendations.

### Recommendations

Having made these conclusions, this research put forth the following recommendations:

1. Regional staff must display the image of the university and as such need training in handling adult learners
2. The university must benefit from the rapid technological developments. Thus, internet service must be prioritised in the region
3. Library facilities must be expanded. And so is office space so that the influx of students in the region is accommodated

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