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A Comparative Analysis of Service Delivery in ODL for ZOU and Other ODL Institutions

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Abstract:

The thrust of this study is to carry out a comparative analysis of service delivery in Open and Distance learning (ODL) for other ODL institutions and Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). The methodology has been triangulated, with the research design triangulated in terms of descriptive survey, case study and document analysis. The population is other ODL institutions in Southern Africa and ZOU students in Bulawayo, based on quota sampling in order to get the sample size of 147 registered ZOU students and 84 other ODL institutions students, half the actual number in Bulawayo. Questionnaires were administered to both other ODL institutions and ZOU students in Bulawayo. Interviews were conducted to two renowned academics in Bulawayo who are products of both ZOU and another ODL institution. The study established that, ZOU's academic staff are highly qualified, knowledgeable and more enthusiastic than other ODL institutions' staff but ZOU staff cannot extend working hours. Most of the other ODL institutions' manning Bulawayo centres are not degreed hence they lack competence. ZOU's modules are excellent as compared to other ODL institutions but they are poorly distributed. ZOU's library has a very good collection of books but has no internet services. ZOU is still to establish a reputation as high as that of a mega university like other ODL institutions in order to attract local students. The study recommends that ZOU should improve on its module distribution as this must be done timely and they must be relevant to the courses on offer. ZOU's payment plan should be accommodative and have discounts for early payments. ZOU should work hard to earn the reputation like that one being currently enjoyed by other ODL institutions.

1. Introduction

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has evolved over the years, nationally and internationally. That is, from being viewed suspiciously and sometimes undervalued, Open and Distance learning has managed to survive the tests of time. From being viewed as a basket case, it has since graduated into the most sort system and style of learning. This is because of the meaning that students can derive from it as well as the competition it can withstand from the conventional institutions dotted around the country. In Southern Africa, the most notable institutions of Open and Distance Learning are the University of South Africa, Zambia Open University, and Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU).

The successes of the above mentioned Open and Distance Learning institutions is measured by the quality of service delivery they offer to their stakeholders, nationally, regionally and internationally. It is because of this reason that this article engages in a comparative analysis of service delivery offered by ZOU and other ODL institutions. This analysis would assist in coming up with why other ODL institutions would appear to be more attractive to student enrolment and satisfaction as compared to the Zimbabwe Open University. This is despite the fact that client satisfaction is one of the strategic elements enshrined in the ZOU's Strategic Plan of 2010 – 2014.

Robinson (1994) defines Open and Distance learning as, referring to policies and practices that permit entry to learning with no or minimum barriers with respect to age, gender or time constraints and with recognition of prior learning. In our own view, Open and Distance learning is a type of learning that caters for both the young and elderly, who either have not been absorbed into the mainstream conventional system of education as well as the elderly at work who would want to study in the comfort of their own homes and while they would be working.

UNESCO (2002) states that, service delivery is all about people first, processes and procedures second. Our own view of service delivery is that, it is about delivering your services as effectively as possible to the satisfaction and delight of the stakeholder. In this view, one and the most important stakeholder who needs to derive a lot of satisfaction from service delivery is none other than the student. The issue is not about service delivery in general but quality and satisfactory service not shoddy, lackluster or erratic service. In this regard, without a satisfied stakeholder every time, you have no service delivery.

Although it is other ODL institutions like UNISA came into being first before ZOU, some continue to hog the lime light despite the fact that they be more expensive and of the foreign origin. On the other end, the establishment of ZOU in the 1990s was supposed to fill in the gaps provided by other ODL institutions but it appears that these may be experiencing a wide readership, taking with it the bulk of prospective ZOU students from its doorsteps. The question that people would always ask is; what is that which ZOU is not doing that other ODL institutions are capitalizing on to the extent of being more popular than our own local brand? That question and many which continue to emanate from this scenario will continue to be a cause for concern in the event that other ODL institutions are becoming more recognized and accessible than ZOU.

UNESCO (2002) emphasizes that, it is time and quality that is required to execute service delivery. In this view, it is quality assurance that determines the success of any given institution in terms of service delivery in Open and Distance learning. Olubar (2008) views quality assurance as, a systematic management and assessment procedure adopted by higher education institutions and system in order to monitor performance against objectives and to ensure achievement of quality and quality improvements. The underlying issue here is monitoring of performance related activities so as to achieve defined standards.

Quite recently, ZOU has embarked on a recruitment drive for quality assurance personnel at the national center as well as all regional centers in an attempt to improve on quality and service delivery in all its centers. If ZOU is engaged in the quality assurance drive then what is wrong with its quality management system to the effect that it is shunned by its own catchment area. And also, how does OTHER ODL INSTITUTIONS manages its quality assurance issues so as to attract wide readership? These and other questions are going to be answered in this unfolding discussion.

