

THROUGH THE EYE OF A STUDENT: CUSTOMER CARE IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES, A CASE AT THE CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY, FREE STATE

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to investigate the perceptions of clients namely, students, about the quality of library services and also the quality of staff client relationship. It was envisaged that through this study the perceptions, feelings and views of students in as far as their needs satisfaction could be illuminated. The study addressed the following concerns: Apart from the physical and other library resources, are there other mechanisms of evaluating the quality of services an academic library has to offer? In order for an academic library to improve service quality, what role should clients play? What are their concerns about their information needs consideration and what other possible means can be done to satisfy those needs?

Keywords: Academic library quality service, customer care in academic libraries, service quality assessment.

1. INTRODUCTION

Academic libraries measure their success of the service quality in terms of the physical resources that clients use. Rapid infrastructure upgrades continue to occupy what librarians consider the core of their quality service towards clients and what could possibly satisfy the clients. The aim of this research is to investigate the perceptions students have on service quality, if the service quality really meets the needs, expectations and the service experiences. The Central university of Technology, Free State library caters for ±12000 students for four faculties which are humanities, management sciences, health and environmental sciences and engineering and information technology. The subject of this study focused on the Bloemfontein campus library.

2. SERVICE DELIVERY IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES, A LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Calvert (2001:732) customer care became a library jargon during the 80s and 90s. Calvert (2001: 732-757) concurs with Nitecki and Herson (2000:259-273) that the quality of library service should exceed the customer's expectations. Calvert (2001:732) also mentions that there are three important dimensions that measure the quality of service in academic libraries and they are, service standard, the library environment and staff attitudes.

Calvert (2001:732-757) conducted research using New Zealand and Chinese university students to measure the quality of service academic libraries offer to the students. The following six points emerged as key points in academic library service:

- Past experience of the client;
- Word of mouth from other customers;
- Personal needs of customers;
- National culture of the customer;
- Communication about what the customer can expect; and
- Services offered by competitors.

Calvert (2001:732-757) used focused groups consisting of four and eight library staff from Perking and Tsinghua universities both in China to gather data. Staff members were presented with lists of probabilities of the service quality. Participants could delete what was not considered relevant and could add what they considered relevant. Questionnaires were circulated to students about their perceptions of an ideal service. A total of 135 questionnaires were completed. The results were analysed using SPSS software. The findings classified six aspects which were considered to be important in assessing the quality of service an academic library has to offer.

- Study environment – this involved personal safety study space and toilets including cleanliness;
- Materials - the materials had to match the course content and be accurate;
- Equipments – were they well kept and maintained;
- Organizational materials – direction signs availability of OPACs and the friendliness thereof;
- Service provided – speed and accuracy; and
- Staff attributes – welcoming behaviour.

The findings when comparing the two countries revealed that Chinese students rated their experience of quality service higher as compared to this same study when done previously at a university in New Zealand (Calvert, 2001:732-757). The findings in both countries indicate that there are similarities in the quality service trait. The most similar traits in both countries proved to be the three earlier mentioned points which are the service standard, environment and staff attitude. The following strategies were mentioned as the strategies to market the library since the library faced competition. These strategies included creating a drive up window, display books and information products and serving customers' coffee (Quinn, 2007:2). Quinn advocates that a library can increase its market by:

- Attracting new customers.
- Doing more business with existing customers.

- Reducing the loss of customers.
- Competitors need to be surveyed.
- Virtual customer complaint boxes need to be set to get criticism.
- Show customers respect (Quinn, 2007:3/4).

However, a study conducted by Harer and Cole (2005:149) highlighted that the pillars of quality academic library service includes students, academic staff and stakeholders. Emphasis was placed on performance measurement and a call for performance measurement system that works well for an academic library was made. Bench marking, quality assessments were also mentioned in the debate provided by these authors. Two quality assessment tools known as continuous quality improvement (CQI) and total quality management (TQM) have been recommended as suitable for quality customer service for an academic library. The application of both tools includes leadership and strategic planning as aspects which affect the end product which is the quality of service (Harer and Cole, 2005:152). Wang (2006:606) managed to shed more insight as to what total quality management includes. It is mentioned that total quality management challenges conventional library practices it as well transform the library as an organization. A point that is seldom debated by library literature is that since the library is not a profit making organization, how can a user be regarded as a client. The argument therefore is that libraries are in the information competition world with competitors like WWW service providers and private information vendors, budget restrictions, not to mention the challenge for “survival” should also be noted (Wang, 2006:607). These competitors are customer oriented and responsive. The library has to find ways and means of survival and this calls for the library to be customer focused rather than user focused.

