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## Quality Assurance: The Keystone to Learners Satisfaction: The Case of Zimbabwe Open University Mashonaland East Region

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### **Abstract:**

*The issue of quality impinges on the work of Open and Distance Learning universities in a number of ways, for instance, competing for students, comparison with other universities, compliance with regulatory authorities, and keeping up with world trends are some of the reasons that compel institutions of higher learning to regard quality issues seriously. The process of quality assurance therefore compares the quality of a product or service with a minimum standard set either by the producer or provider or by some external government or industry standards authority. By rights, this standard should bear some relationship to best practice. The aim in quality assurance is to ensure that a product or service is fit for the market. As universities have increased drastically in number, the students' endorsement of the quality of services offered by the institution becomes critical. It is against this backdrop that this research was conducted in a bid to find out the students satisfaction with regard to quality of services offered by Zimbabwe Open University, Mashonaland East Region. A maxim of quality is that it is impossible to demonstrate improvement without measurement, hence the need to work with quality criteria. It should be born in mind that quality of services in education is about satisfying the learner and the learners' endorsement of the services that you provide as an institution is critical for the institution to retain clients. Collecting and analysing data on the implementation of the different quality criteria constitutes an important part of ongoing self-improvement. A total of 300 students from all the four faculties of the Zimbabwe Open University, Mashonaland East Region made up the population. Out of this population, 100 made it into the sample as follows: (32%) from the faculty of Arts and Education, (25%) from Applied Social Sciences, (16%) from Science and Technology and (27%) from the Faculty of Commerce and Law. The study adopted the descriptive survey design which is essentially appropriate on areas where human perceptions are required. Due to its ability to solicit information deeply buried in the minds and attitudes of people, and its ability to reveal the true present state of affairs in a given set up, the design was seen to be the most appropriate one. Two instruments used in data collection were the questionnaire, and focus group discussion to enable triangulation in order to enhance validity and reliability of data. The study was able to determine learners' levels of satisfaction and expectations on the quality of service delivery. The study recommends the use of online registration, computerization of the library and ensuring that there are no missing results.*

### **1. Introduction**

According to SADC CDE best practice document, many countries in the world are gradually realizing the potential of ODL (Open and distance learning) in expanding access at tertiary level. Whilst in the past ODL was offered as a second chance and did not attract much of government attention in terms of planning and budget commitment, this position is fast changing as many countries realize that it is the best option to address issues of access in cost-effective ways. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) strategies offer immense potential in alleviating problems of access in many developing countries. Unless ODL opens access to quality education, its introduction becomes counterproductive since the millions who go through the system stand the risk of remaining deprived of the knowledge and skills they need in order to make meaningful contributions in the developing economies. The quality of education is as important as the quantity offered. It is against this background that this study was carried out to find out the salient quality assurance issues concerning the services offered by the Zimbabwe Open University in Mashonaland East Region to its students and to assess how satisfied the students are with these services. This study also provided the students with an opportunity to participate, giving essential feedback to the university so that it continues to polish its quality assurance toolkit that is relevant and adaptable to ODL in different contexts within the country. Such a participatory approach was deemed to be important as it would not only enrich the toolkit

through sharing of ideas on ODL and quality assurance, but would also enhance ownership of the end product by the students who are the end users of the quality toolkit.

## 2. The Role of Mashonaland Regional Centre in the Provision of Student Support Services

The ZOU Strategic Plan 2010 outlines the functions of the Regional Centre as follows:

- Recruitment and supervision of part-time tutors
- Recruiting, enrolling and registering students.
- Allocation of student groups to tutors
- Local arrangements for study centers
- Organizing weekend schools for tutorial discussions.
- Planning the tutorial programmes along guidelines provided by the National Centre
- Managing students' assignments and Compiling coursework marks for continuous assessment,
- Keeping student and tutor records
- Counseling students
- Administering examinations.

In a number of distance – learning systems, student support services are built on the concept of local centres (examples include UNA in Venezuela; UNED in Costa Rica; and UKOU in Britain (Kaye and Rumble 1981). At the ZOU, the provision of Regional Centres is part of a strategy to decentralize a highly centralized and impersonal system. Regional Centres carry out a number of functions as alluded above. Regional Centres act like university campuses. A Regional Centre recruits and admits students into programmes and provides them with a host of other support services that include tutoring and counselling. They enable students to have access to study materials. They also act as distribution centres for course materials and the collection and return of students' written assignments.