2. Statement of the Problem

Open and Distance learning was established to be inclusive and fill in the gaps left by the conventional system of education in Zimbabwe. Its flexibility is highly regarded and respected across the board, that it is accommodative of the young and old in its structures and provides materials and online services for student convenience monitored by highly qualified quality assurance staff to enhance service delivery. However there appears to be a problem in the management of ZOU's service delivery system which has seen its regional rival becoming more popular and attractive right on its doorsteps.

3. Research Questions

This study seeks to find answers to the following list of given questions:

- How has the Zimbabwe Open University managed its service delivery and quality management issues since its establishment?
- Why do other ODL institutions continue to attract wide readership in Zimbabwe even when it is regarded as expensive?
- What can the Zimbabwe Open University do in order to improve its service delivery and withstand competition?

4. Purpose of the Study

The study is carried out in order to come with the following:

- Compare other ODL institutions and ZOU's service delivery capacities to their stakeholders as institutions in Open and Distance learning.
- Find out how the two institutions manage their service delivery initiatives.
- Investigate the challenges that these institutions encounter in their attempt to execute service delivery and offer quality services.
- Suggest ways in which ODL institutions can be run in order to offer quality services.

5. Research Methodology

The thrust of this study is to carry out a comparative analysis of service delivery in Open and Distance learning (ODL) for other ODL institutions and Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). Therefore, methodology has been triangulated, with the research design triangulated in terms of descriptive survey, case study and document analysis. The population is other ODL institutions in Southern Africa and ZOU students in Bulawayo, based on quota sampling in order to get the sample size of 147 registered ZOU students and 84 other ODL institutions students, half the actual number in Bulawayo. Questionnaires' were administered to both other ODL institutions and ZOU students in Bulawayo. Interviews were conducted to two renowned academics in Bulawayo who both products of ZOU and other ODL institutions. Their views were sought to establish the feelings of the major stakeholders with regard to the provision of service delivery by both other ODL institutions and ZOU. In document analysis, ZOU modules were compared to those from other ODL institutions', in terms of quality, comprehensiveness, exhaustiveness and instructiveness. Qualitative data has been analyzed using grounded theory in attempts to describe and explain the elicited responses from the students.

6. Literature Review

The literature reviewed suggests that various studies have been conducted on open and distance learning (Ngegebule 2003, Ansari 2002, Ojokheta 2010). Evidence has shown that open and distance learning has been reviewed from many fronts. The area of service delivery in these institutions has generated a lot of interest among distance learning scholars (Salawu 2010, Chabaya *et al* 2011, Zikhali *et al* 2011). However service delivery can be assessed using various components among them course material development, tutorial facilitation, learner support unit, management of study centres, financial regulations and registration process. In the available

literature most researchers have focused on studying these institutions in isolation while comparative studies have received very little attention. The nature of services provided by distance education institutions in terms of materials produced, student support, administrative and management service and monitoring and evaluation of the total package have a major role to play in the progression, retention and successful completion rates (Ngegebule 2003).

In an effort to bring services closer to the population open and distance learning institutions have opened regional centres. The establishment of these centres helps in the disseminating of information from the national centre. Ansari (2002) asserts that the institutional models of open universities are designed to effectively respond to the growth and development of open and distance learning, particularly to meet the educational requirements of the regions, for which they have a mandate. For service delivery to be achieved in open and distance learning the role of regional offices is very critical. The growing population of a country demands a system of education which brings the learning to the doorsteps of the learner. It is the actual service that students get from these regional centres that determine whether open and distance learning can provide efficient service to their clients.

Furthermore service delivery can be measured using the tutorial facilitation offered at the regional centres. In order to augment the course materials for their students open and distance learning institutions offer tutorial sessions which are conducted at the regional centres. Effective teaching and learning require extensive preparations not only in terms of developing study materials for independent learning but also for adopting face-face teaching strategies, mainly in the form of periodic contact programmes (Pityana 2009). The quality service provision during these sessions is of paramount importance. It is the role of the region to ensure that venues for these tutorials are secured, timetables for those sessions are drawn and placed on notice boards in time and that tutors promptly attend. That interaction between the student and the tutor, though limited in time, helps the student who spent most of the time away from the tutor and the institution.

The establishment of a learner support unit in an open and distance learning institution is vital as a way to help students overcome their challenges. For effective learning there is need for rapport between the student and the tutor. Ngegebule (2003) argues that student services are suitably designed to overcome the negative effects of isolation and lack of regular contact between the distance learner and the tutor. From time to time students need counselling services since most of the time they work independently and that may lead to stressful times. The learner support unit offers advisory services to students and can defend students in cases where there they have valid cases. The presence of such units is critical for learning institutions as it promotes efficient service delivery.

