

Customer Care in ODL Institutions: Experiences of Zimbabwe Open University Students

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Abstract

The study sought to establish quality customer care practices that can be employed by Open and Distance Learning institutions in order to attract higher student enrolment with reference to the Zimbabwe Open University. It was prompted by the growing concern for quality customer care aired by the voiceless in most ODL institutions. The study employed the descriptive survey design. The questionnaire used for data collection had both closed and open-ended questions. A sample of 50 students was extracted using the purposive convenience sampling method. The study found out that students need quality tutorials, efficient registration processes, well managed weekend school tutorials, quick and efficient publication of results and well informed tutors who are knowledgeable and committed to their work. The study recommends that ODL institutions should organise workshops, seminars and conferences that deal with quality customer care practices so as to equip staff with attractive service delivery skills and thus improve student enrolment.

Key words: Open and Distance Learning; customer care; customer care practices

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The future success of universities will increasingly be determined by how they identify and satisfy their various customers (Lewis and Smith, 1994). Customer-driven organisations are effective because they are fully committed to satisfying and anticipating customer needs (Maguad, 2009). Open and Distance Learning (ODL) universities face the greatest challenge in terms of customer care that they must become magnetic in terms of student retention and attraction. Quality customer care is the basis for a well functional ODL system and is the bedrock upon which student enrolment is based. Customer care is the foundation upon which university practices are laid. Customers form the structural foundation upon which both public and private sector enterprises are built. The old adage, "the customer is always right" is a necessary tool for the prosperity of any enterprise (Batho, 1999). In higher education, the notion of having customers is foreign to many campuses and even the suggestion of the term can arouse many emotions, preconceptions, and misconceptions (Canic and McCarthy, 2000). Faculty and administrators alike are reluctant to call a student or anyone else a customer (Teeter and Lozier, 1993).

Based on empirical studies, Obermiller et al. (2005) find that faculties generally prefer recognizing students as products and students on the other hand prefer to be recognized as customers. This contention shows that faculties know how a customer must be treated which is what the students demand. Cooper (2007) highlights the significance of quality issues in the development of new markets in the Higher Education (HE) sector as based on customer care. Marketing based on customer wants and needs has been emphasized by Scott (2005). In ODL, students, who are the most important customers, demand first class service, quality tutorials, high quality marking of assignments, library services and want the shortest cut to get the service.

Many faculty members feel "threatened by the notion that students are customers of the educational process" (Lomas, 2007:42). The idea that students (customers) are partners in developing and delivering quality education (the product or service) threatens the historic, traditional academic role of faculty as purveyor of knowledge. Lewis and Smith (1994) observed that "every college and university has a mission but very few fully identify who they serve". They also noted that even fewer institutions acknowledge that they serve customers. This is surprising given the fact that in order to be effective, organizations must be customer-driven. Customer-oriented organisations are successful because they have a unified focus on what they do and who they serve. The Performance Based Management Handbook, (2001) argues that a customer

driven organisation is one that maintains a focus on the needs and expectations both spoken and unspoken, of customers both present and future, in the creation and or improvement of the product and service through implementation of quality customer care.

Most educational institutions now recognize that they need to market themselves in a climate of competition that for universities is frequently a global one, and substantial literature on the transfer of the practices and concepts of marketing from other sectors to HE has been developed (Gibbs, 2002; Hamsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006). The evidence indicates that universities are responding by employing a variety of strategies that borrow heavily from the marketing philosophy as practiced in the business sector and this has been summed up thus:

“The universities of the region are at different stages of marketisation and their levels of marketing sophistication and understanding, which closely resemble those in the business sector, vary from one institution to another and also from country to country (Maringe and Foskett, 2002, 47)”.