## 3. Conceptual framework

- **Open distance learning** is a multi-dimensional concept aimed at bridging the time, geographical, economic, social, and educational and communication distance between student and institution, student and academics, student and courseware and student and peers. Open distance learning focuses on removing barriers to access learning, flexibility of learning provision, student-centredness, supporting students and constructing learning programmes with the expectation that students can succeed; (UNISA 2008) According to UNESCO (2002), the terms open learning and distance education represent approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from the constraints of time and place, and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners. Open and distance learning is one of the most rapidly growing fields of education, and its potential impact on all education delivery systems has been greatly accentuated through the development of Internet-based information technologies, and in particular the World Wide Web. Peters (1976) argues that distance education is characterized by the use of printed material, radio and TV programmes, computers and study circles.
- **Quality assurance** has been defined as a “systematic management and assessment procedure adopted by education institutions and systems in order to monitor performance against objectives and ensure achievement of quality outputs and quality improvements” (Harman, 2000,). This means quality assurance facilitates recognition of standards of awards, serves public accountability purposes, helps inform student choice, contributes to improved teaching, learning and administrative processes, and helps disseminate best practices with the goal of leading to overall improvement of education systems.
- **Learners satisfaction** emanates from the provision of a wide range of services by the ODL institution which are provided to students to enhance a range of opportunities for real two-way communication through the use of various forms of technology for tutoring at a distance, contact tutoring, assignment handling, mentoring where appropriate, counseling (both remote and face-to-face), and the stimulation of peer support structures. The need for learners to access physical facilities and study resources and to participate in decision-making is also taken into account.

## 4. Statement of the Problem

Is the quality of services at Zimbabwe Open University Mashonaland East Region satisfying its learners?

## 5. Research Questions

- How do you rate the registration process at ZOU Mashonaland East Region?
- Is the quality of communication between students and the region at ZOU Mashonaland East Region up to your expectation?
- How do you regard the quality of ZOU modules?
- Are you satisfied with the ZOU examination process?
- Do tutorials at ZOU Mashonaland East region meet your expected standards?
- Do you find all educational resources you need in our ZOU library?

## 6. Significance of the Study

The study establishes the perceptions of the students with regards to the learners' satisfaction of quality of services being offered at Zimbabwe Open University Mashonaland East Region. This data will help Mashonaland East Regional Centre and other Regional Centres to provide quality services to their students. It is felt that this research will enable staff working at the ZOU and in other ODL institutions to identify factors which must be addressed in order to meet the quality standards expected by the students.

## 7. Limitations of the Study

The study focused on only one regional centre of the Zimbabwe Open University- Mashonaland East Region. This might therefore affect the generalisability of results to other regions of the Zimbabwe Open University. Due to this consideration, the number of respondents was made large enough to ensure a representativeness so as to allow results to be generalised. The researchers were constrained by the fact that there was limited time available for the completion of the study and had other commitments. The researchers also made use of evenings and weekends to necessitate the completion of the study as scheduled.

## 8. Literature Review

According to SADC best practice (2011), clear quality assurance framework supported by clear quality assurance action plans is essential for an institution which would like to establish a quality assurance unit in its University. The institution should ensure that day-to-day activities are aligned with its mission, goals, principles and policies in relation to national, regional and global priorities. Internal quality assurance processes are articulated with external processes as laid down by the relevant national quality assurance bodies. Clear routines, procedures and systems for quality assurance should be made known to the staff and learners as well. Staff development is seen as fundamental to quality service provision. Staff, learners, and other stakeholders are involved in the process of quality assurance and quality review. The institution should engage in benchmarking against other similar institutions and uses appropriate monitoring and evaluation techniques, to gather and analyze data to use as a basis for setting priorities and planning for quality improvement. In the case of electronically offered programmes, mechanisms for monitoring learner participation and performance are designed into the technical platforms used in electronically-delivered programmes. For example systems may be designed to track: The time spent by different learners on components of the materials. SADC CDE best practice (2011), document pointed out that learner satisfaction arise from the provision of a wide range of opportunities for real two-way communication through the use of various forms of technology for tutoring at a distance, contact tutoring, assignment tutoring, mentoring where appropriate, counseling (both remote and face-to-face), and the stimulation of peer support structures, assignment handling as well as the registration process.

