Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education-TOJDE October 2017 ISSN 1302-6488 Volume: 18 Number: 4 Article 7

# EVALUATING QUALITY OF STUDENTS' SUPPORT SERVICES IN OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING

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## ABSTRACT

**Evaluating the quality of students' support services in distance education institutions is vital because by nature Open Distance Learning (ODL) is a high-involvement service industry, with multiple student support service encounters. Most quality evaluation models tend to view quality from the institutional perspective. As a result, little is known about the determinants of service quality, which distance education students can use to evaluate the support services provided by their institutions. The aim of this study is to evaluate the quality of support services from the current users of the services. It is through students' expectations and perceptions of their experiences that we shall understand the quality of the support services needed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand distance students' perceptions and expectations of the service received. The results of the study indicated that service quality in distance education can be measured by six dimensions namely; tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, delivery, assurance and student participation. Each dimension can be measured by a number of attributes. The dimensions will be useful in helping distance education institutions evaluate the quality of their support services from students' perspective; by so doing monitoring the overall performance of their services.**

**Keywords: Open distance learning, student support, quality dimensionality, SERVQUAL.**

## INTRODUCTION

**Student support services are developed by distance education institutions to help students with their learning. These services cater for students' cognitive, emotional and social needs. They serve as the interface between the institution and the student (Krishnan 2012, p.460) because they compensate for the isolated "individual" by making the necessary basic facilities available, in the absence of "live support" from the teacher (Pulist, 2001). Many of the students who are registered with the University of South Africa (Unisa), the largest distance education institution in Africa, go to the university's study centers scattered around the country to seek physical and social spaces where they can study, develop and belong to a community of higher education students. In Open Distance Learning (ODL), students' support services are broad and include services such as registration, advisory services, learning support services (academic), counselling, tutoring, guidance on learning and feedback on assignments, interaction with teaching and administrative staff, career services, provision of study centers and financial assistance (Robinson 1995). All these services are essential to help students perform well in their studies. The degree of success of students depends on the amount of support services that are made available to the students on their doorstep (Mannan, 2008, p. 2).**

**In ODL, student support services are essential and very critical for academic success because students and their lecturers are physically separated and their interaction is facilitated through the use of various technologies such as print and various electronic media. This separation affects both teaching and learning; contributes to students' feelings of isolation and disorientation, and leads to reduced levels of motivation, engagement and attrition (Moore 1993, p.22). This is likely to lead to high drop-out and failure rates and non-completion of studies as suggestions in the literature indicate (Belawati, 2007; Fraser & Killen 2006; Simpson, 2003). According to Simpson (2003), failure to provide adequate support services leads to dissatisfaction among ODL students, which in turn makes them neglect their studies.**

**Most if not all open distance education institutions in the world have lesser numbers of students who complete their courses and graduate than those in face-to-face institutions (Simpson, 2002). This problem is exacerbated in developing countries such as South Africa where many of them "are still disadvantaged and underprepared" for higher education (CoL, 2008, p.80). SAIDE (2003) reported that often distance education students are taken advantage of and not given good quality education because they are scattered and cannot mobilize to demand quality education. Simpson (2002) further cautions that "any company that failed its customers on such a scale would be out of business in months if not days." It is therefore the responsibility of the ODL institutions to uphold moral values of fairness and honesty in dealing with students studying at a distance.**

**Perraton (2000) and Simpson (2002) have observed that the high drop-out rates and low pass rates in ODL institutions is caused mainly by inadequate student support facilities. An adequate support service should meet or exceed students' needs and expectations. This means that distance education institutions should provide the required and desired student support services. The Commonwealth of Learning (CoL) and the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) (2010) revealed that the University of South Africa (Unisa's) student support system was inadequate. This was also confirmed by Nsamba (2016) study that found that Unisa's level of student support service does not meet the students' needs and expectations.**

**An appropriate approach to evaluate the quality of services, according to Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985), is to measure service users' expectations and their perceptions of the performance of the experienced service. This is so because service users' expectations and perceptions about a particular service shape the user's evaluation of that service (Parasuraman et al., 1985). In order to understand the quality of its student support services, distance education institutions should allow the students to evaluate, determine and define the quality of those services, because they are the service users. However, this view might be unfamiliar to distance education institutions, because there is generally an inclination to view the quality of services in higher education institutions from an organizational perspective. Viewing quality from the perspective of the service providers limits quality determination to management and therefore does not involve students who are service users. As a result, very little is known about the quality of student support services from the perspective of the student themselves. Moreover, not much is known about the determinants of service quality, which distance education students can use to evaluate the student support services provided by their institutions.**