The higher education market is now well established as a global phenomenon. In response to these changes, the value, effectiveness and potential benefits of using marketing theories and concepts, which have been effective in the business world, are gradually now being applied by many universities: with a view to gaining a competitive edge, and gaining a larger share of the international market. One such theory of marketing Open and Distance Learning (ODL) universities is the use of customer care to attract and retain students. Kotler (2003) proposed a marketing philosophy that has been uncritically accepted in the literature as the panacea for organizations to adopt in their quest to become more accountable to their publics both in terms of providing required products and services and in terms of guaranteeing customer satisfaction. The philosophy holds that:

“...the key to achieving the organisation’s goals depends on determining the needs and wants of target markets and by delivering the desired satisfactions more effectively and efficiently than the competitors (Kotler, 2003, 13)”.

All this demonstrates the need for customer care in universities of today. Customer satisfaction is the basis for a well-functioning ODL institution because the type of the customer in ODL is quite different from the traditional conventional student that we are used to. ODL institutions serve students who in some cases only lack education but are full of other riches and hold important positions in society. Such students can no longer go the conventional way leaving the important duties for the nation. They definitely need proper handling.

Without a complete understanding of the needs and wants of customers, it is inconceivable how educators can design programmes that deliver customers satisfaction. Scott (1999) allays fears about this power shift saying:

“The application of the marketing perspective to HE does not then involve a dramatic shift of power from educator to student, but does suggest that in order to achieve quality, the expectations of students need to be taken into account and ideally their view and those of the educators be brought into harmony (Scott, 1999, 199)”.

Customer satisfaction in ODL institutions demands that the staff should listen to the needs and problems of students, their concerns have to be addressed. Students need value for money and to meet that need requires high levels of customer satisfaction.

With regard to customer service, Mason (2003:15) defines it as a “means of having the knowledge and ability to explain important points to both potential and existing customers”. Services achieve quality in perception when levels of performance meet or exceed the level of consumer expectations (Banwet and Datta, 2003). According to Leonicio (2001), the underlying philosophy of quality service consists of identifying the customer's power in an age in which ideas are the medium of exchange. This means that within an ODL institution, the quality of customer service should be a culture of shared values. In other words, service quality focuses mainly on the interaction between the customer and the service provider, involving an evaluation of specific attributes (Banwet and Datta, (2003; Hernon, 2003; Peter, 2001). In a similar note, Leonicio (2001:53) affirms that customer service has seven characteristics which include: a written statement of customer service philosophies; training of employees in effective service delivery; evaluation and measurement of service quality; the use of data to monitor policies, services and operations; an established process of gathering data; service policies that provide latitude for staff to service customers; and an internal customer service program.

According to Rowley (1994:9) in the competitive world, service providers need to focus sharply on customer satisfaction, as satisfied customers are returning customers. ODL institutions are not left behind. Rowley describes "quality service" as a service which fulfills customer expectations. This alludes to the fact that good quality services offer users an experience with which they are satisfied. If customers have narrowly-defined service expectations, they may rate the service offered them as one of good quality despite the fact that other competitive channels may be more satisfying (Dlamini, 2006). Stockton (2000) is of the view that institutions should strive to implement a spatially enabled customer care strategy as a means to gain a competitive edge in the market. In the case of ODL institutions, they need to recruit people who have customers at heart so that they provide quality services to the students.

The determinants of customer satisfaction are perceived university image, customer expectations, perceived quality, and perceived value (“value for money”). Perceived quality is

conceptually divided into two elements: “hard ware”, which consists of the quality of the product/service attributes and “human ware”, which represents the associated customer interactive elements in service, i.e. the personal behaviour and atmosphere of the service environment (Martensen et al, 2000).

In higher education, this concept of customer defined quality is problematic. Universities have responsibilities to many groups (Reavill, 1998). Harvey and Langley (1995) caution that privileging the views of one group risks oversimplification. Nevertheless, much of the literature on quality in education focuses on the student-as-customer. In the context of quality theory, however, the customer mainly defines ‘fitness for purpose’. As Scott (1999:194) observes ‘The corollary of student-as-customer is the academic-as-service-provider’. The student-as-customer distorts the fundamental nature of the academic-student relationship, which ‘involves covenant, the highest form of interaction ... (It is not) merely contractual or commercial’ (Long, 1996, cited in Luizzi, 2000: 361).