Many young students/users of virtual campuses can be compared to what Prensky (2001) terms 'digital natives' who have grown up in a digitally sophisticated environment populated by home computers, the Internet, graphic rich computer games and movies, Internet gaming, mobile phones, interactive television, PDAs and iPods. Therefore, it is important that the students' learning experiences are enhanced through appropriate technology which stimulates them and enables intercultural dialogue that represents the cultural scope of a virtual campus project that comprises students and staff from across Africa. The attitudinal and cultural problems associated with technology were highlighted by a number of virtual campus projects who noted that it was often staff, the so called digital emigrants, who appeared to have the greatest difficulties in learning to use new technologies, which was often compounded by the negative attitudes of some staff towards the burden of having to learn new skills and master new technologies. Nearly all the virtual campus projects reported that on the whole students enjoyed learning and using new technologies in order to enhance their learning. Peer support among students was often reported as a useful means of students supporting and encouraging each other in learning new tasks and interacting with each other either online or during face-to-face classes when blended learning was adopted within a virtual campus project.

Mwenje and Saruchera (2013) pointed out that cognitive services facilitate learning by mediating study materials for example, face to face tutorials. Affective support services facilitate creation of supportive learning environments to increase student commitment for example ICTs and library services. Systematic support services are administrative and information management systems that make (ODL) more user friendly Tait (ibid). Support services play a key role in the (ODL) context (Rumble and Latchem 2004). Studies on service quality conducted in Australia, New Zealand and India show that the reputation, expansion and survival of (ODL) systems hinge on the quality of services they deliver to students (Harran 2004). Success of (ODL) systems now hinges on students as customers with options to choose universities that offer quality services (Yavas 2004). Mwenje and Saruchera (2013) are of the opinion that quality is an elusive concept. It emerges from industry where it is viewed as fitness for use, predictable degree of conformity and conformance to requirements. (Deming 1982, Crosby 1984, Juran 1992). It can be conceptualized in dimensions for example, exceptional perfection, and value for money or as transformation (Mersha 2004; Boshoff 2007). Barnabas (2007) is of the view that conceptualizing quality in terms of particular aspects of education is problematic because all elements associated with educational quality are interrelated. It seems there are some challenges in coming up with a universally agreed definition of service quality in education. Some studies have focused on relationships between service quality and learning achievement. Asker's (2005) study concluded that (ODL) learners achieve better when support services satisfy their individual needs and bring them closer to university functionaries. Moor (2003); Simpson (2002); York (2004) found out that providing effective support services to (ODL) students has positive effect on student persistence and retention. Mills (2003); McLaughlin (2006) concluded that continuous improvement in support services assist learners to persist in their studies. (Lentell (2003); Tait (2004); Rumble (2005) concluded that (ODL) students as customers of teaching and learning require consumer focused services.

## 9. Tutorials

These are face to face meetings between the tutors and learners and between learners and learners. They replace the distance teacher (the module) and help in breaking the isolation of the distance learner. These are not lecturers but encompass techniques such as group discussions, presentations, demonstrations and explanations. The tutor, during the tutorials merely assists the students to understand the teaching in the module and helps students to understand the course teaching in the module and to understand the course structure and clears the grey areas students might have accumulated during their reading or studying of the module. During tutorials the tutor has the following roles to undertake: She/he

- offers study guidance
- explains assignments
- gives feedback on assignments for example, on items they need to work hard on
- adds onto the ideas provided by the learner so that there is full coverage of topics
- answers questions raised by the learner in particular sections of the modules
- facilitates learning through guiding the learners as they engage in group discussions
- Helps learners to identify sources of material when these are not easily available.

