Assessing Product Knowledge of Frontline Staff in the ODL Institution: a Survey of How Much Knowledge ZOU Frontline Staff has about the Service they are offering to Learners

By: Daniel Ndudzo
(danielndudzo785@gmail.com)

Abstract
The aim of this study was to evaluate the level of product knowledge of the Zimbabwe Open University frontline staff. The study as well evaluated the information needs and resource requirements of the University frontline staff. It was hoped that the findings of this study would help to enhance the effectiveness of the University in responding effectively to stakeholder enquiries. It was also hoped that implementation of the study’s recommendations would enhance the image of the ZOU brand through quality frontline service. The study employed a descriptive research design. Questionnaires were used as the main data gathering instruments. Respondents were selected randomly from the 10 ZOU Regional Centres and the National Centre. The study revealed that ZOU frontline staff had a general appreciation of the institution’s products including the learner administration process. It was also discovered that the information frontline staff had was not always up to date. Students often received information before staff and staff frequently relied on outdated policy documents which often resulted in inconveniences for both frontline staff and students. Service provision was also hampered by inadequate resources mainly stationery and communication infrastructure. The study also revealed that ZOU frontline staff had highly motivated individuals who shared the same vision with the institution and were willing to offer quality service consistently to their clients. They had basic education qualifications, but few had studied public relations and customer relationship management. The study recommends that the University should develop learner administration documents which cover frequently asked questions on Academic Registry procedures. The University should also develop standard customer relationship management and public relations policy documents and develop these skills in employees through workshops.

Background
Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions need superior frontline customer service skills to compete in today’s customer oriented environment. Frontline staff are the face of the organisation, their conduct either promotes or hurts the corporate image. To effectively promote the corporate brand, frontline staff need to be equipped with adequate and accurate information, resources and should have the necessary motivation and appreciation of the University’s vision, mission, values, products, available at points where customers can access service.

ZOU’s relationship with its students has been largely warm, but sometimes it is characterised by frequent complaints by disgruntled students in the media and damaging negative publicity through newspaper articles and publications. Negative publicity has been directed at ZOU programmes and some of the University’s programmes have been consequently suspended. However, ZIMCHE has since lifted the suspension after receiving the correct information on them.

Mastrofskiet al. (1994) in their studies in Pennsylvania realised that individuals performed more when they were assured and confident of their jobs. Initial training upon recruitment was identified as one of the most essential issues contributing to employee effectiveness. The study revealed that employees valued occasional refresher courses to apprise them of the new and improved ways of executing their jobs. It also revealed that product knowledge increases staff confidence and translates to improved service experience on the part of students. Customer delight is a function of service quality hence the need to have assured frontline staff who can engage confidently with customers and give reassuring feedback to customer enquiries.

There is no comprehensive study that has been carried out to investigate the level of product knowledge among ZOU frontline staff. The researcher realises the significance of frontline staff competence on service quality and customer satisfaction which could be significant factors in increasing student numbers and enhancing the image of ZOU.

Statement of the problem
The Zimbabwe Open University has experienced a gradual decline in student enrolment, from an annual student enrolment pick of above 20000 in 2002 to below 8000 in 2012. The University’s image has been damaged by negative publicity and frequent complaints by students through the media. The above mentioned challenges could be a result of poor service delivery hence the need to evaluate the product knowledge of the University’s frontline staff.

Purpose of the study
This study seeks to evaluate product knowledge among ZOU frontline staff. It assesses the extent to which ZOU frontline staff has an appreciation of the institution, its products, the learner administration processes and related systems. It is hoped that the findings will assist in developing strategies that would improve service delivery and learner administration across all Regional Centres of the University.

Objectives of the study
The study was guided by the following objectives;
1.0 To assess the extent to which ZOU frontline staff know the institution’s products
2.0. To assess whether ZOU frontline staff is aware of ZOU internal systems and procedures of learner administration.
3.0. To identify the specific information and resources requirements of frontline staff.
4.0. To investigate the challenges faced by frontline staff in service delivery.
5.0. To recommend strategies for improving the customer relationship management skills of ZOU frontline staff.