In an era of massive expansion and growing consumerism in post-secondary education (Lomas, 2007) where there is keen competition for students among institutions, collecting and acting upon feedback on students’ satisfaction with their experiences has become an important aspect of the quality process (Harvey, 2003; Leckey and Neill, 2001).

Statement of the problem

At some point, most ODL institutions reached a peak of high student enrolment but then encountered a sudden decrease. While it is worth noting that conventional universities are mushrooming and compete for students, the underlying factor in decrease in enrolment is lack of customer care by ODL universities. In Zimbabwe, a number of conventional universities have mushroomed in the past years. This phenomenon caused stiff competition for students among the institutions where in some cases some faculties get faced with lower enrolments compared to previous years. ODL institutions in many countries are set to provide professional training and development to students and since they are competing with conventional universities, they need to realize that customer care is the only competitive advantage they can use. Therefore, this study was prompted by the need to analyze the customer care services offered by Zimbabwe Open University to its students.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the students' experiences with the various customer service points at the Zimbabwe Open University?
2. What can be done to empower service providers in their roles?

Significance of the study

This study sought to contribute towards promoting quality customer care by both the academic and non-academic staff in institutions of higher learning. It was an attempt to inculcate reflection from service points to ensure maximum provision of customer care to students who require services at different service points in the university. It encouraged exercise of initiative in quality service delivery in pursuit of customer care. If both academic and non-academic staff manage to be effective in their work, this will go a long way towards quality customer care and thus improve student retention.

Conceptual framework

The centrality of the customer is grounded in history and tradition. Aristotle, in his Rhetoric, stated that, "it is the hearer that determines the speech's end and object" (cited in Corts, 1992: 2). The success of the speaker therefore depends on the audience, the recipients of the message. The Bible teaches that "You should love the Lord with all your heart, strength, and soul, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself (Luke 10:27) and "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you" (Luke 6:31). This Biblical principle inspires us to give others the same regard we hold ourselves, a beginning point for the service-orientated individual. Deming (1986), one of the founders of the modern quality movement, stated that the customer is "one who gets your work". In a similar note, Juran (1988) suggests that we "follow the product to see whom it impacts----- anyone who is impacted is a customer". These concepts are generally applicable to all kinds of organizations, profit or non-profit, which serve internal and external customers. "Everyone of us is a customer. Everyone of us serves customers" (Corts, 1992: 1).

Developing and maintaining a customer focus in higher education requires effective leadership. After all, leadership 'is the use of non-coercive influence to shape the group or organisation's goals, motivate behaviour towards the achievement of those goals, and help define group or organisation culture' (Griffim 2003:304). Leaders are part of a system and they are affected by the system in which they work. They perform tasks that are essential for others to accomplish their purpose, which in this case, is quality improvement and customer satisfaction.

As quality increases, so will the pride-in-workmanship. The end result will be that a new institutional culture will emerge.

Theoretical framework: Total Quality Management

Total Quality Management spreads from business to education. Many higher education institutions have been stimulated and influenced by a total quality framework for both teaching and administrative support functions (Kanji and Tambi, 1999; Roberts, 1995). The total quality initiatives also recognise the changing conditions in higher education. For example, a considerable increase in students' requirements and needs, increasing demands from business and industry, increasing demands from governing boards and the public sector, decreasing funds, and increasing competition among higher education institutions. And this trend can be expected to continue.

Focusing on the customer is an essential principle of Total Quality Management, and the customers for the services of a higher education institution fall into five groups: the students, the employees, the employers, the government and the public sector, and the industry and wider community (Kanji and Tambi, 1999:131). The primary customers are the students (Hill, 1995; Wallace, 1999). Without students to teach to, there is no business for higher education institutions, no research to conduct or service to provide. Without perceived value there is no reason for students to choose our institution over an increasingly large number of similar institutions. To raise that value, students' perceived quality and satisfaction should be measured and managed. It is essential to measure students' perceived quality and satisfaction within higher education institutions to develop continuous improvement of study programmes, teaching, staff and equipment.