Three tutorials of two hours each are held per semester per course. Each course has six contact hours per semester. In Tutorial 1, the students receive the course outline unit by unit, guidance on assignments writing, study skills and where to get information. The tutor also advises the learner on how to use the module for learning purposes. During Tutorial 2, the tutor attends to challenges the learners are facing and also gives feedback on assignments through purposeful comments that are meant to improve the learners' learning (Koul, 1976). The last session, Tutorial 3 is devoted to revision and preparation for examinations that come at the end of each semester. It is therefore, imperative that learners attend all the sessions owing to their significance. The main aim of tutoring is to provide the learner with effective academic support. In distance education tutoring complements the printed correspondence text. A tutor serves as the primary and sometimes the only instructional contact for the isolated distance learner. The tutor guides, advises and sometimes coaches the learner. The tutor also assists the learner in removing obstacles to learning (Ndeya-Ndereya, Mhlanga and Chikuya, 2003).

### 9.1. Benefits derived by the students from attending face-to-face weekend tutorials

A research by Barker (1995) indicates that interaction is important for a variety of types of learning, learner satisfaction, and persistence of distance students. Further strengthening the importance of studying interaction was Jackson (1994) who described interaction as one of the central issues related to distance education today. In 1993, Acker and McCain made the following statements concerning the importance of interaction through face-to-face. They stated that "interaction is central to the social expectations of education in the broadest sense and is in itself a primary goal of the larger educational process and that feedback between learner and teacher is necessary for education to develop and improve" (Acker & McCain, 1993). Mubika and Bukalia (2012) pointed out that face-to-face interaction is an educational topic which has been studied for several decades. Flanders (1970), as well as others, has published entire books dedicated to the subject of interaction. Although these books offer useful insights into the study, they limit themselves to the study of "classroom" or face-to-face interaction. Moore (1989) further states that interaction is divided into three categories: learner-content interaction, learner-instructor interaction, and learner-learner interaction. A fourth component of interaction was defined by distance education researchers as learner-interface interaction which takes into account the interaction that occurs when a learner must use intervening technologies to communicate with the content, negotiate meaning, and validate knowledge with the instructor and other learners (Hillman et al, 1994). Hillman et al (1994) demonstrate that the majority of students in a study they carried out indicated that they felt that experiences in a face-to-face learner-instructor interaction were moderately to very positively relate to their success in their learning. They also indicated that they felt instructor interest, teaching skills, and personal interaction with the students aided the learning process. Opportunities to discuss assignments and/or course work with instructors was viewed positively by all three groups of students. The majority of respondents taking part in courses via videotape felt that they felt inclined to real face to face interaction which they viewed as very important to their learning. However, a few of the respondents indicated that being physically separated from the tutor did not pose a considerable challenge to learning (Howard, 2009; Hillman et al, 1994). They also indicated that they felt personal enthusiasm for their class interaction was moderately to very positively relate to their learning. Some students indicated that they did not feel that learning individually was a hindrance to their education but others indicated a dislike for being the only student at a particular learning site or being physically separated from the tutor. The effect of poor instructor use of education technology was felt to be extremely negative by each of the groups of learners who felt that this dissuaded them from attending tutorials. The students also felt that talking during class, being ignored by the instructor, and the instructor treating some class members differently than others was also positively related to their non attendance of tutorials thus they detested face-to-face interaction (Howard, 2009; Hillman et al, 1994). Breuch (2005) argues for face-to-face interaction as opposed to online interaction when he argues that because contributions to online chats are slowed by technology, they result in conversations appearing differently than they would in face-to-face environments. Sapp and Simon (2005) arguing for face-to-face interaction remark that there are multiple issues introduced by online learning systems. For example, the presence of non-verbal cues common in the traditional classroom face-to-face tutorials, cause instructors to be at ease in determining student engagement and understanding.