**The aim of this study is to explore appropriate service quality dimensions to understand and evaluate student support services. However, this will be done from the students' perspectives who are current users of students' support services. Investigating the quality of these services from the students' perspective will help us understand students' views of service performance and delivery and also help us know what type of support services could best meet their expectations. Therefore the question that this study is attempting to answer is, "What are the appropriate dimensions to understand and evaluate the quality of ODL student support services?" Although interest in understanding and evaluating service**

quality dimensionality has increased considerably, it is still unclear what service quality dimensions are appropriate for South Africa's higher education ODL environments.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Distance education support service systems meet most of the general criteria applicable to services offered in other service industries (Sewart, 1993, p.9). In the distance education context, (Tait, 2000; Thorpe, 2002; Sewart, 1993; Simpson, 2002), service providers are institutions and service users are students who have registered with the institution. These services can range from the delivery of study material through postal or computer and telecommunication mediated systems to those that involve face-to-face interactions. Although service quality has different conceptualizations, two mostly followed perspectives when evaluating service industries and organizations are the American and European perspectives (Kang and James, 2004). The American perspective is based on Parasuraman Zeithaml & Berry (1985; 1988) model of service quality, the SERVQUAL; and the European perspective follows Gronroos's (1984) model. Although the two perspectives have influenced the development of service quality dimensions in different industries and educational organizations, the SERVQUAL is the base model for this study's conceptual framework. The SERVQUAL model conceptualizes service quality as the discrepancy between service user's expectations and their perceptions of the service provided (Parasuraman et al., 1985; 1988). Groonros (1982); Seilier (2004); Zahari, Yusoff & Ismail (2008) describe service quality as the extent to which a service meets or exceeds the service user's expectations and needs. Service quality has also been defined as a service user's judgement of the excellence of a particular service (Zeithaml, 1987).

In their first exploratory research on service quality, Parasuraman and colleagues (1985) found that service users identified ten dimensions to judge the quality of services delivered to them. These included tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, courtesy, communication, credibility, security and understanding/knowing the customer. They also found that service users tend to compare their expectations of service with their perceptions of the service they received. They therefore argue that service quality can only be understood from the perspective of those who use services. According to Parasuraman et al. (1985) service quality is more difficult to evaluate than goods due to services' characteristics of intangibility, heterogeneity and inseparability. This is consistent with Belawati and Zuhuri's (2007) observation that the quality of student support services is difficult to evaluate.

Many service industries, including higher education have used SERVQUAL to evaluate the quality of services. However, there has been some criticism levelled against the use of SERVQUAL because its dimensions are generic and cannot be applied to all services (Buttle, 1996; Carman, 1990; Cronin & Taylor, 1992). Nonetheless, SERVQUAL developers argue that items under each dimension can "suitably be reworded and/or augmented" to make the model "more germane to the context in which the instrument is to be used" (Parasuraman et al., 1988, p. 28). Some researchers who focused on higher education concluded that SERVQUAL dimensions were sufficient to evaluate service quality in higher education (Kwan and Ng, 1999; Soutar and McNeil, 1996; Owlia & Aspinwall, 1996; Yousapronpaiboon, 2014). In developing dimensions for higher education Sangeeta, Banwet & Karunes (2004) suggested that it is necessary to identify customers' requirements and the design characteristics that make up an educational system. They proposed new dimensions such as delivery, feedback and access to teachers and administrative staff as appropriate for higher education. Brooks (2005) further added more dimensions of reputation, faculty research productivity, and student educational experiences and outcomes as appropriate dimensions for university services.

Although there are many modified versions of SERVQUAL, there is still a need to explore service quality dimensions appropriate to address ODL student support service. Understanding the underlying dimensions within ODL environments will enable researchers evaluate the quality of student support services with precision. This current

**research examined students' expectations and perceptions of their services in order to identify quality dimensions. Although there are many support services in ODL, the scope of this study will focus on support services designed to facilitate students' learning. These are tutoring, guidance on learning and feedback on assignments, interactions with teaching and non-teaching staff; and interactions amongst student themselves. These services are inherent in ODL and they find support in Martinez-Arguelles, Blanco & Castan's (2010, p. 279) research, which uncovered that e-learning students pay attention to services such as feedback from tutors, speed and efficiency in solving students' problems; lecturers' knowledge and pedagogical capacity; ability of administrative staff to solve problem; synchronous and face-to-face activities.**