Another quality service tool known as SERVQUAL (service quality) has been used by libraries before to measure the service quality (Landrum and Prybutok, 2004:629). This tool has recently received the criticism that libraries might meet the assessment requirements using this tool but fail to meet the needs of the user. SERVQUAL includes operational concepts like service input/output, for example, the client lending record. The argument is that this cannot be used as a tool to measure quality but the perception of the client itself is regarded as important (Landrum and Prybutok, 2004:629).

The following quality improvement plan can be found in the subject literature and worth mentioning include the following:

- Quality planning.
- Quality control.
- Quality improvement.

These quality initiatives if simply interpreted imply:

- What do we want to do?
- What are we already doing?
- How can we improve on what we are doing” (Poll & Boekhorst, 1996:12)?

Long term goals and short term objectives need to be clearly stated. Adequate service plan need to be designed and service has to be provided at the highest level possible. Constant service measurement tool should be put in place to continuously assess the quality status (Poll & Boekhorst, 1996:12).

The following keywords should be what each library manager should make sure that they are part of service improvement plan and they are: credibility, understanding, availability, access, security, tangibles, courtesy, friendliness, appearance, atmosphere, cleanliness, comfort, reliability and communication (Pinder & Melling, 1996: 12-13).

2.1 A South African academic library perspective

According to De Jager (2006:1-2) and Dube (2011:27) customer care in South African academic libraries became a subject of interest after democracy with the formulation of HEQC (Higher Education Quality Committee) which resulted into CHELSA (Committee for Higher Education Librarians of South Africa) being formulated. Higher education libraries found themselves compelled to support their mother institutions programme audits and academic libraries had to contribute to standards as set by the quality committee. CHELSA decided to appoint a quality assurance subcommittee which had to establish common bench mark standards that could be used by different university library as yard stick. It was discovered that some universities had already employed Libqual as quality assessment tool.

The following emerged as key quality concepts:

- Inputs – this includes, E-resources, the collection, equipments space and infrastructure.
- Processes – acquisition, cataloguing, classification, circulation and reference services.
- Outputs – Documents, information and service provided.
- Outcomes – met targets, satisfied clients and satisfaction of quality standards.
- Review – audit surveys, performance review, complaints handling and room for improvement (De Jager, 2006:6).

These concepts have to support the holistic picture of an academic library and that include Integration, resources, human resources, processes, access,

service quality and feedback.

Integration refers to the integration of the library's vision and mission into that of the mother university objectives. Resources refer to the library resources that support the critical success factors of the university through the provision of the infrastructure and information resources (De Jager, 2006:6-7; Arko-Cobbah, 2004:268). The human resources look at the high skill level and staff motivation in order to meet the needs of the university. It also looked into whether the staff is afforded opportunities for growth. Arko-Cobbah (2004:268) further state that a highly skilled staff extends its role beyond the library walls as they collaborate with faculties and departments in supporting curriculum restructuring and assist in evaluation of information resources. Accessibility involves making information available in all formats locally and to other locations other than the library. Service quality refers to prompt and competent provision of services expected by clients. Review feedback refers to evaluation of services by clients (De Jager, 2006:7; Arko-Cobbah, 2004:268).

Further, a study was conducted using four universities in Kwazulu Natal which are, University of Durban Westville, University of Zululand, Durban Institute of Technology and Mangosuthu Technikon as subjects of research on customer care. In this, Dlamini (2006:119) discovered that if academic libraries take the importance of customer care into serious consideration, tremendous improvement will be attained in the use of knowledge resources. The main subject of research was customer care strategies focusing on the following points:

- Composition of customers served in academic libraries.
- Customer care policies.
- Customer care knowledge products.
- Customer care surveys plan in place.
- Library customer satisfaction.