There is more social interaction, and such interaction is attributed to creating a conducive learning atmosphere. Sapp and Simon (2005:478) assert that "increased interpersonal contact between teachers and students (and among students) is necessary" and that, though online synchronous elements may facilitate some additional opportunities for interaction, they may insufficiently "simulate

real-time interaction," which they imply contributes to a sense of "interpersonal camaraderie," the students' level of learning motivation, and their development of interpersonal skills critical for personal and professional development. Stodel et al (2006) argue that face-to-face classroom interaction enables students to be energised by the classroom discussions and interaction. They further argue that there is robust dialogue and students perceive others and in turn they are also perceived. Face-to-face tutorials also enabled the use of non-verbal cues which are used to avoid misinterpretation of ideas as opposed to a situation where students are only confronted with the module. The face-to-face tutorials also enabled students to freely speak among themselves rather than always being required to write down notes (Stodel et al., 2006). Howard (2009) argues that face-to-face interaction in ODL programmes would likely help instructors to better accommodate learners who would normally have preferred or been more inclined to succeed in the traditional classroom. The face-to-face medium would also give tutors an opportunity to ease those uncomfortable students who find the content of instruction very unfamiliar. According to a research study conducted by Sapp and Simon (2005) online courses needed to foster more interpersonal accountability, hence the absence of human mediation and interaction through face-to-face negatively affected levels of procrastination and motivation among students who would not have their tutor advising them physically on the need to do their work in time. Kibby (2007) concurs by remarking that the face to- face experience may carry with it a higher sense of responsibility and provides students with more built-in. It is also critical to note that the benefits derived from face to face tutorials cannot be achieved if the tutorials are not of high quality.

### **10. Management of Assignments**

In distance education, assignments are a very critical component of the delivery mode. Assignments are used as a teaching and learning instrument. They are used by both the tutor and the student to evaluate the effectiveness of the teaching and learning that is taking place. At the ZOU, assignments are considered very important as they contribute 20% to the final grade the student will obtain. The management of assignments is, therefore, an important activity.

At the ZOU each course is assessed by coursework that consists of two or four tutor marked assignments (TMA) and an examination. Assignments are set by departmental course teams and distributed to all the Regions at the beginning of each semester in a study pack that includes

- A tutorial letter
- Assignment questions
- A time-table showing dates for the submission of assignments by students to the Regional Centre.

Students are expected to submit their assignments to either the Regional Centre or District Learning Centre on or before the due dates. The Regional Centre or District Learning Centre) plays a very critical role in supporting students in the writing and submission of assignments. At the District Learning Centre, assignments are collected and sent to the Regional Centre. At the Regional Centre, assignments are recorded on submission, sorted according to courses and then distributed to the course tutors for marking. The tutors are allowed two weeks to mark and return assignments to the Regional Centre. Students collect their marked assignments from the assignment office. Tutors are expected to give students feedback on their first assignment before they submit the second assignment. Assignment data is used for:

- General institutional and course evaluation.
- Assessing students' academic progress
- Students' feedback
- Monitoring tutor marked assignments so as to determine if standards of consistency and fairness are being maintained.
- Final assessment.

Poor management of assignments and study packs is likely to lead to students' dissatisfaction with the service which would be provided by the university.

### **11. Communication**

The quality and effectiveness of distance education in general depends on appropriate information and communication technology (Kangai and Bukaliya, 2010). There should be effective systems for communication with stakeholders. Enquiries, complaints and general correspondence should be dealt with quickly and clearly within a structured administration system. The enrolment procedures/guidelines include provision of accurate, helpful information to prospective learners. The student affairs department plays a crucial role in ensuring that students get all the information they want, and therefore this unit must always maintain an open door policy to allow all stakeholders to access the information they might want about the university.

### **12. Library Support Service**

According to Helena Rodrigues (1996) the current library trends in supporting the distant student are faced with many challenges. It has been the primary challenge of distance education programs and units to provide current, relevant information for the distant students. As educational institutions embrace distance education, libraries find themselves playing a pivotal but ever changing role of providing relevant information to a population that may never set foot into the library building. The challenge facing distance education libraries in developing countries is that whilst the demand for the introduction of new technologies is on the increase, libraries lack the capacity to keep pace with the demand for new technology. Ever since the advent of automation, libraries have been faced with what Hickey (1992) calls "technostress". This stress is not caused by technological ignorance but by the rate of change. With the emergence of new technologies, distance education libraries will see no relief from this dilemma (Hickey, 1992). The present

study helped to establish the potential, challenges and opportunities faced by the ZOU library in the provision of learner support services to distance education students.