## METHODS

**The research question this study sought to answer was: "What are the appropriate dimensions to understand and evaluate the quality of ODL student support services?" To respond to this question, data were collected from ten students (6 males and 4 females). In light of Parasuraman et al.'s (1985) pioneering work on service quality, the sampling criteria for this study involved sampling male and female Unisa students of different ages, enrolled in different disciplines and who were the current users of student support services. The initial contact with the students who volunteered to participate in the research was done by telephone. The first two interviewees were requested to suggest names of other students who might be willing to participate in the research.**

**The aim was to examine service quality within an ODL environment in order to identify appropriate dimensions for ODL. Qualitative methodology was used to explore students' experiences and their expectations of the quality of their support services at Unisa. To achieve this, we had to take "on the mind-set of a phenomenologist" and employed a concept of "bracketing" to allow the research participants to describe their own experiences of service quality. According to Giorgi & Giorgi (2003), researchers are required to suspend their presuppositions so that the true experiences of research participants are reported. In-depth semi structured interviews were conducted with the sampled students. Students were asked to evaluate the quality of services they were actually receiving and what they expected to receive. Initially, the study had planned to sample 20 students, however, after interviewing ten students, it was discovered that there was no new information being provided by the participants. According to Mason (2010) data saturation is reached when the research data stop telling the researcher "anything new about the social process under scrutiny". Mason (2010) further states that, "more data does not necessarily mean more information".**

**The data were then analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step guidelines of thematic data analysis which started with familiarizing with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes. Thematic analysis identified patterns of meaning across datasets that provided an answer to the research question being addressed. Patterns were identified through a rigorous process of data familiarization, data coding and theme development. The themes were refined and reduced to 25 perception themes and 19 expectation themes and given names to identify "the story that each theme told". The theme names are identical to the topics used during the interviews: tutoring, feedback, communication, lecturers' and teachers' attitudes towards students, lecturers' and tutors' subject knowledge, students' interactions with administrative staff and among themselves, study centers and the quality of study material.**

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

**When choosing quality dimensions for this study, some guiding principles were set up. Dimensions that were considered were those that had characteristics that reflect educational matters within a distance education context. Secondly, the themes emanated from the data were also used to identify other dimensions. Therefore, the findings of this exploratory study provided a conceptual basis of service quality in order to understand and**

**interpret the service quality of ODL student support services. The six quality dimensions that were identified were tangibles, reliability, delivery, responsiveness, assurance and student participation. The themes derived from the data confirmed the relevance of the six service quality dimensions proposed by Parasuraman et al. (1985, 1988); Zeithaml et al. (1990). Four of these dimensions (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness and assurance) are similar to SERVQUAL quality dimensions and the remaining two dimensions (delivery and user participation) emanated from data and are similar to those identified in literature.**

**Table 1. Dimensions and their attributes.**

| Dimension<br>Explanation | Attributes<br>ODL Support Services/Structures |
|---|---|
| **Tangibles**<br>➢ adequate and appropriate, physical facilities, equipment<br>➢ friendly personnel | ➢ study centers<br>➢ resources<br>➢ administration staff, lecturers and tutors |
| **Reliability**<br>➢ the ability to perform the desired service dependably, accurately, and consistently<br>➢ keeping promises<br>➢ match to the goals<br>➢ handling complaints and solving problems<br>➢ understanding users' needs | ➢ tutorial classes<br>➢ online interactions |
| **Delivery**<br>➢ access to teachers and administrative staff<br>➢ feedback<br>➢ encouragement of students | ➢ Feedback<br>➢ guidance on learning<br>➢ guidance on assignment |
| **Responsiveness**<br>➢ willingness to help students beyond the call of duty<br>➢ willingness to provide prompt service<br>➢ effective administration | ➢ response to telephone, e-mails and letters<br>➢ willingness to help students beyond the call of duty<br>➢ prompt delivery of study material |
| **Assurance**<br>➢ the knowledge and competence of the personnel<br>➢ possession of necessary skills<br>➢ courtesy of the personnel and their ability to inspire trust and confidence | ➢ lecturers<br>➢ tutors<br>➢ administration staff |
| **Service User Participation and Involvement**<br>➢ students taking part in the service production and delivery | ➢ study groups<br>➢ self-motivation |

