

Enhancing Quality Service Delivery through Self Evaluation: A Case of the Zimbabwe Open University's Matabeleland South Region

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ABSTRACT The study sought to establish the extent to which self evaluation, using students who are the direct clients of the education system, promoted the quality of service delivery in Zimbabwe Open University's Matabeleland South Region. The mixed methods design was used to collect data from students in two phases. The first phase collected quantitative data using questionnaires from 77 students who were writing the November/December 2011 examinations. The second phase collected qualitative data using interviews with five students from each faculty. In the main, the study revealed that self evaluation helped the region improve the quality of service delivery. The study also revealed that the Matabeleland South region needed to improve the quality of the tutorials offered to the students, increase the tutorial time allocation, improve the turnaround time for the marked assignments, encourage the use of power point presentation by tutors, provide internet facilities for research and make use of e-mail services when communicating with students. Students were unhappy with lack of periodicals, local newspapers, magazines and journals at the library. The quality of the province's administrative services was acceptable while the conduct and management of examinations was singled out as professional and beyond reproach. The study recommended periodic self evaluation as a means of enhancing continuous improvement of the quality of service delivery in Zimbabwe Open University's Matabeleland South Region in particular and the entire institution in general.

INTRODUCTION

Quality Assurance practice was introduced at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) in 2007 to enhance the institution's quality of service delivery in order to achieve the institution's vision and goals (Kurasha and Gwarinda 2010). The quality assurance practice in higher education is underpinned by self evaluation which is the cornerstone of the entire process (Barnett 1994; Friend-Pereira et al. 2002; Smout 2005; van Vught and Westerheijden 1993; Withers 2005). The demand for quality service delivery at the Zimbabwe Open University has become greater now than ever before due to the unprecedented

competition for students from state and private universities in Zimbabwe. Kurasha (2010), in the ZOU Strategic Plan 2010 - 2014 argued that because of globalization, ZOU is operating in an era where even hotels are now running Graduate Development Programmes that was the preserve of universities and big companies are offering in-house training programmes that are equivalent to university degrees and conventional universities have encroached into Open Distance Learning (ODL) business that traditionally was the preserve of Universities offering Open Distance Learning only. Arokiasamy and Hon Tat (2014) support Kurash (2010) in that globalization and open market systems have created the complex competitive environment for the service sector as is the case with universities. In such a competitive landscape the clients have more options and are no longer brand loyal and satisfying the customer is no longer enough hence the focus of every institution competing for students in the market has gradually shifted from customer satisfaction to cus-

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tomers delight to gain a competitive advantage (Arokiasamy and Hon Tat 2014; Horowitz and Rinehart 2001; Kumasey 2014; Kurasha 2010) and ZOU is no exception. Naidoo and Mutinta (2014) argue that as the global economy battles through the credit crunch, the universities too, are under pressure to attract students. For any university to become an institution of choice to the students both nationally and internationally under these difficult economic times, it has to set itself apart from all others by providing high quality service and take students satisfaction as a major source of competitive advantage (Munusamy et al. 2010; Naidoo and Mutinta 2014; Potrurak 2014). Dumbu et al. (2012) advise that in no way can the Zimbabwe Open University be left out of the race as the competition for the satisfaction of the consumers is stiffening from every corner and every minute of its service to the clients.

Belawati and Zuhairi (2007) argue that public and institutional stakeholders seeking accountability in higher education have encouraged governments to establish national quality assurance and accreditation structures. The Zimbabwe Open University introduced the quality assurance practice which is underpinned by self evaluation as its vehicle of achieving its vision of becoming a world class Open and Distance Learning University (ZOU Strategic Plan 2010-2014). To achieve this vision the ZOU has to raise the quality of its service delivery to that of world class status and ensure high quality service in all its service delivery modes be they academic or administrative that result in satisfied customers (Arokiasamy and Hon Tat 2014; Tierney 1998). According to Arokiasamy and Hon Tat (2014), the quality of service delivery has become a great differentiator and a powerful competitive weapon which many leading services institutions possess.

The emphasis in self evaluation practice is on achieving continuous improvement of the quality of service delivery and professional accountability to peers (Brennan et al. in Smout 2005; Brink 2003; Dill 2007). When aimed at internal institutional continuous improvement, self evaluation practice brings change which includes building on the positive aspects and diminishing or correcting the weaknesses that would have been identified. Adams (2008) adds the various synonyms of self evaluation in his definition when he writes that, "Self review (which

may also be referred to as 'self assessment', self evaluation', self-study', or 'self reflection') can be defined as 'the process of critically reviewing the quality of one's own performance and provision' The Japanese National Institute for Academic Degrees and University Evaluation (2009) uses the terms self evaluation and self assessment interchangeably and defines them as, "A systematic assessment of universities and higher education institutions to check progress in light of their own goals and objectives, discover areas of excellence or areas in need of improvement and enhance the quality of their activities based on published assessment results". From the foregoing definitions, self evaluation can be defined as the capacity of the institution's departments to examine and evaluate their own behavior and actions as they undertake evaluation by themselves, for themselves and for their own continuous improvement as departments or institutions. Self evaluations according to Adams (2008) are primarily conducted to identify improvements and efficiencies in support of identified organisational objectives and to validate strengths based on formalised analysis. This study sought to establish the extent to which self evaluation assisted the Zimbabwe Open University's Matabeleland South region to enhance continuous improvement of service delivery through building on its strengths and correcting the weaknesses to enable it withstand the stiff competition from state and private universities.