### 13. Methodology

The current study was a qualitative study that employed the case study design. This qualitative approach assisted the researchers to study the phenomenon in its natural setting. This enabled the researchers to get an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon and interpret it and derive meaning in a natural setting. A mixed methodology approach to gathering data was adopted and made it possible to triangulate data and collect the data from a variety of stakeholders so as to produce findings which revealed the views of the participants on the effect of quality of services offered by Zimbabwe Open University in Mashonaland East on learner satisfaction. The study employed the focus group approach in which the participants' brain stormed their views on the quality of services and their effect on learner satisfaction. Apart from the focus group discussions which aimed at brainstorming, a questionnaire was also used to solicit other views whose scope was not defined in the group discussions.

#### 13.1. Population and sample

The population for the current study was made up of the key actors in open and distance learning at the Zimbabwe Open University's Mashonaland East Region. These key players were the current 300 students, from all the four faculties of the Zimbabwe Open University. Out of the total population, 100 students were selected through a combination of convenience and stratified random sampling techniques. Depending on availability, students were put into 4 strata according to faculties. From each faculty a convenience sample was selected.

### 14. Findings

The researchers began by answering the question "who is a ZOU student?" according to a number of dimensions which are: age, gender, educational background, marital status, number of own children and dependants, geographical distance, income, access to communication and technology. (See Table 4.5).

Age	30 – 45 years
Gender	Male (56%) female (44%)
Educational level	minimum ordinary level
Marital status	Married
Average number of own children	3 children
Average number of dependants	3 people
Employment status	Employed
Monthly Income – salary	less than USD500
Mean distance travelled to local regional centre	100km
Means of transport	public transport
Means of communication	Notice board/cell phone
Type of residence	rural (80%) urban (20%)

Table 1: Profile of a ZOU Student

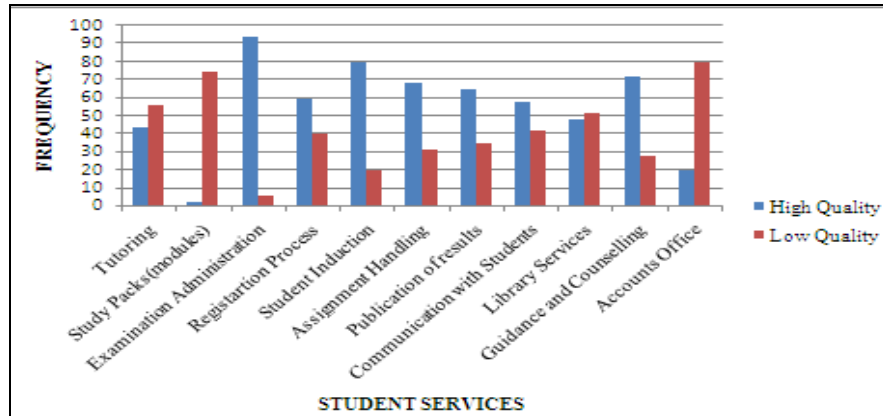
#### 14.1. Age

The composition of ZOU students varies from program to program. In most undergraduate programs, the students are middle aged between 30 – 45 years old, but for post graduate programmes (Masters and PhD programmes), the students are much older (40 – 60 years old). The age of ZOU students is not very much different from other ODL students in the developed countries. In America, ODL students' ages range from 20 – 50 (Tucker 2003), at Anadolu University in Turkey, the age of students range from 17 – 80 years (Tucker, 2003). The present findings show that age was not a factor responsible for determining learner satisfaction with the services provided by the university. Both the young and the older student expressed either satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the services offered at ZOU regardless of their ages.

#### 14.2. Marital Status, Family and Dependants

In the study 76% of the ZOU students indicated that family commitments causes them to be hard pressed for time for their studies and (90%) were married with an average of three children and three dependants and these students pointed out that they require study materials which are of high quality and can be used to answer assignments since most of the students reside in rural areas where they do not have access to libraries. Students with families often experience difficulties in balancing their academic demands with their family and social commitments. The stress of multiple roles has been mentioned by researchers as one of the major constraints that affect ODL students (Moore, 1975; and Thompson, 1984; as cited in Ojo and Olakulehin (2006). Adult learners assume multiple responsibilities at home, in society and in their workplaces. They spend a great deal of time and energy on fulfilling their family, social, and occupational responsibilities. This may drastically reduce the time and energy which could otherwise have been used for learning activities.