## Tangibles Dimension

**Many studies measuring service quality in higher education have included the tangibles dimension. Services are intangible because they cannot be seen or touched or stored like goods. They can only be experienced and perceived by the users (Parasuraman et al., 1985). The students are the ones who perceive and experience the delivery of study material and lessons. Sewart (1993) calls these intangible experiences moments of truth whereby the service user perceives good or bad service as pointed below by students who used facilities meant to support their learning.**

**Respondent 1:** ***More of study centers should be made available for students*****.**
**Respondent 3:** ***Please ask them to open the locked classrooms for us. We need to access the center during examination times. We don't have access*****.**
**Respondent 4:** ***The center has lots of classrooms and can accommodate a lot more people, but only a few classrooms are opened. The classrooms are overflowing. The center is for everybody in our area, but the space allocated is not enough.***
**Respondent 6:** ***Our study center's computer room is fully packed on Sundays. We need to interact with each other.***

**These comments show the students are generally unhappy about the state of the facilities and resources in their disposal. In some instances, students had difficulties in interacting with content in their study materials.**

**Respondent 7:** ***Some study guides do not help us understand difficult things. Some pages of the study guides are not relevant. We are doing assignments for the sake of doing them to pass.***

**These services should also be regarded as intangible experiences and performances that do not "always" take place between the student and the university personnel. In distance education, study material and study lessons are delivered to students via postal services or/and computer mediated and telecommunication services. Those who perceive and experience the delivery of study material and lessons are only students. For this reason services can best be measured using perceptions of experiences of service users, not tangible measurements.**

**Reliability Dimension**

**Another service quality dimension that is regarded as important by students was reliability dimension. Reliability is about trust and responsibility. An institution of learning is supposed to be reliable. Failure to be reliable and do what is right leads to broken promises. When ranked with other dimensions (Parasuraman et al., 1988), the reliability dimension was found to be consistently "the most critical dimension" of all the five dimensions. In ODL, the reliability dimension is supported by the theme of tutorial provision at Unisa.**

**All the students affirmed that they were aware of face-to-face tutoring offered by their university. However, some pointed out that they were unable to attend because the tutorials took place on Saturdays. Others said that the tutorials were meant for first-year students only. They all indicated that even though their university was a distance learning institution, face-to-face tutorials were important as they would help them succeed in their studies. These findings corroborate the findings of Bernath, Kleinschmidt, Walti, Zawacki, & Von Ossietzky (2003); Daweti (2003); Price et al. (2007); Segoe (2014) who found that face-to-face tutoring was important and necessary for distance students.**

**Furthermore, students did not show a lot of enthusiasm for online tutoring. They indicated that online tutoring was only accessible to students with an internet connection.**

**Respondent 4:** ***Online tutorials are not enough. We need guidance. But they are rare and inaccessible where there is no internet. Some modules are difficult to learn so we need them. People who hardly have paying jobs cannot afford to go online. I cannot afford the internet. We need guidance for 'danger' modules at least three days a week.***

**This is in agreement with Price et al., (2007), whose three studies showed that students were happier with face-to-face tutoring interactions than they were with online tutoring. They discovered that students expected their online tutors to provide pastoral care; to demonstrate enthusiasm for the subject through facial expressions and hand gestures; to**

**initiate group learning and encourage student-student interactions; and also become part of group discussions. This shows that students' value face-to-face interactions and they suggested that they would like to have them "once" or "twice" a week or in the "evenings". However many students were not really keen on online tutorials, stating that not many people could afford to go online. They preferred *WhatsApp* communication to online communication.**

### Responsiveness Dimension

**The responsiveness dimension refers to themes related to staff's willingness to help students beyond the call of duty (Parasuraman et al., 1985). It also refers to providing prompt service and effective administration. Attributes of responsiveness are responses to telephone calls, e-mails and letters. All students indicated that phones are never answered despite having been given phone numbers by their lecturers.**

**The majority of the students (8/10) had not had any interactions with their lecturers, either physically or using technology.**

> **Respondent 9:** ***They (lecturers) are never available anywhere, they never answer their phones even though their phone numbers appear in the tutorial letters. They CANNOT pick up their phones. We need lecturers from time to time. They are knowledgeable. We need their physical presence. They should be there to support the students – on WhatsApp or any social media.***

