

Assessing Learner Support Services at the Zimbabwe Open University

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ABSTRACT

This study evaluates the usefulness of the Zimbabwe Open University learner support system. It investigates the extent to which learners use specific services and assesses the extent to which learners regard the services as useful and contributing to learner satisfaction. It is hoped that the findings of this study will assist the University to revitalise its learner support system thereby improving the learners' service experience. It is also hoped that the results would assist the University in distributing resources towards the most critical learner support services. The study used a descriptive survey design. Questionnaires were used as the main data gathering instrument. The questionnaires were distributed to 50 ZOU students from the eleven (11) ZOU Regional Centres. The researcher also conducted interviews with ZOU Centre for Student Management staff. The study revealed that services which are used in instructional delivery are the most frequently used by learners. These include printed learning materials and tutorials. Regional Centre based services are also among the most frequently used services. The least frequently used services include communication facilitation services such as the ZOU website and the ZOU on Thursday and the Counselling and Advisory Services. Printed learning materials, Regional Centre based services, Orientation and Tutorials are regarded as the most useful services by learners. The study recommends that the University should align non-academic services (Website, Student association, Counselling and Advisory Services) with learners' needs as they are not being used adequately by learners. Academic services (Tutorials, Printed learning materials, Library) need to be continuously improved. It is recommended therefore that modules be rigorously edited to eliminate mistakes. Students require more tutorial time and hard copy handouts for future reference and revision.

Introduction

ODL has increased access to higher education for the vast majority of Zimbabweans at a relatively lower cost. This is one of the major reasons why this mode of delivery has experienced growing preference from professionals, entrepreneurs and other individuals. Inevitably, student

enrolment at the Zimbabwe Open University has been steadily growing with a peak of above 20000 students in 2006.

With student enrolment steadily increasing, the issue of quality assurance in learner support services has become important to several stakeholders.

Learner support services should be specific to the needs of learners and they must evolve as learners' needs change.

This study investigates the extent to which ZOU learners are using the learner support services provided by the institution. It evaluates, from the learners' perspective, the usefulness of these learner support services. The study therefore identifies services which contribute the most to learner satisfaction. The study also recommends learner support services which students may require and are currently not offered by the institution.

The findings of this study are essential as they provide the University with a guide on identifying services that should be given greater emphasis and support. It also assists the University in promoting services that are currently offered by the University but are not adequately used by learners.

Statement of the problem

The Zimbabwe Open University offers a diverse learner support system which is composed of several learner support services. There has been no major research carried out to assess the extent to which students are using specific services within the whole system. The institution also wishes to know the services which contribute the most to learner satisfaction.

Aim of the study

The study aims to investigate the usefulness of the ZOU learner support system. It evaluates the frequency with which specific services are used by learners and the extent to which learners regard them as useful. It is hoped that the findings will assist the University in appreciating usage

of services. This information may also provide a basis to allocate resources equitably to services and where necessary promote certain services which are considered essential.

Research objectives

The study aims to achieve the following objectives;

- To identify the extent to which learners are using specific services
- To identify the services which contribute most to satisfaction of the ODL learner
- To recommend action to improve the usefulness of the current learner support system
- To recommend new services to the learner support system

Research Questions

- How often are ZOU learners utilising specific learner support services?
- Which specific services contribute the most to learner satisfaction?
- How can ZOU improve the usefulness of the current learner support system?
- What new services are required by learners to bolster the learner support system?

Justification of the study

The Zimbabwe Open University, in pursuit of its vision, aims to provide world class learner support services to its students. This study aims to investigate possible ways ZOU can enhance its learner support services in order to continue satisfying the needs of its customers.

An enhanced learner support system will enable the University to achieve its objectives of increasing student enrolment. The University will achieve this through increased learner satisfaction and reduced student drop outs.

The study will increase student satisfaction as it will open avenues for more student-student cooperation and student-tutor interaction. It is hoped that this initiative will reduce failure in assignments and examinations.

Literature Review

The Learners' Support System in Distance Education

Simpson (2000), defines the learner support system as including all activities beyond the production and the delivery of course materials that assist in the progress of students in their studies. These could be either in the form of academic or non academic support.

Academic support assists students with cognitive, intellectual and knowledge related issues of specific courses (Simpson, 2000). These may include printed modules, multi media academic materials, tutorials and other facilities which help students to gather knowledge.