- **Institutional –Related factors which can act as indicators of quality of services` at Mashonaland East Regional Centre**



#### 14.3. Tutoring

In the Present study 44% of the students said tutoring was of high quality and 56% said it was of low quality. As a result 60% of the respondents said they preferred Block release and the Lecture delivery method. Majoni and Chidhaka,(2005), in a study of students' views on tutorials reports that 60% of the students at the ZOU were facing transport problems when coming for weekend tutorials and as a result they were always late. In another study (unpublished) by (Kangai and Zikhali, 2007) attendance registers kept at Mashonaland East Regional Centre indicated that some tutorials were taking place where only 20 per cent of the students were able or want to attend. This has serious academic and financial implications. A lot of effort goes into the organization of these tutorials, learning materials in the form of handouts are prepared but only a few students make use of them. Part-time tutors are hired to conduct tutorials but only a few students attend. This renders the system ineffective and inefficient. Students' dissatisfaction with tutorials is likely to lead students to withdrawal.

#### 14.4. Communication

The quality and effectiveness of distance education in general depends on appropriate information and communication technology (Kangai and Bukaliya, 2010). The study found out that communication between the Regional Centre and the students has lead to some 42% of students expressing dissatisfaction with the communication between the regional centre and the students and they pointed out that the notice board which is the principal means of communication used by the region was not effective as it depends on the student having visited the region. However 58% of the students felt that communication at ZOU and the students is of high quality and of these students who are expressing a positive picture could be those students where are being given updates by the university either through SMS or WHATUP. ZOU faces communication challenges due to low levels of technological development. Although the majority of ZOU students (98%) own cell phones and only 10% have computers (Kangai and Bukalia, 2010) access to information and communication technology is still very limited. The majority of students working and living in rural areas (80%) have no access to a computer. Poor Network for cell phones and poor postal services also negatively affect communication. As a result ZOU heavily relies on the traditional way of communication – use of the notice board. Although the local press is also used, many students who live in the rural areas have no access to newspapers. Thus serious communication challenges have lead students to regard the student support services offered by ZOU to be of low quality. Several researchers have reported 'lack of guidance and information prior to registering and enrolment,' 'lack of support from faculty,' and difficulty 'contacting faculty' as factors contributing to dissatisfaction of services offered by an institution (Garland, 1993; Ostman & Wagner, 1987 (Brown, 1996; Cookson, 1989; Pierrkeas, Xenos, Panagiotakopoulos, & Vergidis, 2004; Tresman, 2002).

#### 14.5. Library Support Service

In the present study, 52% of the students rated the ZOU Mashonaland East Regional library as been of low quality. According to Helena Rodrigues (1996) the current library trends in supporting the distant student are faced with many challenges. It has been the primary challenge of distance education programs and units to provide current, relevant information for the distant students. As educational institutions embrace distance education, libraries find themselves playing a pivotal but ever changing role of providing relevant high quality information to a population that may never set foot into the library building. The challenge facing distance education libraries in developing countries is that whilst the demand for the introduction of new technologies is on the increase, libraries lack the capacity to keep pace with the demand for new technology. Ever since the advent of automation, libraries have been faced with what Hickey (1992) calls "technostress". This stress is not caused by technological ignorance but by the rate of change. With the emergence of new technologies, distance education libraries will see no relief from this dilemma (Hickey, 1992). This study helped to establish the potential, challenges and opportunities faced by the ZOU library in the provision of learner support services to distance education students and on whether the main stakeholders, the students are satisfied with the services offered at the library.

## 15. Examination Administration

Ninety-four percent of the students pointed out that the quality of examination administration is very high whilst only 4% expressed dissatisfaction with the administration of the examination. The high quality of examination administration could be attributed to the vigilance of the regional director, the quality assurance coordinator, the student advisor and the examination committee. These people are always present when examinations are being written and they ensure that the examination is run as per schedule and any problems encountered are speedily solved. Students are also properly inducted when they are new with regards to rules and regulations governing examinations during orientation and 80% of the students are of the opinion that the induction process at ZOU Mashonaland East Region is of high quality. 72% of the students also believe that the provision of guidance and counseling provided by the student advisor at Mashonaland East Region is of high quality and this has a knock on effect on the general positive perception of the quality of services offered by the institution. The above sentiments were also echoed by Rumble and Latchem (2004) who pointed out that support services play a key role in the (ODL) success. Wheeler (2008) claims that student support services provide interface between teaching activities and learning behaviours.