Method

This study employed the descriptive survey design. Babbie (1997:62) says 'descriptive survey is a method of research that describes what we see over and beyond'. According to Chikoko and Mhloyi (1995:62) descriptive survey is a method of research which describes what we see, over and beyond. This seeing is not restricted to the physical eye, but by means of asking questions on phenomena. Leedy (1980) highlights that hundreds of studies have been conducted in which the looking over and beyond has been by means of a questionnaire. The design is therefore relevant to the mode of present study, which seeks to investigate the state of affairs with regard to the need for quality customer care in ODL institutions. Thus the researchers chose this method as it allowed students to say exactly what they conceived of as customer care practices that can retain and attract students in ODL institutions.

Sample and sampling procedure

The study was confined to one ZOU regional office out of the ten regions. Purposive convenience sampling was used to come up with the 50 respondents who answered the questionnaires. All respondents were in either their second year or third year of study because researchers assumed that that group had a longer period of interaction with the ZOU staff.

Measures

The data collection instrument used for this study was a questionnaire with statements to which the respondents rated customer care services as *very good, good, satisfactory, weak and very weak*. Self-completion was selected as the most appropriate tool because it is an effective small-scale research tool and knowledge needed is controlled by the questions, therefore it affords a great deal of precision and clarity (McDonough & McDonough, 1997). The chief shortcoming of closed-ended questions lies in the researchers' structuring of the questions (Babbie, 1997). Thus, respondents in this study were given an opportunity to elaborate on issues raised to minimise on this weakness by the use of both closed and open ended questions (Cohen & Manion, 1994). It is suggested that open-ended questions allow for more detailed expression of student views (Fung & Carr, 2000) and that qualitative information on the students in the individual group is far more helpful than aggregated statistical data. The combination of the two instruments helps to minimize the weaknesses of the other.

Results

This research sought the views of the students on the quality of customer care at different service points in the university. The results are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Students' ratings on service provision at key points in the university (n = 50).

Description	SCALE				
	V.Good N (%)	Good N (%)	Satisfactory N (%)	Weak N (%)	V.Weak N (%)
1. Reception	8 (16)	17(34)	15(30)	8 (16)	2 (8)
2. Issuing of Modules	14(28)	10(20)	11 (22)	8 (16)	7 (14)
3. Accounts point	7 (14)	6 (12)	15 (30)	12(24)	10(20)
4. Assignment Handling	12(24)	13(26)	8(16)	12(24)	5(10)
5. Programme Coordinators	8 (16)	11(22)	17(34)	12(24)	2(4)
6. Student Services	11(22)	13(26)	16(32)	7(14)	3(6)
7. Weekend School Management	3(6)	8(16)	12(24)	17(34)	10(20)
8. Orientation Programmes	12(24)	28(56)	6(12)	3(6)	1(2)
9. Registration Process	6 (12)	10(20)	17(34)	13(26)	4(8)
10. Results Issuing Point	3(6)	4(8)	10(20)	15(30)	18(36)
11. Library Services	7 (14)	13(26)	22(44)	3(6)	5(10)
12. Handling of Administration Issues	2(4)	6(12)	16(32)	19(38)	7(14)
13. Results Queries	1(2)	4(8)	14(28)	19(38)	12(24)

Discussion

Factors that emerged from the responses of the students about the quality of services they get from the various service points at the university are discussed in thematic groupings below.

A receptive and informative reception point

Respondents were of the opinion that the reception should be receptive and should have information to answer and provide when students need it. In total 80% of the respondents indicated that they were pleased with reception point. This means that the students are satisfied with the service at the reception point. The reception is the first service point in the organisation and its services are very crucial. If customers are not properly served there, this affects the image of the organisation. In this competitive market of student search, the reception is a key point for marketing and thus attracting the students. It is argued that a customer can recognise a professional institute almost immediately from the manner in which the customer is dealt with. Institutions today aim to achieve their goals by offering and exchanging values with various

markets and publics. It involves the institution studying the needs of the target markets, designing appropriate programmes and services and using effective pricing, communication and distribution to inform and serve the market (Popli, 2005).