According to Kotler (2001), the best way to improve the quality of service delivery is to undertake a service audit or self evaluation. Likewise, this study sought to make use of self evaluation in seeking to improve the quality of service delivery by the ZOU'S Matabeleland South regional centre. This study focused on the quality of tutorial services, the library and information services, general administrative services and examinations management services. The researchers hoped that the knowledge gained would assist the region to improve the quality of service delivery and gain a competitive advantage over its competitors in the region's highly competitive higher education terrain and be able to retain its old and current customers (Arokiasamy and Hon Tat 2014; Kuveya 2004). The study also provided the Zimbabwe Open University's Matabeleland South region with the opportunity to identify its strengths and weaknesses in service quality provision.

According to Friend-Pereira et al. (2002), self-evaluation is a self-regulated and structured process that allows those most affected such as the students, to put forward their views and put emphasis on the use of best practice that enhances continuous improvement in a programme, unit, department or institution's activities. Self evaluation therefore emphasizes the capacity of individuals and departments to examine and evaluate the quality of service delivery by themselves, for themselves and for the continuous internal improvement of the unit, programme or department. This means that the self-evaluation process of the quality of service delivery is designed and implemented by the institution's staff members and students hence reinforces academic collegial values and encourages innovation and creativity by the individual members. Self evaluation as the cornerstone of the quality assurance practice assists members of the unit or department to identify existing strengths to build on, weaknesses to diminish, opportunities to utilize and threats to counteract in order to enhance the continuous improvement of the quality of service delivery in a unit, programme, department or institution (Friend-Pereira et al. 2002; Harvey and Green 1993; Smout 2002; van Vught and Westerheijden 1993; Withers 2005). The self-evaluation focuses on the state of the quality of service delivery and provides the basis against which future improvements can be implemented by the institutional members and becomes both a guiding document for continuous improvement of the unit, department or institution.

In support of self evaluation, Barnett (1994) and Luckett (2003) argue that the more the purpose, design, criteria and consequence of quality assurance practice is owned by the institutional members such as the academic staff, the more likely they are to take the findings seriously and that understanding will be maximized where it is self-generated rather than being the assimilation of others' insights and judgments. This implies that where there is self evaluation, there is the likelihood not just of an advance in self-understanding but also of a continuous self-improvement and professional accountability taking place. This argument further implies that through the change in understanding acquired through the self-evaluation, a resultant change will occur in the views staff members have of themselves, their educational goals and their approaches to their tasks. Adams (2008) notes

that self review can play not only a critical role for institutions committed to learning and improvement, but it can also underpin the capacity of an institution to meet external quality assurance requirements. When self reviews are conducted well, they can result in enhanced (and shared) understanding of performance against set objectives, formulation of improved institutional practices and outcomes, and better founded response to changes and future directions. If the institution's academic staff members feel that the self evaluation process stands to benefit an external agency rather than their professional development, the level of self criticism is likely to be muted and their creativity and innovativeness stifled and the value of the evaluation reduced.

In a comparison of experiences of the institutional audits at three South African universities, Botha et al. (2008), found that in all three institutions the audit preparation process, especially the self-evaluation exercise was seen to be a more useful learning and developmental experience than the visit by the external audit panel. Self-evaluation practice allows the staff members to put forward their views and suggest possible solutions that are likely to be better received as they originate from among the peers rather than being imposed from above. These arguments imply that where there is self evaluation of the quality of service delivery, there is the likelihood not just of an advance in self-understanding but also of continuous self-improvement taking place. The conduct of self-evaluation by staff members resonates well with the conventional wisdom advanced by Barnett (1994) and Biggs (2001) and the demands of the Bologna International Convention (1999) that quality assurance practices in higher education must move towards self-evaluation and self-regulation. The study sought to establish the extent to which the self evaluation study in the ZOU Matabeleland South region enhanced continuous improvement of the quality of service delivery.

The primary aim of conducting self evaluations is to ensure that services are responsive to customer needs. Quality customer service delivery is the process by which an organization delivers its services or products in a way that allows the customer to access them in the most efficient, fair, cost effective, and humanly satisfying and delightful manner possible (Thompson 2000). According to Tierney (1998) in

Chabaya et al. (2011) service delivery in education must motivate students 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. Excellent customer service delivery improves trust and information exchange and results in satisfied or delighted customers. Kotler (2001) argues that high quality service delivery leads to repeated patronage and loyalty, promotes positive word of mouth whereby clients become walking, talking advertisements for the organization, lowers institutional costs of attracting new clients, reduces failure costs, creates sustainable advantage, increases trust and insulates customers from competition. Devanathan and Jambulingam (2014) concur with Kotler (2001) in that the key strategy for the success and survival of any institution is the delivery of quality services to customers which results in customer satisfaction and loyalty. According to Naidoo and Mutinta (2014), the greater the level of customer satisfaction, the stronger the link between customers (students) and the providing institutions. On the other hand, Nitsch (2003) in Chiome et al. (2011) posits that disgruntled customers or clients can offer negative 'word of mouth' advertising. When addressing participants of the customer care workshop for the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) employees, Kurasha (2005) advised that for ZOU to attract new student clients it had to provide high service quality to keep its old clients satisfied since satisfied clients spread good news that attract more clients.