Many students 75% expressed satisfaction and regarded the ZOU modules as of high quality. The modules are issued to each registered student and the dimensions which were being looked at include the timely provision of learning materials, the adequacy of the learning materials and also whether the modules contain current information. ZOU modules high quality could be attributed to the fact that ZOU engages reputable module writers from other universities and for the internal module writers they have to undergo a rigorous module writing course so that they are able to produce high quality modules. However 25% of the students felt that the ZOU modules are of low quality and the reason they were giving were that ZOU modules are not being upgraded and hence some of the information in these modules is obsolete. ZOU modules are expected to be revised after every five years, but due to the fact that we are in the information explosion era, new information is being created on a daily basis and keeping up with current issues may be a challenge. Some of the 25% of the students who expressed that ZOU should be upgraded pointed out that content reviewers of the modules should be a specialist in the area where he or she is reviewing. **According to SADC Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Best Practice (2013)**, appropriate stakeholders should be involved in the programme conceptualization, for example learners, parents, employers and others if the product is going to be of high quality. Clear procedures should be in place for the development, dispatch and timely provision of high quality learning materials to allow learners enough time to use the materials before examinations. Course materials should have a balance of knowledge, skills and values that are mediated appropriately using relevant media. Course materials should be designed in an accessible way. Access devices such as contents pages, headings, graphic presentation of information, and layout should facilitate use by learners. Course materials should be periodically reviewed in order to keep them up to date with changes in knowledge and learners' needs. Materials should be developed by people with expertise in ODL and are subjected to rigorous quality reviews before use by learners. The content of the materials should be accurate, up-to-date, relevant to course aims and outcomes and sensitive to the multicultural realities of the context. The materials should be based on sound learning theories and lead learners to construct knowledge rather than simply memorize facts. While the university holds copyright for course materials developed by employed or contracted staff, the individual author's intellectual property rights are also respected. Materials actively engage learners during the learning process There should be a clear house style for materials development.

### 15.1. Accounts office

Many respondents 80% felt that the services they are getting from the accounts office is of poor quality and many respondents pointed out that accounts personnel are very rude and do not respect the students and do not explain clearly what the students are supposed to do with regards to the payment of fees. The respondents pointed out that procedures in the accounts department should be error free and these officers should pay attention to detail. Some of the respondents advised that the account officers should be prepared to offer individualized help to students and should be trained in public relations. The following expectations which were also raised in Mwenje and Saruchera (2013) study were that the university must put in place flexible payment systems which are user friendly to students from all socio-economic backgrounds and must suspend late registration and other miscellaneous fees to assist disadvantaged students. Accounts office staff must improve courtesy when communicating with students on fees issues. However 20% of the respondents were of the opinion that the services they were getting from the accounts office were of high quality and expressed satisfaction. These respondents pointed out that the accounts office put their information on the notice board such that if the client comes and reads the information it is very clear.

### 15.2. Registration Process

Sixty percent of the respondents regarded the registration process at Zimbabwe Open University Mashonaland East Region to be of high quality and pointed out that the officers who are responsible for registration of students are very supportive and assist students throughout the whole process. Forty percent of the respondents were of the opinion that the services they receive during registration are of low quality and their argument was premised on the fact that registration process is still paper based. These respondents pointed out that registration and publishing of results should be done online as is the case with current trends. Some respondents pointed out there are still cases of missing results when results are published and according to these respondents this indicates low quality of services.



## 16. Recommendations

- ZOU should avoid paper based registration process
- ZOU management should sample printed modules to check for quality
- ZOU academic registry should ensure accurate publishing of results.
- Computerization of library services should be undertaken by ZOU management and computer lab and library should be connected to the internet.
- ZOU management should improve technological capabilities for example accessing results via the website.

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