The accessibility, quality and relevance of study materials is considered to be very important for open and distance learning institutions whose endeavour is to provide quality service to their clients. When students are not served with enough study material it may lead to students failing examinations, taking longer to finish their studies or even withdrawing completely from the university. The print study material has proved to be the mainstay of open and distance learning although e-learning is fast gaining ground.

7. Data Presentation

Student responses on service provision in the two institutions were placed side by side so that a simple comparison could be made.

	ZOU N=147			OTHER ODL INSTITUTIONS N=84		
	Always F %	Sometimes F %	Not at all F %	Always F %	Sometimes F %	Not at all F %
The reception is always manned	143(98)	4(2)		80(95)	4(5)	
Staff is friendly	142(97)	7(5)		80(95)	4(5)	
Prompt service	143(98)	3(2)		82(98)	2(2)	
Provide information on where to get different services	146(99)	1(1)		84(100)		
Their area is clean	143(98)	4(2)		83(99)	1(1)	
The security officers are courteous	88(59)	59(41)		48(57)	36(43)	

Table 1: Students Responses the service provision by front desk and support staff at ZOU and other ODL institution

The level of satisfaction in the services provided by front desk and support staff seems to be generally more satisfying in ZOU than other ODL institutions. Staff presence at ZOU offices is (98%) compared to (95%) reported for other ODL institutions' centres. ZOU staff scored (97%) against (95%) for other ODL institutions in terms of front desk and support staff friendliness. With regards to prompt service provision there is no difference between the two sets of service providers. Two areas where ZOU staff seems to trail other ODL institutions' centres are cleanliness of front desk area and providing information on where to get different services. However, the latter seems not to be significantly different.

	ZOU N=147			OTHER ODL INSTITUTIONS N=84		
	Agree F %	Sometimes F %	Disagree F %	Agree F %	Sometimes F %	Disagree F %
Academic staff is respectful	105(71)	42(29)		63(75)	21(25)	
Staff is polite	110(75)	37(25)		63(75)	21(25)	
Ready to work extra hours to help students	63(42)	42(29)	42 (29)	70(83)	14(17)	
Enthusiastic about their work	109(74)	21(14)	17 (12)	61(73)	23(27)	
Are knowledgeable in their areas	131(89)	16(11)		66(79)	18(21)	
Provide accurate information on internal processes	84(57)	42(29)		80(95)	4(5)	

Table 2: Students view of performance of academic staff at ZOU and other ODL institutions' centres

One area that ZOU academic staff seem to be doing distinctly better than other ODL institutions is knowledgeability. ZOU staff seem to be trailing other ODL institutions on extending working hours to help students.

	ZOU N=147			OTHER ODL INSTITUTIONS N=84		
	Yes F %	Sometimes F %	No F %	Yes F %	Sometimes F %	Yes F %
Registration process is clear and simple	129(71)	9(6)	9(6)	84 (100)		
Fees are affordable		50(34)	97 (66)	42(49)	43(51)	
Payment plan is good	10(7)	63(43)	74 (50)	42(49)	43(51)	
There are incentives for early payment	111(76)	18(12)	18 (12)	61(73)	23(27)	
Tutorial venues are accessible	126(86)	15(10)	6(4)	64(76)	20(24)	
Tutorial venues are clean and safe	84(57)	42(29)	21 (14)	65(77)	19(23)	

Table 3: Students perceptions on processes within ZOU and other ODL institutions' centres

Tutors are always prepared and knowledgeable	132(90)	9(6)	6(4)	81(96)	3(4)
Modules distribution is good	20(14)	74(50)	53 (36)	84 (100)	
Modules are easy to follow	131(89)	10(7)	6(4)	68(81)	16(19)
Other materials such as CDs, tapes and radio lessons are used	63(43)	84(57)		67(80)	17(20)
Library hours are long enough	118(80)	29(20)		81(96)	3(4)
Library collection is good	131(89)	16(11)		66(79)	18(21)
There is easy access to the internet within the institution	84(57)	42(29)	21 (14)	80(95)	4(5)

Table 4

The findings seem to suggest ZOU has more accessible tutorial venues 126(86) against other ODL institutions' centres 64(76). Tutors compete with (90%) of the ZOU students rating their tutors as prepared and knowledgeable while (96%) of other ODL institutions' students rated their lecturers as prepared and knowledgeable. Furthermore (89%) of the ZOU students viewed their library as having a good collection against (79%) of other ODL institutions' students for the same parameter. ZOU modules were better favoured than other ODL institutions' modules. Other ODL institutions on the other hand seems to be better than ZOU in the registration process (100%) against (71%), fees affordability, distribution of modules (100%) against (14%) and provision of internet services (95%) against (57%).