Naidoo and Mutinta (2014) posit that since service quality can be a major determinant in attracting students, the university should apply the concept of service quality at all its levels of service delivery. Customer satisfaction is achieved by providing valued services and products, where value is the positive difference between customers' actual experiences and their service delivery expectations (Heskett et al. 1997). Literature has shown that employee satisfaction begets employee loyalty which begets loyal behavior outcomes such as good word of mouth marketing for the organization (Heskett et al. 1997; Potrurak 2014; Preko et al. 2014). The customer service culture in institutions must be supported by leadership that emphasizes the importance of each customer and employee. Heskett et al. (1997) advise that leaders must be

creative and energetic (not lofty or conservative), participatory and caring (not removed or elitist), that is, one who can be a coach, teacher, or listener (not just a supervisor or manager). Such a leader demonstrates company values (rather than simply institutionalizing policies) and motivates by mission (rather than by fear). The study also focused on the role the administrative staff in ZOU's Matabeleland South region played in enhancing quality service delivery.

Christopher (2001) in Zikhali et al. (2011) and Thompson (2000) argue that unsuccessful organizations think inside-out and think they know what their customers want and they deliver that while the successful ones think outside-in. Organizations using the inside-out strategy are unsuccessful because quite often what they think the customer wants is wrong. On the other hand, successful service organizations using the outside-in strategy find out through market research or self evaluation what their clients want and deliver that standard or higher. Christopher (2001) in Zikhali et al. (2011) argues that knowing what the client wants is probably the first and most critical step in delivering quality service. While conducting daily business, one of the researchers has often heard ZOU's clients complaining about non delivery and late delivery of services, rude and incompetent personnel, poor performance, and a host of other unsatisfactory issues that reflect an outside-in strategy of providing services. The self evaluation study provided an outside-in opportunity of establishing the students' perceptions and views on the quality of service delivery Zimbabwe Open University's Matabeleland South provided to its clients.

Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study was to investigate the extent to which self evaluation enhances the continuous improvement of the quality of service delivery in the Zimbabwe Open University's Matabeleland South region. More specifically the study sought;

- ♦ To determine the implications of self evaluation practices in enhancing continuous improvement of the quality of service delivery in the Zimbabwe Open University's Matabeleland South region.
- ♦ To determine the extent to which the role of self evaluation of the quality of service de-

livery in the Zimbabwe Open University's Matabeleland South region is in tandem with the current trends in quality assurance practice.

South region is in tandem with global practices and enhances the continuous improvement of the quality of service delivery.

METHODOLOGY

The Research Design

The study adopted a mixed methods design. The greatest advantage of the mixed methods design is that it enabled the researchers to use both qualitative and quantitative approaches in a complementary manner and provided some interaction rather than a dichotomy between these approaches (Gelo et al. 2008). The mixed methods design enabled the researchers to triangulate the quantitative and qualitative methods and data sources as well as provided a convergence and corroboration of results from the different methods and designs in studying the same phenomenon (Creswell 2007; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004). This way, the researchers were provided with an opportunity of checking or explaining findings from one method against findings from another hence provided a more complete analysis of the research problem through comparing data produced by the different methods. This way, the researchers were able to see and understand the problem under study in a more rounded and complete fashion than would be the case had the data been drawn from just one method. The mixed methods design enabled the researchers to overcome the limitations of purely quantitative or qualitative approaches by maximizing the advantages and minimizing the disadvantages connected to the single application of one of the two approaches (Creswell 2007; Gelo et al. 2008; Maree 2007). Given that the different methods overlap each other somewhat, at times complement each other and are contrary at times, the use of Mixed Methods has the effect of balancing each method out and giving a richer and deeper understanding of the phenomenon. The researchers collected data in two separate phases. The first phase collected quantitative data through the use of survey questionnaires while the second phase collected qualitative data using interviews and analysis of documents. The mixed methods design enabled the researchers to establish the extent to which the use of self evaluation in the Zimbabwe Open University's Matabeleland

Population and Sampling

The population of study was made up of all the students who sat for the November/December 2011 examinations at the Matabeleland South regional centre. The study preferred convenient sampling strategy that raised 77 participants who volunteered to complete the questionnaires during the examination period. The researchers also collected follow up data from 32 students who attended weekend tutorials for the last semester of 2012. The two categories were believed to have adequate experience on the quality of service delivery by the ZOU's Matabeleland South regional centre as they had been enrolled for at least one semester.

Data Collection Techniques

The researchers used the survey questionnaires to collect quantitative data in the first phase of the study and interviews to collect qualitative data in the second phase. The survey questionnaires provided a general overview of perceptions and experiences held by students while interviews enabled the researchers to have an in-depth understanding of the quality of services delivery offered by ZOU's Matabeleland South regional centre to the students. The survey questionnaires comprised both open-ended and closed-ended questions that were administered to students who came to write their November/December 2011 examinations. The questionnaires enabled the participants to freely respond without fear of any reprisals. Since students were busy with their examinations, they were requested to take the questionnaires home and bring them when completed. Of the 100 questionnaires distributed, 77 were completed and returned and that was 77% return while the 32 students who participated during the weekend tutorials were those students who attended tutorials.

The researchers collected qualitative data in the second phase through semi-structured interviews that comprised a few structured questions that were followed by unstructured open-ended questions which enabled the researchers to collect rich descriptive data from the informa-

tion rich participants. The interviews comprised focus group discussions that enabled the researchers to collect in-depth understanding, experiences and perceptions of the students on the quality of service delivery ZOU students were offered by the regional centre under study. The interview schedule enabled the researchers to document real events, record verbatim what students said and observe their behaviour while immersed in the natural setting of everyday life in ZOU's Matabeleland South regional centre (Maree 2007; Neuman 1997). The semi-structured interview schedule enabled the researchers to recognize several nuances of attitude and behaviour that could have escaped the researchers had he used other methods.

