Service Delivery in Open and Distance Learning (ODL): Quality of Service Offered to Students in Zimbabwe Open University Regional Centres

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Abstract

This descriptive survey was conducted to establish the quality of service offered by the ZOU staff at the regional centres. A total of 325 respondents drawn from the ten regional centres of the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), responded to questionnaires, which had both closed and open-ended items. The study established that staff at the regional centres was generally providing appropriate quality service to the students even though they were working under difficult conditions most of the time. Front desk staff was seen as marketing ZOU very well through quality service, whilst the academic staff was considered humble, accommodating and diligent. However, poor service was noted in registration, assignment marking and communicating with students. The attitude of some ancillary and library staff was also identified as an area of improvement. This service audit was seen as a way of contributing towards the improvement of service in the ZOU and in other ODL institutions.

Introduction

The study sought to examine the quality of service offered to students in the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) regional centres. ZOU operates in ten regions of the country. It is crucial to mention that though the regions may differ geographically, their operational structures are the same; hence one would expect some uniformity in terms of operations. The study was carried out in all the ten regional centres of ZOU.

A service is an act of performance offered by one part to another. The performance is essentially intangible and is intended to bring about desired change in the recipient of the service. Unfortunately, clients are not always happy with the quality and value of services received. They complain about late delivery of services, rude or incompetent personnel, inconvenient service hours, poor performance, needlessly complicated procedures and a host of other problems. Service providers on the other hand believe in cutting costs and eliminating what they believe to be unnecessary frills. On the contrary, there are other service providers who try to please the clients running a productive profitable operation staffed by pleasant and competent employees.

Service is equated with meeting or exceeding customer expectations. Zeithamal quoted by Christopher (2001) argues that unsuccessful service organizations think inside out. They think they know what their customer wants and they deliver that. They are unsuccessful because quite often what they think the customer wants is wrong. On the other hand, successful service organizations think outside in. They found out through market research what their clients say they want and then they deliver what those clients say they want. In other words, the service provider finds out what the customer expects and then delivers to that standard or even higher. Knowing what the client expects is probably the first and most critical step in delivering quality service.

ZOU derives its mandate and legitimacy from society through service delivery to stakeholders (Kurasha, 2005). According to the ZOU Strategic Plan
2005 – 2009, the university’s vision is to become a World Class Open and Distance Learning institution by 2009. Client satisfaction is one of the strategic elements enshrined in this Strategic Plan. The major focus is to delight the clients; this implies that the service offered should move towards excellence to achieve that goal by 2009. Excellence can only be achieved if Zimbabwe Open University students and all other ZOU clients and stakeholders get delight in the type of service they receive from ZOU centres countrywide. Once clients get delight in the quality of service offered, this is likely to reduce attrition rates.

The Manitoba 2nd Report (1997) emphasizes that the extent to which a university succeeds in becoming one of the world’s leading universities is greatly influenced by its ability to attract and retain students through appropriate quality of service. The ZOU wants to be in the group of crème de la crème Open and Distance Learning Institutions, those universities with service excellence and an ability to delight customers. Kotler (2001) explains that organizations can achieve service excellence by:

1. creating a sense of urgency to improve their service
2. putting together a strong team to direct the process
3. creating appropriate vision
4. communicating the new vision broadly
5. empowering employees to act on that vision
6. producing short-term results to create credibility and counter cynicism
7. building momentum and using that to tackle service provision
8. anchoring new behaviours in organizational culture

Satisfaction is only possible if the employees are motivated and take pride in their work. The Zimbabwe Open University conducted customer care workshops nationally in 2005. This was a clear indication of its commitment to quality service to its main clients, the students. In other words, the primary focus of ZOU is on the needs of the customer. ZOU is, therefore, guided by customer orientation. The institution expects all its employees to focus on the student, listen to and appreciate their needs and desires and attend to them appropriately.