	ZOU N=147			OTHER ODL INSTITUTIONS N=84		
	Good F %	Average F %	Bad F %	Good F %	Average F %	Bad F %
Assignment management	144(98)	3(2)		84 (100)		
Assignment marking and comments	110(75)	21(14)	16 (11)	63(75)	21(25)	
Assignment turnaround time	63(42)	42(29)	42 (29)	70(83)	14(17)	
Administration of examinations	142(97)	5(3)		84 (100)		
Publication of results	37(26)	36(24)	74 (50)	84 (100)		
Students guidance and counselling	84(57)	42(29)	21 (14)	80(95)	4(5)	

Table 5: Students evaluation of the processes within ZOU and other ODL institutions' centres

Areas of assignment management, marking and administration of examinations were rated by students in both sets of institutions the same. Other ODL institutions' students rated their institutions better than ZOU students and results publication.

7.1. Results of Document Analysis

The researchers carried out a document analysis of ZOU and other ODL institutions' modules. The other ODL institutions' modules are more or less of a course outline. It does not have the requisite content. On the other hand the ZOU module is the basic textbook which can be used with supplementary texts. A snap look at the tutors profile in the private colleges offering other ODL institutions' programmes were not degree holders.

7.2. Interview Results

Asked what it is that they like about other ODL institutions (80%) of the respondents expressed satisfaction with the ease of the registration process through the use of the other ODL institutions' website such that local colleges are only convenient in getting face-to-face tuition. One respondent did not want to explain further but just said "reputation". Seventy-one percent of the respondents said they were delighted with the pride that comes with one being a student with other ODL institutions student as they award an internationally recognised certificate.

8. Discussion of Results

UNESCO (2002) service delivery is about people first, process and procedure. The front desk personnel must do a good job first so that ensuing services may be as satisfying. Occupants of these posts are no less important than the director as they have the potential to attract customers or turn them away. Comparing the service delivery by these groups in the two sets of institutions showed that they are not significantly different as three percent is the largest difference noted.

Academic staff in ZOU scored higher than other ODL institutions' tutors in knowledge ability. ZOU is a government institution which abides by the laid down standards where minimum qualifications are set for one to teach a given level of education. Private institutions are not really under strict surveillance to that effect.

The registration process for other ODL institutions was described as clear and simple by all the students while that for ZOU is long and winding. The regional office has two offices on different locations and this inconveniences students as they to move to the other site for other services. Fees for ZOU were viewed as high by students but this could be due to the fact that most of them are civil servants such that from their meagre salaries they may find it difficult to pay. Furthermore most of the students are parents who have to pay fees for their children then use the remainder on their fees thus may vie the fees as high. Payment plan was viewed in bad light probably due to the fact that as there is a charge for late payment yet there is no discount for early payment. Module distribution was condemned by students as they are usually not available but already paid for. No extension of assignment due dates are given where a delay in module distribution was experienced. ZOU also trailed to other ODL institutions on access to the internet. Matabeleland North students have access to the internet by only using the Bulawayo Region network. One element so distinctly better than other ODL institutions is the quality of the module. It acts as the lecturer. It contains the basic content required; it has references for further reading.

Assignment management and marking is as good as in other ODL institutions' centres. Only assignment turnaround time is longer than in other ODL institutions. This is due to the fact that part-time tutors who mark the assignments in some cases are difficult to get.

They usually attend to ZOU work after their own work. Administration of examinations was not different from that of other ODL institutions' centres with only the publication of results being thorny. Feedback is essential and should always be timely.

9. Conclusions

From the data collected, the researchers have concluded that:

- ZOU front desk and support staff performance is equivalent to other ODL institutions therefore in terms of attracting students, ZOU has the potential.
- ZOU's academic staff is highly qualified, knowledgeable and more enthusiastic than other ODL institutions' staff but ZOU staff cannot extend working hours.
- Most of the other ODL institutions' manning Bulawayo centres are not degreed hence they lack competence.
- ZOU's registration process appears to be long and tiresome thereby demotivating students.
- ZOU fees appear to be a bit high for our local client who is both a parent and a student.
- ZOU's modules are excellent as compared to other ODL institutions but they are poorly distributed.
- ZOU's library has a very good collection of books but has no internet services.
- There is no difference in assignment management, marking and examination management for both other ODL institutions and ZOU.
- ZOU's publication and management of results leaves a lot to be desired.
- ZOU is still to establish a reputation as high as that of a mega university like other ODL institutions in order to attract local students.

10. Recommendations

- ZOU's registration process should be clear, simple and under one roof.
- ZOU should improve on its module distribution as this must be done timely and they must be relevant to the courses on offer.
- ZOU's payment plan should be accommodative and have discounts for early payments.
- All regions must be connected to the internet and data base management should be upgraded in line with recent technological advancement.
- ZOU should work hard to earn the reputation like that one being currently enjoyed by other ODL institutions.

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