Findings differed from university to university, however there were also some similarities. The University of Zululand and Durban Institute of Technology did not have a customer care policy in place whereas the Durban Westville University and Mangosuthu Technikon did have some policies in place. It also emerged from the study that there was an urgent need for customer care training for library staff. It was also found that clients were not aware of a unit or person responsible for customer care, however and at Mangosuthu Technikon, the special projects librarian was also responsible for customer care. All these universities offered orientation and information search training. Users in all universities were aware of knowledge records. It was also discovered that the currency of the information resources bring about stability. The general finding was that the library clients appreciated the services offered to them (Dlamini, 2006:128).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data collection in the context of this research involved a mixed method approach. Chen (2006:75) refers to mixed method research as the systematic combination of the qualitative and quantitative qualities in research. Creswell et al. (2006:1) refers to it as both a method and methodology and it involves collecting analysing, mixing both qualitative and quantitative approaches in a single research. The reason for employing both methods is for the weakness of one method to be overcome by the other. This is supported by the literature as documented in Jonson and Onwuegbuzie (2004:14). These authors are of the opinion that emerging research paradigms call for the mixed method approach as each approach is special on its own. Hoepfl (1997) mentioned that the quantitative research method lacks the social interaction effect as feelings can not be captured. It is as well mentioned that a qualitative approach lacks a truth testing tool (Hoepfl, 1997:50). Ngulube et al. (2009:105) mention that mixed method research may add more insight as compared to when one method is used and this usually enhances the research results. Both questionnaires and interviews were used in this research.

3.1 Data collection method

An easy to fill questionnaire consisting of five questions was used. A total of 100 questionnaires were distributed. A random sampling of participants was conducted. Out of the 100, only 76 were returned. Peer students were used as agents to distribute and collect the completed questionnaires. The reason for using questionnaires as data collection tool was to reach out to introverted students and again to alleviate stigmatization perceptions students might have. Besides questionnaires, interviews were also used to collect data. The purpose was to be able to detect emotions in the voices of respondents. A tape recorder in the possession of a fellow student was used so as to conduct interviews. The purpose of using students to collect data on behalf of the researcher was for the learners to feel free with their peers without any fear of prejudice. Individual as well as paired interviews were conducted with each interview lasting for at least thirty minutes. Participants willingly took part in the survey.

3.2 Data analysis

Data analysis focused separately on the quantitative followed by the qualitative one. However on the findings, a joint discussion combined both findings.

3.2.1. Questionnaire data analysis

The questionnaire consisted of only five questions which encompass most of the library services as offered to the students. A scale of 1 to 5 rating consisting of 5 questions was designed to elicit desired ratings by participants. The sixth one

was open ended where respondents could air their views.

The following questions were asked:

1. How many times do you use the Library and Information Services (LIS) per day?
2. What would you rate the quality of service at the circulation desk?
3. What would you rate the quality of services you get from the information librarian on the first floor?
4. What would you rate the quality of service you get in the computer lab?
5. What would you rate the attitude of the library staff in serving information needs?

The service rating criteria were as follows:

1. - Poor
2. - Average
3. - Good
4. - Very good
5. - Excellent

This question or statement rating is referred to as Likert scaling and has been described by Jamieson (2004:1212) as the one commonly used to measure attitudes and perceptions of responses on a given question or statement.

The tables bellow indicate the number of responses per question and how percentages. The following questions were asked with a relevance rating indicated below:

3.2.1.1 Frequency library visits ratings

Respondents were requested to rate the frequency of their daily library visits.

Table 1 bellow depicts the response ratings

Ratings	Numbers	Percentage
1	15	19.73
2	29	38.15
3	17	22.36
4	7	9.21
5	8	10.52
Total	76	100

The highest rating on depicted on Table 1 is 2 on the scale which is 29 (38.15%) rating average.

3.2.1.2 Circulation desk quality service rating

Regarding the circulation quality service rating, the answer is provided in the ratings provided in table 2 below.

Table 2: Circulation desk quality service rating

Ratings	Numbers	Percentage
1	7	9.21
2	11	14.47
3	21	27.63
4	18	23.68
5	17	22.36
Total	74	97.35

The highest rating on this question was 3 consisting of 21 (27.63%) and the circulation desk was rated good.

3.2.1.3 First floor information service rating

Table 3 below provides the responses yielded on the service ratings regarding the information services on the first floor.

Table 3: First floor service quality rating

Ratings	Numbers	Percentage
1	7	9.21
2	10	13.16
3	22	28.94
4	13	17.10
5	20	26.13
Total	72	94.54

Only 72 out of 76 respondents answered this question. The highest score consisting of 22 (28.94%) percent rating 3 on the scale rated the librarians services good.3.2.1.4.

3.2.1.4 Computer lab quality service rating

The results on table 4 below describe the rating allocated by respondents on the quality of service students receive in the library computer lab.