Non-academic support assists students in their ability to be organised and effective in their studies (Simpson, 2000). Examples of non academic support services at ZOU are orientation, counselling, and student's association.

The learners' support system is an important service that needs to be provided by the institution to the learners because of the characteristics of distance learners themselves. ODL students are mainly isolated and come from diverse backgrounds – economic, social, educational and occupational. The provision of such an educational support system ensures the facilitation of communication between students, the academic staff as well as the administration. It also assists in addressing the administrative needs of the students (Kember & Dekkers, 1987; Sewart, 1992; Hillman et al., 1994).

The responsibility of ODL learning lies with the learners. It is important that the Zimbabwe Open University and other ODL learning institutions provide learner support services that are learner centric and meets the learners' expectations and needs.

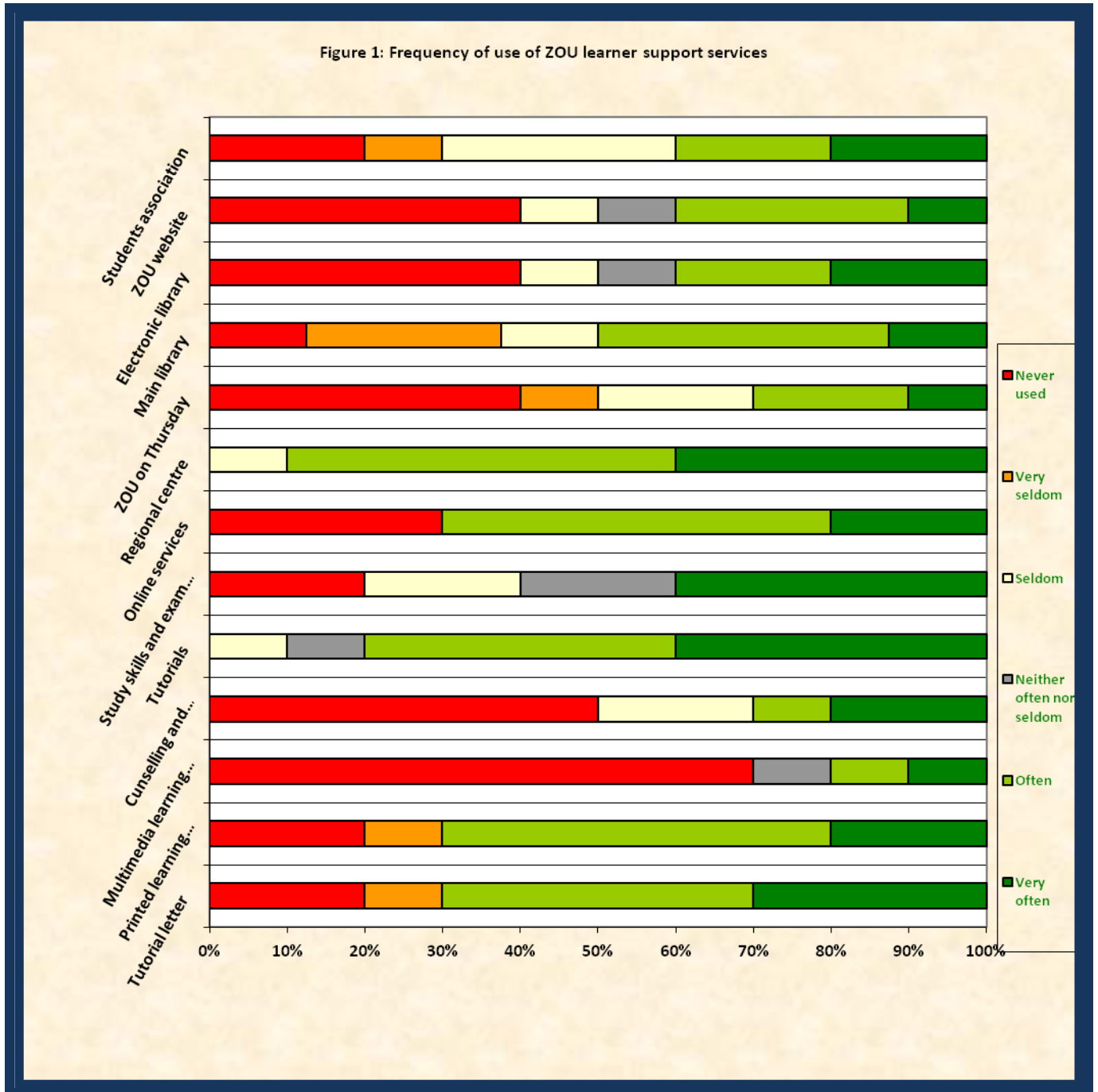
Methodology

This study employed a descriptive survey design. Data gathering was conducted using the questionnaire method. The researcher randomly administered questionnaires to a sample of 50 ZOU students from eleven (11) ZOU Regional Centres. To get an in-depth understanding of the current learner support system at ZOU, the researcher conducted interviews with the ZOU Centre for Student Management personnel who are responsible for learner support services.

Discussion of Findings

Figure 1 below shows the frequency of use of various services provided through the Zimbabwe Open University learner support system. The most frequently used services are mainly academic support services which include tutorials (mean = 5.1), orientation (mean = 4.5), printed learning materials (mean = 4.2) and regional centre services (mean = 5.2).

(NB. All means are calculated out of a total of 6)



The less frequently used services are mainly non academic learner support services. These include Counselling and Advisory services (mean = 2.8), ZOU Website (mean = 3.2) and the

ZOU on Thursday (mean = 2.8). The less frequently used academic support services include multimedia learning materials (mean = 2.2) and the Electronic Library (mean = 3.3)

Printed learning materials and tutorials are the main instructional delivery modes in Distance Learning. Where printed learning materials do not adequately clarify concepts, tutorials provide a platform for discussion and further clarification and understanding of concepts including preparation for examinations. The importance of printed learning materials and tutorials is thus indicated in the results in *Figure 1* above. ODL learners basically rely on the two academic support services.

What is of major concern in the findings above is the low utilisation of the ZOU website, the ZOU on Thursday and the electronic library. Globally, ODL is evolving into more of online learning and utilising more technology. Though the other online services are increasing in popularity, the low utilisation of the website is a worrying trend for the University.

Figure 2 below shows the degree of usefulness of the Zimbabwe Open University learner support services. The diagram estimates the level of satisfaction derived from using services. The services which are most useful and contribute more to learner satisfaction at the Zimbabwe Open University are Orientation (mean = 4.5), Printed learning materials (mean = 4.1), Tutorials (mean=4.1) and Regional Centre services (mean = 4).

The least performing services at the Zimbabwe Open University, and perceived by learners as least useful, are the Multimedia learning materials (mean = 2.7), ZOU on Thursday (mean = 3) and the ZOU website (mean = 3.1)