Issuing of modules in time

On the issue of modules 60% of the respondents highlighted that the service is fairly given. This information was also raised by some respondents when they said the following:

'Modules are highly interactive but we need them in time'

'We have seen the ZOU module being used by almost all universities in Zimbabwe to show its power in instruction but let us get them in time so that we have ample time to read'

Respondents seem to put the ZOU module on a stone pedestal. Students show that the service of the module is the best but what needs to be improved is the time when they are issued. This situation implies that students need to have access other than by interpersonal contact to appropriate learning materials like books, cassettes or CD-ROMs, receiving broadcasts, using mail or e-mail, accessing the Web. This is, however, not enough, even if these materials have been designed as suitable for self-learning. Distance learning methodology also requires that some kind of support mechanism like handouts, newsletters and tutorial letters be available to students, so they can overcome their learning difficulties, get supplementary information, evaluate their own progress and exchange ideas with teachers, tutors and fellow students (Holmberg, 2000). It is argued that most ODL systems place a strong emphasis on the conception and production of high quality learning materials. Research further argues that knowledge is evolving quite rapidly and courses need to be updated more and more frequently (Trindade et al, 2000:14).

Quick processing of results queries

Respondents seem to indicate that the results issuing point should improve its service delivery. They need a better service than is being offered there. 66% of the respondents showed that the service point is weak and needs some improvements. Students are important stakeholders in the quality monitoring and assessment process. It is thus imperative that the universities providing distance education lay due emphasis on customer satisfaction and quality assurance. The theoretical underpinnings of the expectations performance paradigm implies that levels of student satisfaction are a direct function of the extent to which expectations are realised.

Confirmation of expectations occurs if outcomes exceed or at least match the expectation, which leads to student satisfaction (Palihawadana & Holmes, 1999).

Effective and well informing orientation programmes

Respondents highlighted that the orientation service they get from the university meets international standards as it is highly informative and well organised. 92% of the respondents showed that the orientation programmes meet customer requirements. If students are given proper orientation, they are likely to be retained in the university and they tell others about it. Marketing is not only done through the use of pamphlets but by effective, motivating and highly informative orientation programmes. High satisfaction or delight creates an emotional bond with the brand, not just a rational preference. The result is high customer loyalty. Kano's model (Jobber, 2001) separates characteristics that cause dissatisfaction, satisfaction and delight. Three characteristics underlie the model: 'must be', 'more is better' and 'delighters'. Customers of distance education must be given customer care that delights them.

Efficient handling and processing of assignments

Respondents had the following to say as regards assignments.

'We need proper handling of assignments after submitting them'

'Assignments should be given back in time after marking'

'Collection point should sort assignments properly to avoid time wasting searching for assignments'

The best measure of quality is customer satisfaction. Satisfaction, in this view, is a function of perceived performance and expectations (Kotler & Fox, 1995). The customers can immediately perceive the service errors. The customers' satisfaction, which depends on the perceived value of customers to a great extent, must be taken into consideration. Customers hold the idea that the service failure occurs when the service provider fails to provide the customers with expected service and causes the dissatisfaction of customers. Most people hold the opinion that when the customers perceive the service errors, no matter who is responsible, the service failure occurs.

Quick publication of results

Respondents highlighted the need for quick publication of results in ODL systems. Due to distance from the central processing point, the students want to access their results without any complications and within the earliest time possible. The sentiments seem to be given by 66% of

the respondents. It seems students have time expectations in terms of results publication. Delays would cause problems in terms of preparation of fees for the following semester and quick access of certificates and transcripts for those completing the programme. In the case of ODL systems, it is the individual student whose learning achievement is assessed and to whom a certificate, diploma or degree may eventually be awarded. The institution makes the customer (student) feel special and deals with the customer as a matter of priority rather than as a secondary issue, less important than the undertaking of other activities (Popli, 2005).