Data Analysis

In the first phase, the quantitative numerical data collected through survey questionnaires were manipulated to reveal patterns, trends and relationships between variables (Neuman 1997). The collected data was analyzed and summarized through a table of frequency distributions and percentages that were subsequently displayed in graph form. In phase two, the researchers organised the qualitative data on the basis of themes, categories, general ideas, concepts or similar features that related to the main research question. In analyzing qualitative data, the researchers sought to summarize what had been seen and heard in terms of common words, phrases, themes or patterns that aided the understanding and interpretation of that which was emerging (Maree 2007). After the data collected through quantitative and qualitative techniques had been analyzed and interpreted separately, inferences from the separate findings were made and integrated for interpretation.

RESULTS

This self evaluation study sought students' views and perceptions over the quality of service delivery of the region's tutorial services, library services, administrative services and examination management services. The quality of the tutorial services is discussed first.

Quality of Tutorial Services

The results reflected in Table 1 revealed that students are slightly dissatisfied with the venue for weekend tutorials 44(57.1%), the availability of tutors for weekend tutorials 54(70.1%), level of preparedness by tutors 45(58.4%) and the quality of tutorial presentations by tutors 63(81.8%).

Students also expressed low satisfaction on the amount of tutor feedback 39(50.6%), the quality of research supervision by tutors 40(51.9%), the level of tutor consultation 45(58.4%) and the length of turnaround time of marked assignments 39(50.6%). Students however indicated that they submitted assignment on due dates 56(72.7%) and that assignments were thoroughly marked 58(75.3%). The emerging picture was that students were generally dissatisfied with the quality of weekend tutorial management services in the ZOU, Matabeleland South regional centre. The interviewed students across the faculties demanded weekend tutorials and these are some of the verbatim quotations of what they had to say;

'Please provide Maths tutorials since there have never been some in Matabeland South since I joined'.

'Anyone studying with ZOU should have access to tutorials'.

Table 1: Responses on the quality of tutorial services by all 77 respondents

	Agree		Disagree		Total No.	Total %
	No.	%	No.	%		
1.1. Tutorial venue is conducive	33	42.9	44	57.1	77	100
1.2. Tutors are always available	23	29.9	54	70.1	77	100
1.3. Tutors are always thoroughly prepared	32	41.6	45	58.4	77	100
1.4. Tutors always provide feedback	39	50.6	38	49.4	77	100
1.5. Tutors use power point in their presentations	14	18.2	63	81.8	77	100
1.6. Tutors are helpful in research supervision	40	51.9	37	48.1	77	100
1.7. Students submit assignments on due dates	56	72.7	21	27.3	77	100
1.8. Assignment marking is thorough	58	75.3	19	24.7	77	100
1.9. In the absence of tutorials, student consult tutors	45	58.4	32	41.6	77	100
1.10. Students receive marked assignments before writing next	39	50.6	38	49.4	77	100

“Tutorials should be held regardless of the number of students”. Being a small number of students cannot be an excuse because we pay for these services. Please deliver’.

‘Tutorials should be constantly held’.

“No tutorials are being held and yet tuition fee is paid by students”.

‘Please organize tutorials’.

‘Conduct tutorials without fail’.

‘No tutorials were conducted. Use qualified tutors who have a passion’.

‘There is a need to have students at heart and conduct tutorials’.

‘Arrange for tutorials because some of us are beginners who honestly need help. By cancelling tutorials, we are being deprived of the learning opportunities’.

‘Tutorials should be held during every semester for students to be informed of their expectations when writing examinations’.

‘We need tutorials please’.

The quality of library information services is discussed next.

Quality of Library Information Services

The results in Table 2, reveal that 62(80.6%) of the students expressed satisfaction with the library assistant’s courtesy and help. The students also reflected satisfaction with the library space and furniture 59(76.6%) and the classification of books for quick accessibility 54(70.1%).

The students however appear dissatisfied with the relevance and currency of books in the shelves with 41(53.2%) expressing dissatisfaction and 36(46.8%) being satisfied. Students were also very dissatisfied with lack of internet facilities 62(80.5%), inadequate reference books 65(84.4%), inadequate newspapers and magazines 52(67.55) and inadequate periodicals and journals 56(72.7%). The picture that emerges is

that library information services facilities provided to students are far from being adequate. Some responses on the open-ended questions had a fair number of respondents indicating that they never used the library either because they stayed far from the regional library or because it was inadequately stocked with relevant and current books. The quality of administrative services is discussed next.

Quality of Administrative Services

The results had 60(77.9%) of the students indicating that they were happy with the accessibility of the Regional Director and 61(79.2%) expressed satisfaction in the Regional Director’s level of concern about their academic problems. The students also appear satisfied with friendliness and courtesy demonstrated by both the Chief Secretary and Receptionist they both rated at 68(88.3%). Students also applauded the following services: the efficiency with which the receptionist addressed their queries 61(79.2%), the level of interest the Administration Officer showed in students’ academic problems 62(80.5%), the friendliness and courtesy demonstrated by the Administration Officer 65(84.4%), the amount of information and help provided by the Administration Officer 60(77.9%), the degree of concern shown by the accounts clerk over students’ problems 62(80.5%) and her friendliness and courtesy 68(88.3%). The students were satisfied with the RPCs’ help and support 69(89.6%), the RPCs’ follow up on students’ problems 58 (75.3%), the faculty clerks’ friendliness and courtesy 69(89.6%), the faculty clerks’ help and support 66 (85.7%). The picture emerging is that students are in the main, satisfied with the general administration of the regional centre including that of

Table 2: Summary of responses on the library information services by 77 students

	Agree		Disagree		Total	Total
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1.1. The librarian is courteous and helpful	62	80.6	15	19.5	77	100
1.2. There is adequate space and furniture	59	76.6	18	23.4	77	100
1.3. There are relevant and current books	36	46.8	41	53.2	77	100
1.4. The books are well classified for quick access	54	70.1	23	29.9	77	100
1.5. There is internet facility to facilitate research	15	19.5	62	80.5	77	100
1.6. There are adequate reference books	12	15.6	65	84.4	77	100
1.7. There adequate newspapers and magazines	25	32.5	52	67.5	77	100
1.8. There adequate periodicals and journals	21	27.3	56	72.7	77	100

programme management services in the faculties. The quality of the examination management services is discussed next.