Speaking during the Customer Care workshop, Kurasha (2005) noted that the purpose of ZOU was to;

- Attract new customers by keeping old ones.
- Keep the new customers by giving excellent services, adding that ZOU cannot afford to lose even one customer.
- Satisfy customers; a satisfied customer spreads the good news and more new customers will come.
- Be well informed about institutional operations and perform these operations diligently.
- Try to satisfy all customers where it is unable to refer them to other institutions.

Roberts (2004) argues that the provision of good quality student service is always likely to lower the drop out rate and increase the pass rate, the very issue that Southern African distance education institutions struggle with. The objectives of institutions should, therefore, be in line with Stewart (1992) where he says that the objectives must not be focused on the production of highly acclaimed course materials but rather on the production of successful students. This is only possible through effective quality provision of service at all times. Tierney (1998) explains this point noting that service delivery orientation involves ability to think through problems and issues from the students’ point of view, since service is what the student says it is.

It must be noted that customers seek services to meet specific needs. They, therefore, evaluate the outcomes of their service requests on the basis of what they expected to receive. When people feel a need, they are motivated to take action to fulfill that need. Lovelock (2001) notes that customers looking for services may be anticipating service from any of the three different service levels; desired service, wished for service and predicted service. Desired service is that service which a client hopes to receive. Wished for service is a combination of what clients believe can be and should be delivered in the context of their needs, while predicted service is the service that the client
actually anticipated receiving. These three levels directly affect how they define quality service on any given occasion. The implication here is that clients, in this case students, come to ZOU with certain service expectations and once these are not met, they define service as unsatisfactory and this may have some negative ripple effects. Client perceptions of good quality service according to Lovelock (2001) are centred on reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. By meeting these, therefore, the host will have met good quality client service.

Kottler (2001) points out that good service is not an end in itself, but a means to achieving a number of goals such as:
- client loyalty and relationship commitment
- spread of positive word of mouth, whereby clients effectively become walking, talking advertisements for the organization
- to highly satisfy customers and make them more forgiving and less susceptible to competitive offerings.

In other words, customer satisfaction and quality service encourage repeated patronage and loyalty, promote positive word of mouth, lower institutional costs of attracting new clients, reduce failure costs, create sustainable advantage and insulate customers from competition.

Berry and Parasuraman in Lovelock (2001) in their study on customer care discovered that open communication between frontline personnel and managers is important for achieving service quality. On the same subject, Zanke and Anderson also quoted by Lovelock (2001) studying some unsatisfactory encounters in client service discovered that some unsatisfactory encounters may be due to inappropriate customer behaviours – the notion that sometimes customers are wrong. Such customers can be a source of their own dissatisfaction. Policies have been developed on the pretence that customers are always right and managers recommend and demand that employees should treat customers as if they are always right. On the contrary, however, Dahl in another study also quoted by Lovelock (2001) discovered that the customer is not always right nor will he or she always behave acceptably.

The same study also discovered that the front desk staff was seen as good sources of information and good representatives of the organizations and the majority of dissatisfactory incidents were reported to originate from inadequate information and poor responses to service.

Research in ODL has revealed that institutions are often found lacking in student service provision. Benza (2001) highlights some areas of discontentment with regard to student service delivery as:
- lack of respect for learners,
- unfavourable support service,
- inadequate information and communication, and,
- poor attitudes of staff.

The quality of service offered to students cannot be established in the absence of a comprehensive study. This study, therefore, sought to determine the quality of service offered to students in terms of:
- Assistance given at regional centres
- Interaction of staff with learners and staff availability for consultation, and,
- Information dissemination

The research, therefore, sought to answer the following questions:
1. How do staff interact with learners?
2. Is staff readily available for consultation?
3. Do regional centres effectively disseminate information to students?