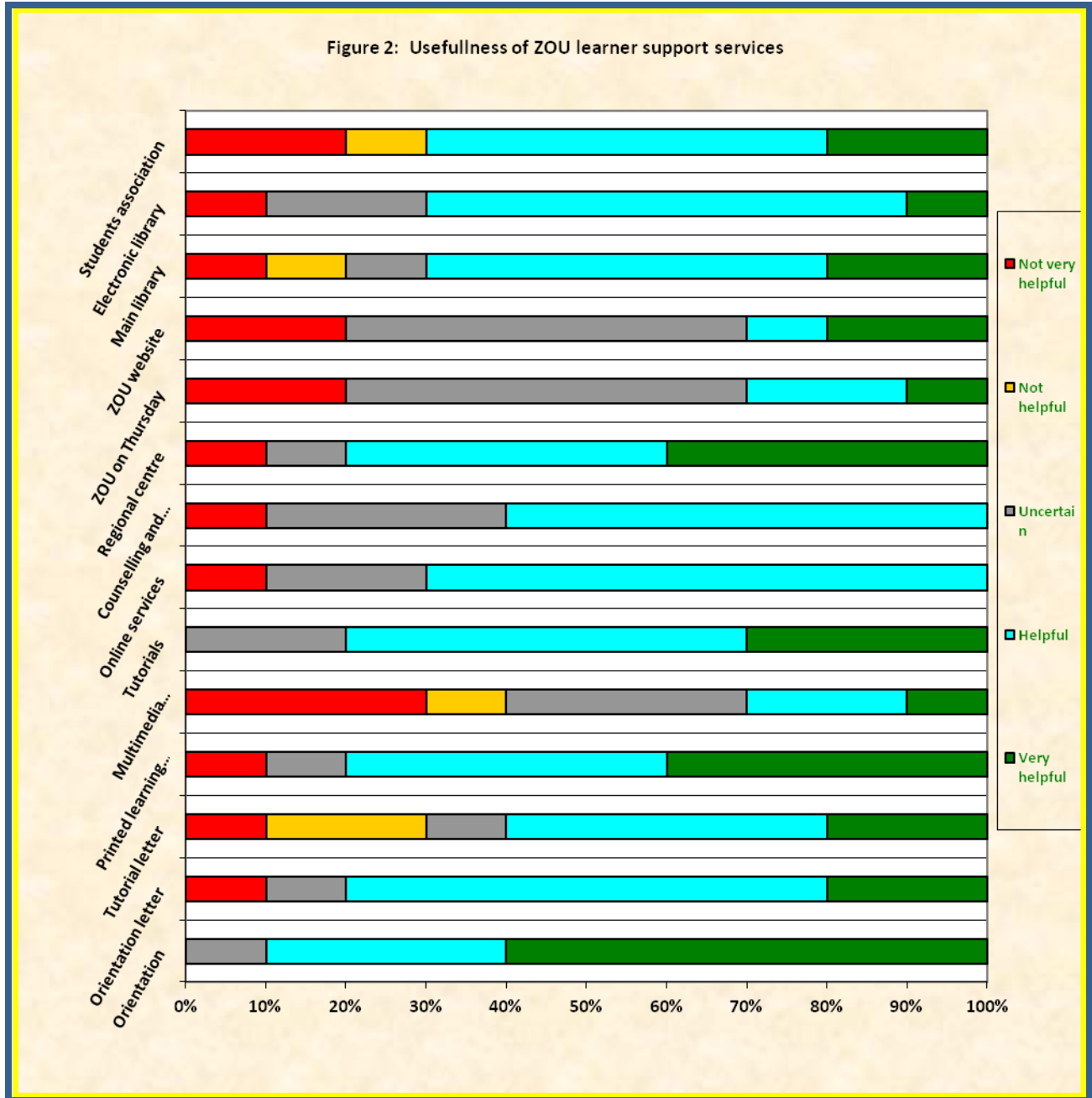