Quality of the Examinations Management Services

The results had 69(89.6%) of the students indicating that the examination venue was conducive enough. This however contradicts students' feelings towards the suitability of the same venue for weekend tutorials in which 44(57.1%) expressed dissatisfaction. The dissatisfaction could be because of the size of furniture designed for primary school children while the satisfaction as the examination could be derived from the use of the school hall. The data from the study show 75(97.4%) of the students confirming being informed of the examination rules and regulations before writing their examinations, seated separate enough to discourage copying during the examinations and that the conduct of the examinations was professional and beyond reproach with invigilators always alert and vigilant. The respondents also revealed that sealed examination packages were always opened in front of the examinees 76(98.7%) while 74(96.1%) indicated that candidates brought along their positive identification for verification of their candidature to be allowed to sit for the examinations and remained displayed throughout the process. Data however show that 53(68.8%) students were dissatisfied by the amount of missing results while 44(57.4%) indicated that the subsequent examination results queries were not dealt with spontaneously. The 55(71.4%) of the students felt that these missing results frustrated some students into dropping out of their studies of study. The picture that emerges from the study is that the conduct of examinations in the ZOU's Matabeleland South region is professional and beyond reproach. There is however a need for improvement in ensuring that all the students received their examination results and on the speed of processing and resolving subsequent queries to avoid frustrating some students into dropping out. The analysed data is discussed next.

DISCUSSION

The discussion focuses on the quality of tutorial, library and information, administrative

and examination management services the Zimbabwe Open University's Matabeleland South region provides its students. The quality of tutorial services is discussed first.

Quality of Tutorials Services

As the results section shows, in connection to the weekend tutorials, students expressed displeasure with the conduct and quality of weekend tutorials across faculties. Students demanded weekend tutorial services even when there was one student registered once fees have been paid against the university's position that having tutorials for less than ten students was not cost effective. The students however argued that if the University felt that they were too few for tutorials to be cost effective then they should be exempted from paying tuition fees but if that was not feasible then they needed value for their money. This concern by students is in line with Watkins (2000) who notes that learning can be constrained by dilapidated infrastructure, inadequate facilities, and limited supply of learning materials and weak tutorial sessions, which inhibit rather than nourish the potential of students. All these outcries for weekend tutorials from students are adequate evidence that the quality of weekend tutorial services had deteriorated to very low levels. The study concurs with Devanathan and Jambulingam (2014), Kurasha (2005) and Nitsch (2003) in Chiome et al. (2011) that such disgruntled customers or clients are likely to offer negative 'word of mouth' advertising since it is only the satisfied clients who spread good news that attract more clients. In the same vein, in a study by Sikwibele and Mungoo (2009) interviews with the teachers who were learning through distance education revealed that their greatest challenge was the minimal learner support from tutors and citing Kember (1989) explain that learners also experience feelings of isolation and stress due to lack of organizational support, which may eventually lead to non-completion. Excellent customer service delivery improves trust and information exchange and results in satisfied or delighted customers. The study concurs with Devanathan and Jambulingam (2014) and Kotler (2001) in that high quality service delivery leads to customer satisfaction, loyalty and repeated patronage and promotes positive word of mouth whereby clients become walking, talk-

ing advertisements for the organization, lowers institutional costs of attracting new clients, reduces failure costs, creates sustainable advantage, increases trust and insulates customers from competition. The study also concurs with Naidoo and Mutinta (2014) in that the greater the level of customer satisfaction, the stronger the link between customers (students) and the providing institutions.

The study revealed that while weekend tutorials were being scheduled, some tutors were not turning up and when they did they were not well prepared for the contact sessions hence the quality of service delivery was either poor or nonexistent. Interviewed students recommended that set dates for tutorials must be adhered to and tutorials ought to be conducted as scheduled. The students requested tutors to be available and be fully prepared for weekend tutorials as in some instances their interactions with students lacked content and where changes were inevitable these should be communicated on time. This request indicates the existence of a common practice by tutors not to turn up for tutorials without communicating the changes on time while students travelled all the way for nothing and incurred financial costs and when tutors turned up they were poorly prepared. Interviewed students indicated that some students sat for examinations without having had any tutorial guidance from their tutors. It is with this experience of poor tutorial service delivery that some interviewed students encouraged ZOU's Matabeleland South region to employ qualified and committed tutors with basic knowledge of the courses being offered who will be available for scheduled tutorials all the time. In the main, the study revealed that students were dissatisfied with quality of tutorial service delivery in the ZOU's Matabeleland South region. This is in line with Watkins (2000) who notes that learning can be constrained by dilapidated infrastructure, inadequate facilities, and limited supply of learning materials and weak tutorial sessions, which inhibit rather than nourish the potential of students

Students also revealed that some tutors demanded money for drinks from students yet they were being paid by the University for tutoring while students were struggling to raise fees. The existence of such caliber of tutors in the region is a cause for concern as they can easily be influenced for monetary gains by corrupt students

to inflate marks for inadequately researched assignments or projects. All the Faculties and units were implored during the feedback workshop to assist weed out such unprofessional and unethical conduct among its tutors. In reacting to a need for suitably qualified personnel, the region immediately head hunted, interviewed and engaged suitably qualified additional part-time tutors of good reputation as they sought to improve the regional image and quality of tutorial services. In an effort to monitor tutor attendance, a register to account for both students and tutors was introduced as evidence of attendance and entitlement to a claim by tutors.