The researchers hoped that findings from this study would provide policy makers with a yardstick with which to view the quality of service offered in ZOU regional centres. This was seen as critical in a developing ODL institution to interrogate practices, find information and feed it back into the system with a view to improving the operations, thereby assuring and controlling quality as it relates to service delivery. Kotler (2001) says that the best way to review, evaluate, and improve the service function is to undertake a service audit. It was also believed that findings emanating from this study would contribute to some extent to the existing body of knowledge on service delivery in distance education.
Methodology
The research adopted a descriptive survey design. The greatest advantage of the survey is that it enables descriptions and explanations of the phenomenon. Borg and Gall (1989) point out that descriptive survey enables researchers to measure attitudes, perceptions and orientations prevalent in a large population. Barbie (1997) adds that surveys enable descriptions of what is seen over and beyond. As the study sought to analyze the quality of service offered by ZOU regional centres, the researchers felt that this design would be appropriate.

Stratified sampling was used to extract subjects and a total of 325 respondents were used for this study. Stratification was based on the size of region in terms of student enrolment. This enabled control of the number variable per region per course. The big regional centres, Bulawayo, Masvingo, Harare and Mutare administered 100 questionnaires each and Mashonaland East, Mashonaland West, Mashonaland Central, Midlands and Matabeleland Regions administered 50 questionnaires each.

Questionnaires with closed and open-ended questions were used to gather data. The instrument was preferred because it enabled respondents to answer questions freely and without fear of any reprisals. Questionnaires were distributed to students during the second semester of 2006 in weekend tutorials in some regions and in others questionnaires were administered to students as they came in to write the end of semester examinations. As students were either concluding their semester tutorials or busy with end of semester examinations, making them complete the questionnaires and leaving them behind was problematic hence they were requested to take them home, complete and bring them back. Again this method did not yield very good results as most of the questionnaires were not returned resulting in low response rate, out of a total of 700 questionnaires administered, 335 were returned just slightly less than half and 10 of these had only closed-ended questions answered and as such they were left out of the analysis.

Data presentation combined both quantitative and qualitative approaches to cater for the different types of questions.

Results

Table 1a Distribution of respondents by gender N = 325

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>325</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1a shows that about 61% of the respondents were male and about 39% female. Students in the first year constituted the bulk of the respondents (57%) followed by those doing their second year (21%), third year (13%) and fourth year (9%) respectively. The bulk of the respondents came from those studying BEd. Management (24%) and MEd. Management (±15%) whilst the least represented were those studying BA. English and Communication and BSc. Sports and Physical Education (1.5% each).

Table 1b Distribution of respondents by academic year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Year</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>325</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Information from table 2 indicates that the staff at the front desk was always neatly dressed and very presentable thereby staging a very good picture of the institution. They were described as friendly (85%), and eager to assist (68%). Staff listened to students’ grievances (75%), always giving them full attention. When students arrived, staff greeted them first (62%). They were regarded as prompt and empathetic. They were also recorded as polite (78%), respectful (78%) and receptive to students’ suggestions (78%). Respondents saw staff as generally knowledgeable in their different areas and communicated effectively thereby marketing ZOU. The picture emerging is that the front desk was generally providing appropriate quality service to the main clients.

The open-ended questions, however, revealed that some of the young support staff were often very rude, treating adults like young children and sometimes ignored the clients when they made enquiries.

### Table 1c Distribution of respondents per programme of study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programme</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BSc. Counseling</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BEd. (Management)</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>24.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSc. Psychology</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PGDE</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSc. Geography</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEd. (Management)</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSc. Maths &amp; Stats</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSc. Agriculture</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSc. Special Education</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BA. English &amp; Comm</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDBL</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BCom</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSc. Sports &amp; PE</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MBA</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSc. Nursing</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BA. Media Studies</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>335</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2 The front desk and support staff