Table 4: Computer lab service quality rating

Ratings	Numbers	Percentage
1	15	19.74
2	12	15.78
3	16	21.05
4	23	30.26
5	10	13.16
Total	76	100

The highest responses on this question consisted of 23 (30.26%) and rated 4 on the scale. This means that the service in the computer lab is very good.

3.2.1.5 Library staff attitude

Table 5 below presents the respondents' rating on staff attitude towards clients during service provision.

Table 5: Library staff attitude rating

Ratings	Numbers	Percentage
1	4	5.26
2	16	21.05
3	23	30.26
4	15	19.73
5	18	23.68
Total	76	100

On the staff attitude the highest rating was 3 consisting of 23 (30.26%) which was good. This simply implies that attitude of library staff need some improvements in order to be excellent.

The opportunity for comments on the questionnaire elicited positive, negative and advisory comments as reflected in Table 6.

Table 6: Comments

Comment	Numbers	Percentage
• No comment	22	28.94
• Positive comment	13	17.10
• Negative comment	3	3.94
• Advice	38	50
• Total	76	100

Most of the comments were related to the services the students received from the computer lab and recommendations for improvement. The following were the sentiments of the responses on the open ended questions on the questionnaire:

- “Increase quality of service in computer lab (second floor)”
- “The computer lab is not big enough to accommodate most people”

The 50% indicated on table 6 dealt with improvement of the service in the computer lab. The computer lab service received a very good (30.26%) rating which was 4 on the scale of 1-5 in table 4. It is evident from the questionnaire data analysis that no question received an excellent rating. This calls for more improvement in all the services the library offer.

Since the study was both qualitative and quantitative interviews were also conducted to collect data. So as to be objective, a tape recorder was used to capture data as the literature regards it as one of the most faithful tool that can be used as data storage device (Hoepfl, 1997: 53). A random selection of over seventy volunteer students was made and students were not under any obligation to participate but they participated enthusiastically. The sentiments from the interview data were of similar concern therefore the researcher decided not to conduct any more interviews as a result.

3.2.2 Interview data analysis

In order to analyze the interview data collected, two approaches that marketers usually rely on, known as utilitarianism and hedonism, have been used. Utilitarianism measures the maximum outcomes of a general utility in a given situation (Riley, 2008:286). One can explain this by mentioning how much effective service provision brings about client satisfaction. Heathwood (2006:540) describes hedonism as a desire for satisfaction that has been met with the result being “happiness”. Hills (2008:50), is of the opinion that happiness is good and therefore should be subject to maximization. One may further add that a happy client equals a successful library.

The two mentioned approaches have been considered in the literature when conducting customer surveys. Clients' surveys usually yield a mixture of responses and they usually include the following:

- Frustration;
- Satisfaction;
- Uncertainty; and
- Don't care.

In this study a mixture of responses has characterised the interview findings. Respondents in this regard were named A or B or C and pairs were also named pair A or B or C, and so forth.

Table 7

Respondent/Pair	Comment
Respondent A	a participant had this to say about the general library services “Um the general library services are excellent...”
Respondent B	said this “ I think the services are outstanding and we don't have problems about the services generally in the library” ... “ the staff are very helpful”
Respondent C	had this to say about the circulation desk “... they are magnificent, outstanding....”
Respondent D	“There is no much to complain about. Queue up need to be paid attention to. They are very much helpful, they are the best staff you can ever ask for. We really have a problem with number of computers so far I am not really satisfied, for instance my memory stick does not work on this computer ...Give us people with more insight into computers”.
Respondent E	“We need more PCs and more space”.
Respondent F	“The library is not generally accessible to students, particularly disabled students.... This student had this to say about the computer lab service “Absolutely it's poor service, ridiculous service... We have 9000 student here and the computer lab cannot even cater for 20% and most students studying here are of disadvantage society and cannot afford to have their own laptops and computers you know, so it becomes a problem very difficult for quantitative students to use lack of computers so we need to work on something for that, the sooner the better”. (<i>Hiring of at least two professional permanent staff with IT background to attend to students and offer professional services could alleviate this challenge</i>).
Pair A	“Long queues in the printing room, computers are little.... The circulation desk “is best, they are the best... The books are being well set at the shelves, the staff on the first floor are the best. Some people do not get computers, these computers are few, they need to extend the time” (<i>Library closing hours have thus been extended upon approval by council</i>).
Pair B	“General services I think they are good and not good as they favour some other students and not the others”.
Pair C	had this to say about the circulation desk, “That desk is out of order...when you look for something they will tell you to go to first floor, they are not well informed of their duties in the library, They are dysfunctional if I may say so because they are supposed to help student, so if students come and yet they refer the student to another person that person refer the student back to them so is more like maladministration which operates under certain disfunctionality which student do not accept. When asked about the attitude of staff on the first floor, this is what the respondents said “Those ones are very proactive, they always help you with a smile”. (<i>Constant meetings where strategies as to how services need to be improved should be held to alleviate impasses students' experience</i>).