Research Questions
The study sought to address the questions:
1.0. To what extent does ZOU frontline staff know the institution’s products?
2.0. Is ZOU frontline staff aware of internal systems and procedures of learner Administration?
3.0. What are the information, resources and training requirements of ZOU frontline staff?
4.0. What are the main challenges faced by frontline staff in addressing stakeholder enquiries?
5.0. What strategies can ZOU implement to improve the customer relationship management skills of ZOU frontline staff?

Justification of the Study
Frontline staff interacted directly with customers. Customers perceived the organisation’s vision, products and values through interaction with service staff and other visible cues. It was therefore, imperative that a study to evaluate the product (vision, mission, values, and services) knowledge of ZOU frontline staff be undertaken.

It was hoped that this study would provide the necessary information to the University on knowledge and information gaps among ZOU frontline staff. It was also hoped that the findings would assist in recommending strategies which would improve service delivery and subsequently increase student enrolment.

The University sought to implement a holistic strategy to revitalise its brand which was affected by negative publicity which was directed at its programmes. It was hoped that the findings would assist the institution in developing staff centred initiatives that would enable the University staff to play an instrumental role in revitalising the University’s brand.

The University sought to curtail negative publicity from disgruntled customers and other stakeholders. It was hoped that, through this study, customer and stakeholder handling techniques among ZOU frontline staff would be improved and thus generate good relations with stakeholders and create positive publicity for the University.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Expectancy motivation theory
The expectancy motivation theory is a cognitive process theory of motivation that is based on the idea that people believe there are relationships between the effort they put forth at work, the performance they achieve from that effort, and the rewards they receive from their effort and performance (Pinder, 1987). The theory was first developed by Victor Vroom (1964) with direct application to work settings. It was further developed and expanded by Porter and Lawler (1968) and Pinder (1987).

The expectancy theory has three key elements which determine behaviour. These are expectancy, instrumentality, and valence. The expectancy theory of motivation is based on the argument that a person’s level of motivation is determined by the degree that he or she believes that (1) effort will lead to acceptable performance (expectancy), (2) performance will be rewarded (instrumentality), and (3) the value of the rewards is highly positive (valence) (Lunenburg, 2011).

The theory thus argues that people will be motivated if they believe that strong effort will lead to good performance and good performance will lead to desired rewards. It is important for the ODL University to provide the necessary resources, information and an enabling environment which motivates employees to perform.

Product knowledge, supervisor support and resources are some of the key requirements for workers to produce at optimal levels. Mastrofski et al. (1994) utilised expectancy motivation theory to explain individual workers in civil service. They found that workers produced the greatest number of work output when they had the opportunity (proper equipment), capability (specific knowledge, training and experience), instrumentality (directives from management and overtime pay), and reward balance.

The Expectancy theory creates a strong case for the importance of the Zimbabwe Open University to investigate whether the University’s frontline staff has the knowledge, necessary resources, information and support to effectively carry out their duties.

Research Methodology
The study on the evaluation of Frontline staff product knowledge at ZOU primarily used the questionnaire instrument. Questionnaires were distributed to a sample of 44 frontline staff respondents in the 10 Regions and at the National Centre. The questionnaires were based on the basic knowledge and skills that frontline workers should possess in order to effectively deliver superior service.

The study focused on employees who interacted directly with students, these were Receptionists, security desk personnel, administrators and records & information clerks. Respondents were randomly selected from the 10 ZOU Regional Centres and the National Centre.

Delimitations/Scope of the study
This study focused on frontline staff at the Zimbabwe Open University’s 10 regional centres and the National Centre. The study focused on a sample
of 44 ZOU frontline staff composed of reception staff, secretaries and administrators at the ZOU Regional Centres and the National Centre.

Assumptions of the study
- All data collected from the field was contributed independently and truthfully by respondents.
- The sample population truly represented the opinions of the Zimbabwe Open University frontline staff.

Limitations of the Study
The major constraint on this study was the geographic dispersal of respondents. Easy access to respondents was, therefore, a major challenge. The researcher, however, managed to overcome the challenge through cooperation and facilitation by ZOU Regional Centre Directors.