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Freq</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>66</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>68</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>70</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>88</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some were noted to spend time playing computer games instead of doing their work.
Table 3 Assistance given by academic staff  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Freq</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The staff market ZOU appropriately.</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>They give accurate information in their areas of operation.</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Staff can give accurate information on other processes at the centre.</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>They are willing to assist students at any time.</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>They assist students after working hours.</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>They go out of their way to assist you.</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>They are prompt to attend to students when they arrive.</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>They respect adult learners.</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>They are polite to students.</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>They enjoy their work (Please explain your answer in-space below).</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From table 3, respondents 60% indicated that the staff marketed ZOU appropriately. Respondents (71%) pointed out that academic staff gave them accurate information in their areas of operation. They were reported as polite (67%), respectful (66%) of adult learners and always eager to assist at any time (54%). Some respondents remarked that some lecturers sacrificed to work extensively during weekends and even shared their contact numbers with students for easy access. They (57%) also pointed out that staff was prompt in assisting students. Respondents (56%) further indicated that staff appeared to be enjoying their work. A disturbing revelation was that some staff was providing services for a fee, claiming that there was “nothing for nothing” outside normal working hours. Students (57%) went on to point out that a few were not eager to attend to students during lunchtime even when they were in their offices. Furthermore, respondents (57%) pointed out that the staff was not eager to assist students after working hours.

Some respondents highlighted areas that needed improvement as:
- Efficiency during registration
- Management of assignments
- Ability to explain all ZOU processes
- Attitude of ancillary staff especially the librarians towards clients

The picture emerging is that although there were some grey areas, ZOU regional centres were doing a lot to meet the services of their clients.

With regard to promptness, most respondents (57%) expressed that staff were generally prompt, accommodating and efficient. Staff was also seen as humble, tolerant and respectful. However, a few were reported to have been treating adult learners like children, harassing or verbally abusing them. On the contrary, some respondents hailed staff for being patient even when they were being harassed and abused by some students. While the majority was described as humble, tolerant, respectful, prompt, accommodating, a few were seen as uncooperative and impatient.

A few respondents indicated that some members of staff gave an impression that they were always busy or pre-occupied with other things such as talking on the phone, playing computer games, basking in the sun or talking to their friends. One respondent remarked, “Some members are proud and slow, resulting in disappointing queues.” A typical example cited was some of the staff on the registration desk. The library, front desk and clerical staff were cited as possessing some of these negative characteristics. This led to the development of fear among students.

Generally academic members of staff were noted as enjoying their work as a lot of them worked over-time and remained cool, approachable and friendly. One respondent remarked, “They do their work diligently yet they walk to work when us students are driving. Please provide them with vehicles for week-end tutorials.” There, however,
seemed to be some contradictions within the views of the respondents. While some viewed staff as enjoying their work, working as their own supervisors, being apparently well paid, others saw them as gloomy and de-motivated and always complaining of low salaries. The general picture emerging is that students saw their lecturers as enjoying their work, working diligently and sacrificing a lot for the institution.

Respondents (60%) indicated that staff made prompt follow up and gave feedback to students citing examination result queries that were promptly attended to. A few, however, expressed that follow-ups were only made “after your face became a prominent feature at the regional centre.” Academic staff was described as sympathetic and empathetic particularly when it hinged on student’s health problems. Tutors were described as always showing concern (70%) on students’ problems. It also emerged that there was always somebody ready to assist (64%) when a particular programme coordinator was away. Respondents were happy with the attention they received from their coordinators. Respondents (73%) indicated that they always enjoyed full attention of their tutors and the tutors listened and took time to explain issues fully. They (64%) further indicated that their tutors always stopped whatever they were doing to attend to them. In situations where tutors were very busy, they always acknowledged the presence of the student, apologized and assured them that they would attend to them in the shortest space of time. Respondents also noted that their tutors demonstrated a lot of concern for their problems and always tried to find solutions, making follow ups, guiding and advising. They (55%) however indicated that they did not get private discussions with their tutors. One would, therefore, conclude that academic staff was generally offering appropriate service to students. The picture emerging is that academic staff was generally competent in both academic and administrative issues.

Most respondents (69%) indicated that tutors always had information on their fingertips. This was elaborated by such comments as: ‘tutors respond to students’ questions and explain concepts clearly and give us good notes. In cases where they were not sure of the information, they always researched widely to come up with correct answers’. However, a few tutors were reported to be reading modules to students during face-to-face tutorials.