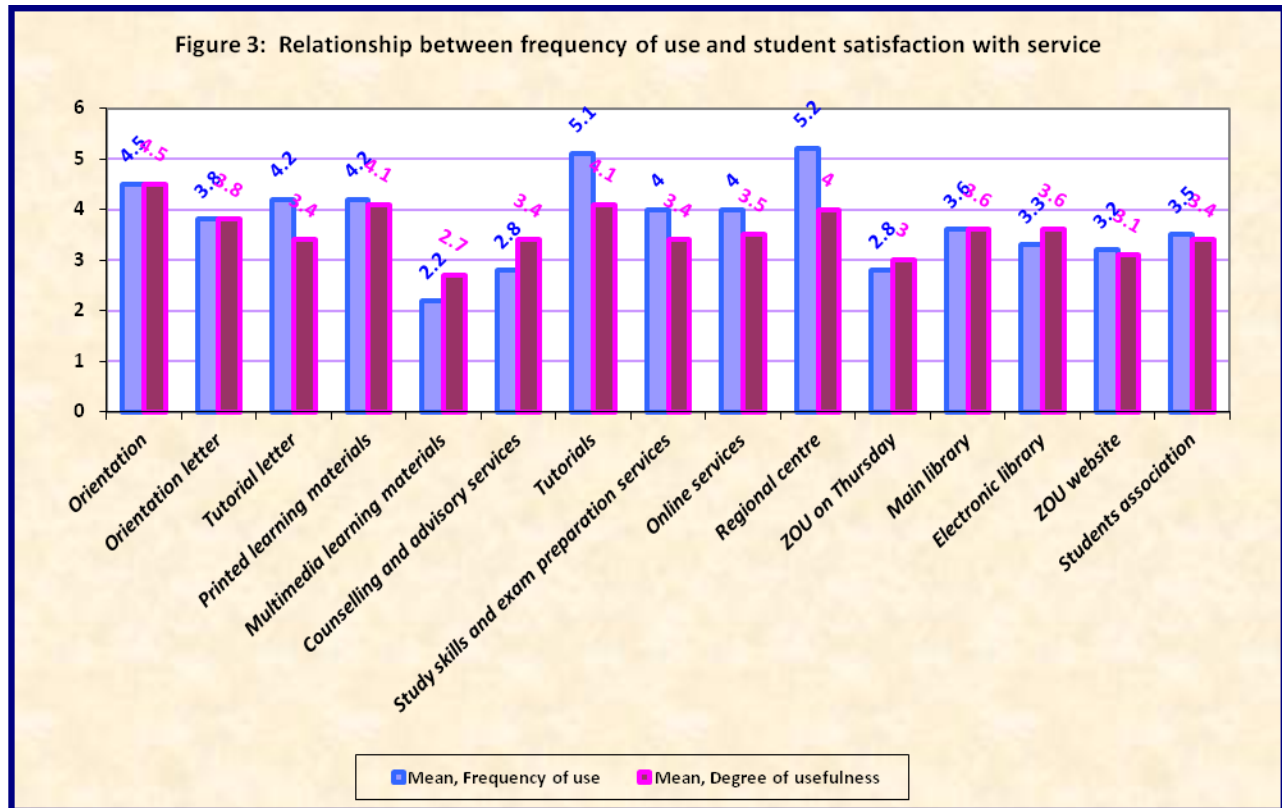