Ethical and Legal considerations to the Study
Responses from the respondents were treated with utmost confidentiality and were used for the purposes of this study only. The study was carried out within the legal framework of Zimbabwe.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS
The ZOU frontline service provider – demographic information
The research sample was composed of 44 ZOU frontline staff respondents. 55% of respondents were male while 45% were female. The majority of ZOU frontline staff was in the age ranges of 21-30 yrs (43%) and 31-40 yrs (39%). 9% of respondents were above 40 years while the other 9% were below 20 yrs. 70% of respondents were married while 30% were single.

11% of respondents had been in service for less than 2 years at ZOU. 62% of respondents had been in service at ZOU for 2-5 years. 16% had served the University for 6-9 years while 11% had been in service for 10 years or more.

25% of respondents had Bachelor’s degrees while 6% had Master’s degrees, 28% had O-level qualifications only, 16% had attained A-level qualifications. 21% of respondents had attained National Diploma qualifications while 4% had Higher National Diplomas.

Only 11% of respondents were either educated or received training in public relations and customer service. ZOU frontline staff, was therefore, not adequately trained and might be inappropriately deployed as their education qualifications did not fit the essential requirements of frontline service.

What motivates ZOU frontline staff?
- **Fair remuneration**
  40 out of 44 respondents (91%) expressed satisfaction with the Zimbabwe Open University remuneration package. The ZOU allowance was a significant motivator and respondents encouraged the University to maintain the allowance while making it more consistent as they reported that the allowance was not paid in some months and the University was in arrears in paying the allowance.

- **ZOU staff development programmes**
  Respondents cited the University’s subsidization of employee education as a major employee motivating factor. All respondents said that they were motivated to work for the University as it empowered them with education and opened more opportunities for career and professional progression.

- **Prestige**
  64% of respondents cited that working for a higher education institution earned them respect in society. They said that the ZOU brand was a reputable and futuristic higher education brand hence they were proud to be associated with the University.

- **Working conditions**
  84% of respondents indicated that the working conditions and the culture at ZOU brought with it job satisfaction. They said that the institution created a culture of inclusivity, innovation and encouraged personal growth.

- **Interaction with students**
  72% of respondents said that they were motivated by interaction with the mature adult learner. They said that there was an incentive in interaction with adult learners as the adult learner was a professional who was informed and frequently engaged in constructive debate with service staff.

Resource requirements of ZOU frontline staff
ZOU frontline staff was the face of the University as they directly interact with its stakeholders. 91% of respondents indicated that they interacted with students frequently while 9% said they interact with students occasionally.

79% of respondents were not equipped with the adequate resources they needed to perform their duties effectively. 14% were not sure, while 7% said they had the necessary resources.
The research inquired on the resources that were required by frontline staff to effectively carry out their duties. The following were suggested by respondents:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resources/Facilities required by staff</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stationery (bond paper, cartridge, files)</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PABX switchboard</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Furniture (lockable desks)</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet connection for students and staff</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office space</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funds for outreach programmes</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniforms</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current books and online journals</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diaries and calendars for planning</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Resources/ Facilities required by staff

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Information requirements of frontline staff

49% of respondents indicated that they were furnished with the information that they needed to perform their duties, 21% were not sure while 30% said that they didn’t have adequate information to perform their duties.

Respondents from Regional Centres complained that up-to-date information pertaining to the institution was accessed by students through the media and other sources from the National Centre before they received the information. This, they said, was a serious challenge and an obstacle to them presenting a professional image of the institution to clients. The respondents requested that they be availed with the following information to effectively carry out their duties:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Information</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Registration issues</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer relationship &amp; Public relations workshops</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedure manuals for all departments</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timely fees structure and payment scheme details</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brochures for all programmes</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear and detailed job orientation by managers</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarity on the APL system</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Product knowledge assessment

The product knowledge assessment graphs below show the knowledge deficiencies of frontline staff in some of the critical aspects and areas of learner administration at the Zimbabwe Open University. The extent of information deficiency (inadequacy) on the graph is shown by the difference between the mean (average responses) per question and the curve showing the correct answers. Here, responses were categorized into Agree, symbolized by (1) on the graph, Not sure (2) and Disagree (3). The correct answerers were either (1) or (3) but respondents were given the option of choosing (2) where they were not sure of the correct answer on the particular issue.