A follow up study to the recommendations raised in the self evaluation study carried out during the second semester of 2012 on the quality of tutorials revealed drastic improvements in the quality of service delivery in most areas. The students were however still unhappy with lack of computer aided power point presentation by tutors during tutorials and the long turnaround time of marked assignments that deprived them of feedback from tutors on their first assignments before writing their second assignments. Students argued that it was common practice for them to write the second assignment and even the examinations without having seen their two marked assignments. This long turnaround time of marked assignments does not guarantee that students receive the required feedback before writing second assignments and for preparing for examinations. Students' dissatisfaction on turnaround time for marked assignments concurs with previous research by Mukeredzi and Chiome (2006) which revealed that assignment management at the Regional Centre was unsatisfactory and the turnaround period of marked assignments was too long. The long turnaround time of marked assignments was also raised as a cause for concern in the Student Affairs Committee meeting held on the 14th May 2013 at Century Towers in Harare and was partly attributed to failure to pay Part-time tutors on time by the Zimbabwe Open University and failure to staff develop them on assignment marking. In an effort to closely monitor and reduce the turnaround time of marked assignments the faculties established assignment monitoring registers showing dates of submission by students, distribution to tutors for marking and submission of marked assignments by tutors. The follow up study revealed a need to improve the quality of

service delivery by staff developing tutors in the use of power point presentations and assignment marking in the ZOU's Matabeleland South region.

Open-ended responses raised additional student needs such as increasing time for tutorial services, providing students with handouts and modules instead of soft copies as substitutes at times. The study revealed that the demand for additional tutorial time shows that students value the interaction and interpersonal relationships opportunities and concurs with Majoni and Chidakwa (2005) that ZOU's move to reduce tutorial time from twenty to six hours per course per semester in 2002 was ill informed. There is therefore a need for policy makers at ZOU to consider the students' recommendation of an increase in tutorial time. The study revealed that students were not amused with the provision of soft copies as substitutes to modules in areas such as Early Childhood Education since they had paid for hard copies and not for the soft copies hence demanded value for their money. The follow up study showed improved tutor commitment and attendance for tutorials while student attendance has also gradually improved. The observed improvements are in support of self evaluation and concur with Lockett (2003) in that the more the purpose, design, criteria and consequence of quality assurance practice is owned by the institutional members, the more likely they are to take the findings seriously and that understanding will be maximized where it is self-generated rather than being the assimilation of others' insights and judgments (Barnett 1994). The quality of library and information services is discussed next.

Quality of Library and Information Services

Analysis of the data shows that students were generally dissatisfied with the quality of library and information services delivered by the Zimbabwe Open University's Matabeleland South region. Most respondents complained over lack of internet facilities to facilitate research and of outdated and irrelevant books hence requested for more relevant and current books that would assist them in their studies. These findings agree with findings by Mhishi et al. (2012) on the Bindura University's Virtual Open Distance Learning programme where the shortage of reading materials during their studies, nota-

bly of textbooks, modules, and other reference books, as well as the shortage of library facilities, was identified as the major handicap by 68.4% of the pre-service trainee teachers interviewed. The majority of the respondents in this study revealed that the library lacked magazines, periodicals and journals and indicated a need for local newspapers. Interviews with some of the respondents revealed that the library only received the Herald Newspaper and Sunday Mail from the city of Harare and did not receive the locally printed 'Ilanga' and the 'Chronicle' from the regional city of Bulawayo mainly reflecting regional news. Interviews with some students further revealed a demand for entrance signs to the library and that past examination papers needed to be arranged and classified systematically to facilitate easy and quick access. Students also called for the relocation of the library from the township into town for easy access by those students dropping off buses from outlying and far flung rural areas and increased borrowing time for those students residing in far flung rural areas. Interviewed students also demanded that the library should be opened according to the stipulated times as at times it was not open during weekends as indicated. Though the majority of the respondents indicated that the library assistant was courteous and helpful some students however felt that the Assistant Librarian manning the library was not courteous to the customers and needed to improve on public relations with clients. One other student indicated that the library assistant needed an assistant as it was observed that he was overwhelmed with work since he worked week days and weekends alone hence work overload could have been the source frustration hence the said discourtesy to the clients. Most students were satisfied with the space, classification of books and furniture.

In response to some of the weaknesses raised by the self evaluation study, an additional library assistant has since been appointed and the internet facilities were installed at the administration offices and the Internet computer laboratory furniture was purchased for the Computer Laboratory. The engagement of the Assistant Librarian brought in the needed additional manpower that enabled the library to be open for longer hours and during all weekends as stipulated, the systematic filing and classification of past examination papers for easy access and a

cleaner library environment. The sign posts indicating the entrance of the library and two banners of the ZOU Library and Information and ICT services were mounted. The findings of the self evaluation study helped the ZOU Matabeleland South region to improve the quality of service delivery and the access of the library and information services in the most efficient, fair and humanly satisfying and delightful manner possible to its customers and concurs with Thompson (2000).