Vibrant tutors who are knowledgeable and committed

Respondents highlighted the need to have vibrant tutors who Trindade et al (2000:12) argue that it is important to make sure that a suitable number of competent tutors are available and that other student support mechanisms are satisfactory. In a course evaluation on quality issues, students highlighted that knowledgeable tutors bring about quality improvement (Thurab-Nkhosi and Marshall, 2009:275). The modern system of higher education is marketed with many new features and ideas. The salient features of education in the new age are: an open and flexible system, direct and easy access to every learner, a broad based and futuristic visionary stream of learning, edutainment and infotainment and student-centred learning, that is more emphasis on insight and knowledge than mere information collection, new knowledge with a personal touch and need and utility-oriented learning (Popli, 2005).

Well prepared and managed weekend schools

Respondents highlighted the need for tutor preparedness during weekend school tutorials. Students need to be satisfied in terms of value for money. 78% of the respondents concurred with the sentiments that tutorials in ODL systems must not be time wasted. The following responses shed more light:

'After paying fees we need close attention during weekend school tutorials'

'Tutors must be fully prepared to clear hunches that we meet when studying through distance'

'Time management is very important since it means wide content coverage'

Most higher education institutions all over the world collect some type of feedback from students about their experience of higher education. 'Feedback' in this sense refers to the expressed opinions of students about the service they receive as students (customer satisfaction). This may include perceptions about the learning and teaching, the learning support facilities, the

learning environment, other support facilities and external aspects of being a student (Harvey, 2001). These can also be considered as the variables of customer satisfaction.

Efficient registration processes

It is worth noting that customers want all their details captured correctly by the registration team. Wrong pin numbers for student identification, names, dates of births, etc, will lead to missing results. Respondents seem to indicate that central registry point should commit itself in any ODL system and make sure that details of students are captured correctly. Respondents had this to say:

'We stay far away from the central registry point and once our details have been wrongly captured it will not be easy to correct that'

'Entering wrong student identification numbers or names might lead to missing results'

'It is ideal to summon one's brains and process student details correctly to avoid problems'

Credible ODL systems must have means of establishing an individual link with each member of their universe of users. This means that each student is identified as a specific person, to whom correspondence is addressed, assignments are sent, marks are attributed and whose questions receive timely answers. It is argued that a distance teaching system needs to have efficient technological infrastructure in data processing for academic and administrative management and internal circulation of information for assuring good communications with students (Trindade et al, 2000:11).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Customer care support services for both academic staff and non-academic staff must be put in place so that both play their roles in the service delivery of ODL effectively. Therefore the following recommendations have been made for both academic and non-academic staff. There is need to support the staff through holding regular workshops with them on various aspects of customer care since it the bedrock upon which student numbers is based. Such workshops would help them to understand the needs of students, as well as ways of motivating students individually or as a group. In addition, forums like workshops would afford the workers time to share their customer care experiences and, in the process, learn from one another. On the part of ODL institutions, there is need to clearly articulate a service charter with the involvement of the staff where their roles in the service provision of ODL processes are clarified. In addition, a facility for representative staff, both academic and non-academic, to visit other ODL institutions

in the region and outside would assist in exposing them to best customer care practices in the ODL context. They would then hold seminars with others sharing their experiences with their colleagues about how others successfully do it. It is hoped that such encounters may help to clarify the myths some workers may have about quality customer care practices. Asking staff to make research presentations of customer care practices in ODL would encourage them to live what they say as well as producing quality service delivery.

In addition, other ways of encouraging staff to internalize quality customer care practices, the university could encourage them to present their work at conferences or assist them in publishing their work in relevant journals. Most ODL institutions employ part-time tutors to tutor during weekend school tutorials. To that end, the part-time tutors need training works on ODL pedagogy since they form part of the service provider team. Quality customer care practices should not only be targeted at full time workers only. Where possible, the institution could periodically invite customer care experts and consultants to address both academic and non-academic staff so that they realise the internationalisation of quality customer care practices in ODL systems.

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