Figure 3 below shows the relationship between the frequency of use and the usefulness and the level of satisfaction learners derive from using ZOU learner support services. The noticeable trend from this graph is that more learners use services that they perceive as useful more often. Less useful services are used less frequently. There is therefore a direct relationship between the

usefulness or satisfaction experienced from using a service and the frequency with which the service is used by learners.



The following service improvements were suggested by respondents

- Improve supply of orientation and tutorial letters
- Modules need thorough editing to eliminate grammatical and spelling mistakes
- The Website needs to be made more interactive and to be constantly updated
- Tutorials should be accompanied with hard copy hand-outs for reference
- Increase frequency of tutorials and number of tutorial hours
- The institution should decentralise regional centre services to district centres to enhance access and convenience

Conclusion

The Zimbabwe Open University's learner support system is being underutilised. The study reveals that only a few services are being utilised frequently. The University is committing resources to these services hence it is essential that they be used effectively.

Learners are effectively utilising instructional delivery facilities and services thus printed learning materials and tutorials are the most frequently utilised services.

Regional centres are central to the ZOU ODL system; they enhance accessibility of the institution and bring convenience to learners hence their high frequency of utilisation and perceived usefulness. Other services that are not directly linked to instructional delivery are not frequently utilised.

Communication facilitating services such as the website and the ZOU on Thursday are among the least utilised services. This implies that the University is not effectively communicating with its learners.

Learners' frequency of using services is directly related to the perceived usefulness of the services. The most frequently utilised services are regarded as the most useful learner support services. Likewise, the least utilised services are regarded as less useful by learners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study identified the most and least frequently used learner support services as well as the perceived usefulness of different services by learners. Opportunities for improving learner satisfaction through provision of effective learner support services at ZOU were identified through this study. The following recommendations were made to the Zimbabwe Open University;

- Modules need to be rigorously edited to remove mistakes and they should be availed to learners on registration.

- To improve understanding and clarity on topics, it is recommended that the institution increases the number of tutorial hours. The institution should also provide printed hand-outs during tutorials.
- The ZOU website need to be updated and made more interactive.
- The institution needs to do an in-depth study of the reasons why learners are not utilising other learner support services as noted above. This will assist the University to align the services with learners' needs.

The Zimbabwe Open University learner support system plays an important function in enhancing learners' experience. It is thus important that learners fully utilise the services that are provided by the institution. The University therefore has to ensure that learners are utilising the services and facilities that the institution invested in. Services may be provided but it does not imply that learners fully utilise those services. Learner support systems should be learner centric to be effective in enhancing learners' service experience.

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Appendix

1. Figure 1 – Frequency of use of ZOU learner support services
2. Figure 2 – Usefulness of ZOU learner support services

Figure 3 – Relationship between \frequency of use