The students were however unhappy with the failure to provide internet facilities at the library to facilitate research. When reflecting on the overall quality of service delivery the Regional Library offered to the students one student summed it all up by saying, "Our library is a joke compared to Edward Memorial Service library" also in Gwanda urban. The findings of this study concur with that of Nyerere et al. (2012) in Kenya that revealed that some of the student respondents felt that their study centres were not adequately equipped with adequate study materials as they had to travel to the main centres for the materials. Devanathan and Jambulingam (2014) supports these students demanding quality services in that the key strategy for the success and survival of any institution is the delivery of quality services to customers which results in customer satisfaction and loyalty. Naidoo and Mutinta (2014), advise that the greater the level of customer satisfaction, the stronger the link between customers (students) and the providing institutions and that disgruntled customers or clients can offer negative 'word of mouth' advertising (Nitsch 2003 in Chiome et al. 2011). In the address to participants of the customer care workshop for the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) employees, Kurasha (2005) once advised that for the ZOU to attract new student clients it had to provide high service quality to keep its old clients satisfied since satisfied clients spread good news and more clients will come. The dissatisfying quality of library and information services offered by the ZOU Matabeleland South regional campus can play a major role in distracting students from the institution and encourage them to engage in behavior outcomes that include bad word of mouth for the organization (Heskett et al. 1997; Potrurak 2014; Preko et al. 2014).

Arokiasamy and Hon Tat (2014) and Kurasha (2010) argue that the complex competitive envi-

ronment that has been created by globalization and open markets systems for the service sector such as the ZOU has provided students with more options to choose from and are no longer brand loyal. Literature shows that satisfying the students is no longer enough hence every institution competing for students in the market and seeking to be the university of choice has to shift from customer satisfaction to customer delight in order to gain a competitive advantage and attract students (Arokiasamy and Hon Tat 2014; Horowitz and Rinehart 2001; Kumasey 2014; Kurasha 2010; Naidoo and Mutinta 2014). To achieve university of choice status to both national and international students, the ZOU's Matabeleland South regional campus has to become more market driven and set itself apart from all others by providing high quality library and information service and take students satisfaction as a major source of competitive advantage (Munusamy et al. 2010; Naidoo and Mutinta 2014; Potrurak 2014). Dumbu et al. (2012) argue that in no way can the Zimbabwe Open University be left out of the race as the competition for the satisfaction of the consumers is stiffening from every corner and every minute of its service to the clients. The quality of administrative services offered by Matabeleland South region is discussed next.

Quality of Administrative Services Offered to Students

The self evaluation study revealed a general satisfaction among students over the quality of administrative services provided by the regional centre, though there still were some areas that were not satisfactory. The study confirmed that communication was the underlying weakness in the ZOU Matabeleland Region as similarly reflected in the Zimbabwe Open University Strategic Plan 2010-2014. One student just pleaded 'Please communicate'. Students demanded constant communication hence recommended the combined use of written communication, SMS messages, telephone calls and e-mail services since some students were staying in remote rural places where there was no network. Similar echoes are made by Mpofu et al. (2012) who found that at Bindura University in Zimbabwe, the problem of electricity created problems of integration of ICT tools (e-mail, fax, internet, television, radio) into the Virtual Open Distance

Learning (VODL) programme and that basic communication infrastructure to enable VODL to make use of these technologies was not in place at the centres and that the residential session centres lacked enough laboratory space to cope with the de-mand of practical subject training. The respondents indicated that the region's administrative system should not only send cold SMS messages demanding outstanding fees and when they did should be directed only to owing students and not to all the students. Besides using SMS messages to communicate with students on outstanding fees, the students felt that SMS messages could also be used to update them on recent important developments in the region, on relevant issues such as research project and assignment submission dates, the examination timetables, tutorial dates and dates for in-class tests in some instances and when following up to students' problems and establishing whether these would have been resolved.

The students demanded the administrative staff to be approachable and accessible, show concern over students' problems and willingness to assist the students all the time. This concern concurs with Heskett et al. (1997) in that some administrative staff members were removed or elitist and were not caring hence not approachable and accessible when students needed their assistance. The removed and unapproachable members became emotional when approached by students for assistance hence students recommended that the Regional Director should ensure that there is a friendly and supportive atmosphere and improved relations between students and administration office. When presented with these self evaluation results, staff members committed themselves to work on their weaknesses and reinforce the strengths. In this regard Devedia et al. (2011) advise open distance learning providers to pay close attention to quality in terms of products, processes, production, delivery systems, and philosophy.

In connection with faculty programme management the study revealed a general satisfaction among students on the quality of programme management services offered by Regional Programme Coordinators (RPCs). Some students confessed that they were not aware of the names of their RPCs and the faculty clerks and their respective duties or responsibilities. Students requested for the display of the regional organ-

ogram. This recommendation resulted in the organogram being drawn and displayed. There was an outcry for some RPCs to be always available to assist students hence one student recommended that faculty clerks be empowered to inform students on certain key issues whenever the RPCs are away. The individual RPCs when presented with the students' concerns declared total commitment henceforth and have since delivered valued services resulting in customer satisfaction in line with Heskett et al. (1997). The self evaluation study also revealed that the reception telephone always sounded engaged or ringing without being picked from the caller's side hence was faulty and needed repairing or replacing and a need for extension lines to different offices to avoid clients holding for too long waiting for the one to come all the way to the reception. The faulty telephone handset was replaced and an effort to purchase a new PBX was made by the region in its effort to provide extension lines to all offices. However, the national Information Communication Technology (ICT) department advised that the identification and purchase of an ideal PBX was its responsibility and not of the region.