Other issues that emerged from open-ended questions related to tutoring, ID cards, modules, marking of assignments and communication with students. Students complained about erratic ID provision, delays in module supply and the long turn around time for assignments. One respondent lashed out, ‘they give us modules a week before examinations and examination dates are changed without notice.’

They further registered their unhappiness citing that some programme coordinators needed to be pushed to follow up on issues, particularly those that dealt with isolated examination queries or, with failure of part-time tutors to show up for face-to-face tutorials. One can therefore conclude that although respondents were generally
satisfied with the service they received from the regional centres the following areas needed improvements:
1. module supply
2. turn around time of marked assignments
3. limited library material
4. communication with students
5. accessibility of ZOU website

Discussion
As the front desk is the first port of call for all visitors to any organization, good grooming and deportment become very critical in `saying it all’ about the organization. Good grooming means being tastefully dressed, scrupulously clean and neat, in the office early, respectful and well poised at all times, with hair, hands and nails neatly and carefully done. Front desk staff needs to maintain good posture and poise. Poise may be seen as the ability to appear always alert, respectful, dignified, composed even if one is not physically or emotionally well, not slumping in the chair but properly seated as this affects not only appearance but health as well.

Service delivery may be affected negatively if staff are demoralized, stressed and overworked as they try to maintain the quality of what they do especially if circumstances in which they operate are not conducive, (Race and Smith quoted by Stokes, 1994). Race and Smith go on to outline some of the causes of poor customer service in organizations as emanating from uncaring attitude, ignorance, negative/indifferent attitude, differences in perception, absence of customer services philosophy, poor handling of the empowered and poor treatment of the employees. Adding to this list Van der Walt et, al quoted by Lovelock (2001) outlined some of the appalling/disgusting customer services as;
• Ignoring customers
• Being impolite or discourteous
• Showing a lack of expertise and product knowledge
• Failing to keep promises
• Being indifferent and impersonal
• Failing to listen
• Blaming others
• Not taking responsibility
• Being arrogant superior or dressing down clients
• Giving incorrect/inaccurate information
• Being sarcastic
• Passing jokes when the client is upset/angry/worried

Zimbabwean Consumer Education Manual (2004) advises that all clients have rights that should be observed in all dealings and some of these are the right to:
• Be treated as a king
• Full attention at every step
• Polite treatment
• Fast and accurate information
• Be informed
• Knowledgeable host/hostess
• Expect action in emergencies and tricky situations
• Redress
• Care, accuracy and attention

The above client rights can be achieved through keeping appointments, giving feedback on developments, being honest in all dealings, attentive, committed, approachable, tolerant without criticizing, smart in dealings, knowing the calibre of customers and handling them accordingly, listening without interrupting, treating with respect all individuals, keeping promises, not grumbling about overtime, not passing the buck but taking the responsibility and accepting it without being defensive.

Every client deserves to be respected and they will always feel good about it. Likewise, ZOU students, as clients, should enjoy this respect at all levels and at all times. Lovelock (2001) gives hints on ways of respecting customers as:
• Listening to them
• Allowing them to finish explaining
• Using their name correctly
• Keeping them informed
• Using clear simple terms not complicated technical jargon
• Getting to the level of the customer
• Making them feel welcome
• Treating them personally
• Being genuine with them
• Responding to them politely
It is, therefore, vital that everyone in the organization maintains good customer relations. Maintaining good customer relations implies that staff must handle complaints promptly and fairly, maintain contact with their customers, keep serving them and show appreciation no matter how many times they ask the same question and build a professional reputation. Everyone in the organization must accept and implement a customer orientation focus and not just as the responsibility of one area but as the obligation of all employees and at all levels.