More interviews could not be conducted as the researcher felt that sample saturation has been reached as more sentiments were of the same opinion as the ones stated above.

4. FINDINGS

From the findings it has been discovered that students were generally satisfied with the quality of services offered by the library and that most students took the initiative of coming up with recommendations. Participants also added comments in areas where they perceived attention was needed for improvement to areas mentioned within the services. The main concern was the services they reviewed.

From the quantitative data, it is evident that the utilitarianism and hedonism approaches which measure satisfaction and happiness were not fully met as no question received an excellent rating of 5 on the Lickert scale for all the questions. This simply implies that more efforts have to be done to ensure that the service quality improves and clients are more than satisfied.

A different kind of sentiments was echoed by interview participants. Respondent A used the word “excellent” for the general library services. Respondent B used the word “outstanding” and as such it is perceived that the service level in terms of this respondent is beyond expectations Respondent C used the words “outstanding”, and “magnificent” for the circulation desk service. From the qualitative analysis of data, it is evident that the utilitarianism and hedonism approaches have been met. On the questionnaire, this question elicited a rating of 2 on a Lickert scale of 1-5 which rated average. Pair A supported the views of respondent C and referred to the circulation desk as being the best. Pair C (with one participant sounding frustrated) had a different opinion about the circulation desk as they used the word “dysfunctional”. Pair A also responded positively about books on the shelves and the assistance they get there.

From the data collected it is evident that there are areas in the library that require urgent intervention and that include queues in the printing room. The challenge is, the printing room is not a library function however it is housed within the library.

More concern however was related more to the computer lab as students felt that the number of computers has to be increased and all computers need to be fully functional Respondent D's memory stick could not work on a computer. The increase in computers is echoed by respondent D, E and F. As for challenge faced by the computer lab, it is not possible to meet the needs of 12 000 student with only 235 computers since this is the number of computers available for students to utilize. This simply implies that implies that 1 computer is to 51 students.

(With development of the Student Academic Support Centre, the library's challenge with regard to computer facilities has been partially alleviated but more surveys need to be conducted to determine if indeed the challenge has been fully addressed and if not, what can be done?).

It is evident that students regarded library facilities as the core of their need satisfaction as concerns involved facilities and not staff as such. "Give us people with more insight into computers", that is what respondent D said. Do they really get what they want, that is how they measure their service satisfaction.

One may further add that the use of mixed method research has presented data in such a way that the quantitative analysis has rated the services from average to very good but no excellent. On the contrary the qualitative perspective has rated the services "excellent", "magnificent" and "outstanding". The qualitative method complemented the where the quantitative method could not reach.

To show that the students of CUT have the interest of their library at heart, 50% of the comments on the open ended question on the questionnaire were advices.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of this research was to see the library services through the eye of a student as library clients. Literature was consulted to investigate where similar studies took place and what methods were used. Students made their contribution as to what do they expect as far as the CUT library services are concerned. A general satisfaction with services came out from both the quantitative and the qualitative data. Concerns that were raised involved queues in the printing room, computer lab services and of course circulation service.

Students recommended that more computers need to be acquired and more space should be made available in the library. They also felt that people with computer expertise should be employed in the computer lab in order to support them with computer related challenges they experience. One particular user who was frustrated of being sent from the circulation to other levels made a point that this challenge needs to be addressed. For that, clear and visible service direction signs placed in strategic areas that immediately catch student eyes should be in place as this will alleviate the challenge. Circulation staff needs training on reference interviewing so as to refer clients to the relevant service point.

For all the service points, regular interactions and trainings on what each service entails should be provided so as to avoid the situation where students are sent from pillar to post as this compromises the services as well as the integrity the library stands for. Professionally qualified staff should be recruited to deal for the challenges that students face the in the computer lab. Radical marketing of library services strategies should be investigated and applied.

Library promotions and competitions can improve the image of the library and minimize the competition challenge the Library faces from other services. Even if not asked for professional librarians should market the services through word of mouth by informing the students of current and new services.

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