Due to the results of the self evaluation study, the region has made an effort to improve its communication with the students and has identified those students residing in areas where SMS messages are not usable to substitute with written messages. The demand for improved communication pressed the region's administration to open a telephone directory containing all the students' physical addresses, telephone and cell numbers which however excludes students' e-mail addresses. All faculties also keep their own telephone directories for their students. The exclusion of students' e-mail addresses is testimony enough that this form of communication with students has not yet been embraced by the ZOU's Matabeleland South region. There is however a need to embrace technological developments and encourage all students to have e-mail addresses to facilitate communicating through e-mails now that the administration offices have internet facilities. One weakness of some open distance learning institutions according to Hope and Guiton (2006) and Sikwibele and Mungoo (2009:4) is the limited use of technology and more dependence on conventional methods which might not be suitable for distance education students.

The awareness brought about by the self evaluation research in the ZOU's Matabeleland South regional campus resulted in great improvement in staff attitude and conduct towards students as they now treat them with respect they deserve and are now customer friendly and more willing to serve clients even during lunch. Some students were quick to note this change of attitude and commitment to duty hence commended the improvements. The handling of students' complaints has been shifted to the Student Advisor and Counselor. This has helped to reduce pressure from some administrative staff members who had become overwhelmed with work and responsibilities resulting in them becoming emotional in some instances. The study however revealed a need for customer care training for ZOU front office staff and the faculty clerks. The need to train front office staff in customer care was also raised in the 5th Student Affairs Committee meeting held on the 14th May 2013 at Century Towers in Harare. The self evaluation study served as an eye opener as it revealed the strengths to be reinforced and weaknesses to be diminished in the region. The study resulted in staff pledging their full commitment towards improving the quality of service delivery as a regional effort to delight clients and stakeholders.

This study shows that the quality of administrative services provided by the ZOU Matabeleland South region actually delighted the student customers. The provision of quality administrative services to customers by the ZOU's Matabeleland South regional campus as a strategy for its success and survival leads to customer satisfaction and loyalty that in turn begets a 'good word of mouth' marketing and concurs with literature by (Chakanyuka and Chabaya 2011; Devanathan and Jambulingam 2014; Heskett et. al. 1997; Kottler 2001; Kurasha 2005; Naidoo and Mutinta 2014; Potrurak 2014; Preko et al. 2014). The study concurs with Heskett et al. (1997) in that customer service culture when supported by leadership that is creative and energetic (not lofty or conservative), participatory and caring (not removed or elitist) as is the case in the ZOU's Matabeleland South region and emphasizes the importance of each customer is likely to delight the student customers who then spread good 'word of mouth' advertising. The quality of the examinations management services is dealt with next.

Quality of the Examinations Management Services

The self evaluation study revealed that students commended the management of examinations services by ZOU's Matabeleland South region. The students indicated that examinations were conducted efficiently and they were generally happy with the environment. One student said, "All things being equal I think you are the best" while another said "This is the only area I can safely say I received the best service". The study shows that the Zimbabwe Open University's Matabeleland South region provides high quality management of examinations for its students and in this area has gradually shifted from customer satisfaction to customer delight (Arokiasamy and Hon Tat 2014; Horowitz and Rinehart 2001; Kumasey 2014; Kurasha 2010). The delighted students of the Zimbabwe Open University's Matabeleland South region are very likely to spread positive 'word of mouth' marketing of the institution making it an institution of choice to both nationally and international students (Naidoo and Mutinta 2014; Nitsch 2003 in Chime et al. 2011; Potrurak 2014; Preko et al. 2014). The study concurs with McIlroy (2003) in Chabaya et al. (2011) in that well structured examination systems help to motivate students. The findings confirm that the management of the examinations by ZOU's Matabeleland South region was professional and beyond reproach hence the region committed itself to reinforce the strength. In an effort to reinforce the quality of managing the conduct of the examinations as its strength, the region resolved to select the most committed part-time tutors and pair them with the full-time tutors in invigilating the conduct of the examination process.

CONCLUSION

The best way to improve the quality of service delivery is to undertake a service audit or self evaluation. Likewise, this study sought to make use of self evaluation in seeking to improve the quality of service delivery by the ZOU's Matabeleland South regional centre. The main focus was on the quality of tutorial services, the library and information services, general administrative services and examinations management services. The study concluded that ZOU needed to continue offering tutorials to their students and increase the tutorial time and provide tutors

with workshops in tutoring, assignment marking and use of power point computer aided tutoring in their presentations. The self evaluation study also indicated a need to reduce the turnaround time of marked assignments to enable students to receive feedback on their first assignments before writing their second assignments. The study revealed that the ZOU Matabeleland South region needed to fully embrace technological developments by utilizing e-mail communication services and providing internet services to complement shortage of books. The conduct and management of examinations was said to professional and beyond reproach hence promotes the image of ZOU qualifications. The study revealed that self evaluation study generated an overall delightful improvement in the quality of service delivery in the academic and administrative practices of the Zimbabwe Open University's Matabeleland South region.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the findings and conclusions above the following recommendations are made.

- The library needs urgent internet facilities and ICT laboratory to facilitate computer training for students and research facilities to complement inadequate and outdated library books.
- Encourage students to have e-mail addresses to facilitate alternative communication to those students with the e-mail addresses.
- To embrace technological developments and staff develop tutors in the usage of computer aided power point presentation in their tutorials.
- The region to constantly engage in self evaluation exercise so as to be able to identify strengths to maximize, weaknesses to work on, opportunities to utilize and threats to diminish and ensure continuous improvement.
- Increase tutorial contact time and reduce turnaround time of marked assignments to enable students to use feedback from tutors on first assignment in writing the second.
- Increase the range of newspapers, journals and periodicals both physical and electronic
- Staff develop tutors in assignment marking

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