Staff should be able to assess clients’ feelings and thoughts. If staff is able to understand their customers, they will then be able to develop a rapport with them and establish credibility in their eyes. Good customer service, therefore, implies:

- Seeing things from client’s point of view
- Showing enthusiasm in work and remaining relaxed and at ease at all times
- Having competence/knowledge and acting promptly and effectively
- Relating to the client as an individual and being interested in their feelings and/or responses
- Remaining polite, cool, confident and attentive without intruding
- Taking pride in one’s work and in one’s institution
- Talking good about one’s institution publicly regardless of costs
- Providing solutions and communicating clearly and knowledgeably
- Taking the trouble – going an extra mile for the sake of learners
- Being sensitive without imposing own feelings at their expense
- Attending to clients’ concerns warmly and accommodatingly
- Moving at their pace, being prepared to deal with their concerns
- Being genuine at all times as the hostess, saying what one means, sticking to one’s promise, promising to deliver and accepting weaknesses without being defensive.

Members of library staff in the ZOU centres were seen as generally indifferent. Be that as it may, Perraton and Creed quoted by Roberts (2006) argue that it is a tall order for library service to try to satisfy varying needs of a diversified clientele of mature people, who know what they want, where to find it, how to look for it and when to look for it. In other words, mature students should as far as possible be able to serve themselves most of the time when they get into the libraries and only ask for assistance in very limited circumstances.

Lovelock (2001) notes that in most organizations, the prime responsibility for the organization’s success often rests with the relatively junior personnel in such customer contact positions, for example, front desk, receptionist, messenger gardener and general support staff. These individuals who are often young and less educated than their customers need both technical and interpersonal skills. Not only do they need to serve clients quickly and accurately, they must be able to do so while relating well to customers.

In other words, service institutions need to devote special care to selecting, training and motivating those employees who will be serving clients directly. In addition to possessing skills required for the job, they need to possess interpersonal skills. At the same time the institutions have to manage and shape customer behaviour so that the misbehaviour of a few does not spoil the experience of everybody else. To cope effectively, service employees need training, authority and management support to ensure that encounters with customers result in satisfactory outcomes. This is sometimes achieved by flattening the organizational chart and turning it upside down thereby placing client contact staff on the upper level of the inverted pyramid.

Communication channels as well as communication aids are important in the design of a good and effective client service structure. Van der Walt et al. quoted by Lovelock (2001) note that provision should be made for three communication channels; vertical—where communication flows downwards and upwards from the very junior staff and students to top management. Horizontal communication – where communication takes place between people on the same level and in the same department of the organizational structure. Cross communication – where communication concerning specific activities which directly affect
most departments between subordinates and the personnel.

Kotler (2001) warns that every organization which has client orientation needs to follow basic guidelines for appropriate client care. Client care according to him involves; knowing one’s customer and focusing on them, knowing one’s organization and its products and services, carrying out one’s duties with efficiency and effectiveness, communicating positively about one’s services and the organization as a whole, being positive in attitude and treating clients as one would like to be treated, under promising but over delivering and maintaining good grooming and deportment at all times. Kotler goes on to point out that not respecting the client, not seeing things from their perspective and not being genuine with them are bad client practices which organizations should always guard against.

Conclusions
From the data collected, the following findings emerged:
The descriptive survey on ZOU students’ perception of service delivery resulted in the following emergent issues:-
• that generally ZOU regional centres were providing appropriate quality services to their students but were working under a lot of pressure most of the time and under very difficult conditions.
• that the staff at the front desk was generally providing appropriate services to clients thereby marketing the institution. ZOU was marketing itself adequately through appropriate quality service at regional centres’ front offices, and also through t-shirts, caps, ZOU bags and brochures.
• that the majority of ZOU academic staff were seen as humble, tolerant, respectful and accommodating, always willing to assist and prompt in addressing and following-up on issues. They were enjoying their work and they were described as competent, diligent and sacrificing a lot for the institution.
• Poor service was noted in areas like registration, assignment marking, and communication with students and attitude of library and ancillary staff. Some members of staff were providing their services to students for a fee outside working hours.

Recommendations
Emanating from the above findings it is recommended that:
1. Registration process be efficiently conducted to minimize errors and wastage of time.
2. Proper procedures for assignment management be instituted and adhered to.
3. Ongoing staff development workshops for full-time and part-time academic and non-academic staff on client services be organized.
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