![Figure 3: Product knowledge assessment graph](image)

ZOU frontline staff was generally confident with the knowledge and information that they had pertaining to learner administration. 66% of respondents expressed confidence that they knew all the procedures followed.
in student administration, 25% were not sure while 9% indicated that they were not aware of some of the steps.

The researcher investigated the extent to which respondents knew the individual steps and some of the frequently asked questions in student administration. The questions and procedures ranged from application up to graduation and they formed the core of information that should be known by frontline staff to serve students more effectively. The graphical presentation of the responses is shown above. Below are some of the detailed findings.

Application

A significant proportion of respondents (30%) were not aware that students could inquire for programmes and send applications at any time of the year. 14% were not sure of the policy while 56% were aware and correctly responded to the policy. All respondents knew about the ZOU intakes and their timing. The majority of respondents (68%) were aware of the various forms of media where potential students could access details for application. 21% were not sure while 11% thought that it was the State owned Herald newspaper only.

Only 43% of respondents indicated that they fully understand the ZOU APL system, 46% were not sure while 11% indicated that they did not understand the system.

Faculties and Programmes offered by ZOU

68% of respondents were not sure of the number of degree and diploma programmes offered by the University. Only 23% of respondents correctly responded while 9% wrongly responded to the number of programmes offered by the University. 67% of respondents, however, correctly identified all the ZOU faculties and at least one programme which was provided under the relevant faculty.
Fees payment schemes and support facilities

34% of respondents were not sure regarding the ZOU student loan facility policy, 30% of respondents thought that ZOU guaranteed a loan facility for students. Only 36% of respondents were correctly informed of the ZOU loan facility policy. 23% of respondents were not sure of the University’s current policy on the staggered fees payment plan, 25% thought that it could no longer be used by students while 52% knew that it was still being used by the University as a policy, but they were not sure of the details or structure of the scheme.

ZOU students have other financial obligations and they needed to be accurately informed by the frontline staff on the institution’s fees payment schemes and learner support facilities.

Figure 10: Registration Package

59% of respondents were either not sure (16%) or do not know (43%) the complete registration package distributed to students on registration. (43% indicated that the registration package was composed of the printed module only while 16% were not sure). 41%, however, knew that the registration package was not limited to the printed module only.

Examinations

91% of respondents were aware of the policy requirements regarding examinations. They accurately identified the required documents and the materials and gadgets that are not permitted in examination rooms/venues. Only 2% of respondents responded incorrectly and 7% were not sure whether unregistered students could be allowed to write examinations.

Tutorials and Lectures in ODL

35% of respondents could not articulate the difference between conventional lectures and tutorials offered by the University. Of these, 15% said that ZOU students learn through conventional lectures while 20% were not sure. 65% of respondents however were aware of the ZOU ODL learning system and correctly indicated that students do not learn through conventional lectures.

Figure 11

ZOU frontline staff generally did not understand the administration of tutorials. 70% of respondents thought that tutorials were mandatory as part of the learning process while 16% were not sure. Only 14% of respondents knew that tutorials were not mandatory.

Results and procedure on queries

68% of respondents were aware of the policy on raising results queries, 14% were not sure while 18% of respondents said that students could raise queries at any time of the year, which was contrary to the university’s policy.

Certificates and Graduation

30% of respondents either did not know or were not sure as to when learners could to collect their certificates. 20% of these indicated that they were not sure while 10% said that learners could collect their certificates as soon as their results were released. 69% of respondents, however, knew that certificates were collected during or after the graduation ceremony.

The Graduation regalia

80% of respondents knew that graduates were required to attend the graduation ceremony in ZOU graduation regalia, and they should not use regalia from other Universities. 14% of respondents were not sure while 6% of respondents said that graduates are free to attend the ceremony wearing regalia from any institution, which is contrary to University policy.

Figure 12: Pursuance of Post-Graduate Studies

75% of respondents were aware of University requirements for enrolling post graduate students; 14% were not sure while 11% were not adequately informed as they thought that only students with first class first degrees qualified to pursue post graduate studies with ZOU.
Challenges faced by ZOU frontline staff

In a touching testimony, one of the respondents said that, "Some of the more experienced and informed staff members just chip in when I am in the midst of assisting students. It makes me lose confidence. I need to be furnished with up to date information on the main learner administration functions in the University".

It was clear that frontline staff rely on information to be effective and motivated in executing their professional duties. Lack of adequate information brought with it uncertainty and unsettled employees. It was one of the major challenges faced by ZOU frontline staff.

The following were cited by respondents as some of the main challenges facing frontline staff in learner administration:

• Lack of facilities tailor-made for learners with disabilities
• Students received information through the media before frontline staff officially received communication
• Interruption by colleagues while attending to students
• Delays in response from the National Centre pertaining to student enquiries
• Communication breakdown between Region and National Centre
• Lack of resources such as stationery, brochures, computers and other communication equipment
• Inadequate registration packages for some programmes
• Poor inter-departmental communication
• Lack of adequate policy information on fees, the fees payment scheme and student loans
• Challenges in linking students to programme leaders due to inadequate communication channels such as telephone extensions to link with programme leaders
• Unavailability of structures to serve students who arrived after working hours from distant and remote areas

Having listed the main challenges they faced in learner administration, respondents were requested to suggest possible measures that the University could take to enhance front office service delivery. The following suggestions were made by respondents:

• Develop contingent mechanisms for dealing with learners with disabilities
• Quick response to student queries by National Centre
• The University should inform Regions and make sure information reached frontline offices before communicating with students through the media
• Equip all frontline offices with the PABX machine and provide sufficient lines and extensions
• Provide frontline offices with the necessary resources especially stationery to effectively serve students
• Develop a University standard customer handling guidelines booklet as a standard for all ZOU frontline employees
• Facilitate the development of a University learner administration frequently asked questions booklet with the relevant answers for frontline staff
• Provide computers, lockable desks and files for secure storage of student information

In line with the expectancy motivation theory by Pinder (1987), employees are prepared to commit their effort if they believe that their effort will yield the expected result. At ZOU the expected outcome depended on other issues independent of the employee such as availability of resources and information, support from management and other essential support services. It was thus important for the institution to realise the importance of maintaining high motivation within its employees by providing the resources necessary for effective execution of duties.

Conclusions

ZOU frontline staff was found to be highly motivated to carry out their work and they enjoyed interaction with the adult learners who comprised most of the ZOU students. The Zimbabwe Open University employee development programme was a major motivator for frontline staff as most of them were eager to enhance their careers. Frontline staff was also satisfied with the University compensation package especially the ZOU allowance.

Generally ZOU frontline staff had an appreciation of the University and its ODL products. They, however, lacked adequate and up to date information on several policies due to incomplete circulation of information and communication breakdown between Regional Centres and the National Centre. Information, however, differs with different departments and the years individuals had served in the University.

Though some of the staff members, due to experience at work, were adequately informed of the main learner administration issues, policies and procedures, the University frontline staff generally did not have up to date official documents and policy statements.

The University’s frontline staff though motivated was facing significant challenges in effectively serving students. The main challenges included communication breakdown, inadequate information on policies and resource constraints.

Recommendations

The effectiveness of frontline service delivery depends on the motivation of staff, availability of resources and information. To this effect, it is recommended that the Zimbabwe Open University implement the following measures:

• Holding of regular registration, customer relations and public relations workshops
• Extension of the employee orientation programme beyond a general appreciation of the University to cover essential job related details, processes and procedures.
• Development of University standard customer handling and public relations policy guideline booklet for ZOU frontline employees
• Facilitate the development of a University learner administration frequently asked questions booklet with the relevant answers for frontline staff
• The University, through the relevant authorities should make it standard procedure to officially inform Regional Centres and relevant staff members before information is communicated to students through the media.
• Equip all frontline, Regional Coordinators’ offices with computers and internet service, PABX machines or extensions and provide adequate stationery
• Provide computers, lockable desks and files for secure storage of student information
• Develop mechanisms, friendly policies and supply resources to effectively serve learners with disabilities.

After this study, the researcher believed that Zimbabwe Open University frontline staff was a group of motivated individuals with the institution at heart. The University should leverage on this motivation by providing frontline staff with adequate resources and information for them to effectively execute their duties. Implementation of the above recommendations should assist the University in improving the quality of service delivery and match world standards.

References
Sam Houston State University