**One female student proudly and emphatically mentioned that the few times that she had had interactions with her lecturers were her best experience. She remarked *"Excellent lecturers, enthusiastic."* She said she obtained some distinctions after having physical interactions with her lecturers. She explained that during her interactions with them, the lecturers created enthusiasm in *"the whole group of students – peers."* She said seeing them and hearing them speak motivated her and other students. These students' experiences confirm that the transaction gap contributes to students' feelings of isolation and disorientation, which can lead to reduced levels of motivation, engagement and attrition (Moore, 1993).**

**The student's views on interactions with lecturers find support in Usun (2004), who asserts that less motivated students may benefit from interaction with the teacher or tutor. Students' frustrations about the lack of any or adequate interactions with their lecturers confirm Moore's (1993) theory of transactional distance. This theory posits that the learning gap experienced by distance students can only be closed by applying different forms of interaction in distance education institutions. These interactions are student–teacher, student–student and student–content. For students to report that they need their lecturers shows that one of the interactions – student–teacher – is being neglected. In this case students feel that student–teacher is an important interaction that leads to success in their studies.**

### Delivery Dimension

**Delivery dimension relates to access to lecturers, tutors and administrative staff. Delivery attributes are core activities for students' learning in an ODL environment. Attributes are study material, feedback, students' interactions with staff and encouragement of students by staff. The dimension includes empathy, which is an affective function of student support (Tait, 2003). The majority of the students were not happy with postal service delivery.**

> **Respondent 5:** ***One time I got wrong delivery. My books got lost. I tried to use Helpline communication. It is useless. Unisa students' representative council is non-existent. I had to SMS at my own cost.***
> **Respondent 9:** ***Books arrive two weeks before the assignment. The post office is not reliable. If we use PostNet, we have to pay for books. We***

***should be given an option to pick up a book somewhere else, not from the post office.***

**Many students reported that the delivery of study material was not always on time. Half the students indicated that the postal service was only efficient when there were no post office strikes. The nature of distance education is that it is heterogeneous. The delivery of services is in the hands of several structures including those that are external to the institution. Structures responsible for study material compilation are different from those handling dispatch and from those involved in the delivery. Therefore, it is not easy to ensure consistency because what the service provider intends to deliver may be entirely different to what the service user receives. This situation can be dire where there are no standards to maintain service quality.**

**Some students also complained about the quality of the assignments, for example, "late feedback", "poor quality of marking" and "insufficient feedback".**

**Respondent 3:** ***The different forms of guidance on learning are in bits and pieces, not enough and do not cover everything.***

**Chokwe (2015, p.47) points out that a mere comment like "Good essay" without highlighting obvious grammar errors can mean that the marker did not read the essay because there is no evidence that that might have been the case. "A student who could have probably failed this assignment has passed with flying colors" (Chokwe, 2015, p.47). Students want detailed feedback, not just marks.**

**A different picture was painted for SMS and *myUnisa* (Unisa's Learning Management System) communication. All the participants indicated that SMS communication was the most reliable form of communication for "announcements." In addition, nine out of ten students showed their satisfaction with the *myUnisa* service. Two students rated it "excellent". It was also seen as "the best service so far".**

**However, concerns were raised about administrative staff members who were "very unprofessional", "very rude", "disrespectful", "moody", "cold", "ignorant". Some students stressed that administrative staff in a particular learning center should be trained on how to treat students. The center was regarded as rendering the poorest service –"*poor to the core"; "They always tell us, 'We are closing.'"* Conversely, the services provided by two other centers in the same province were rated "Excellent" by all the students who have had interactions with the administrative staff of those centers.**

**Assurance Dimension**

**Assurance dimension focuses on lecturers', tutors' and administrative staff's subject knowledge, work knowledge and skills. This is an important dimension for ODL universities due to the lack of physical and social interaction. One student said their DVDs were good, so it was obvious the lecturers were knowledgeable.**

**Another student said he would rate them "fair" because he had not had any one-on-one interactions with any lecturer. Others said they must be knowledgeable because they are lecturers and they work for a world-class university. Furthermore, referring to Unisa as a "world-class university" says a lot about the university's image. This is consistent with a theory of perceptions that shows that service users' opinions of service providers' ability to fulfil expectations is based on the service provider's image, amongst other things. Furthermore, according to Gronroos (1982), service users evaluate the quality of a service organization by its image.**

**According to Parasuraman et al. (1985), attributes of services such as "knowing whether people possess skills and knowledge to perform their job" is one of the service quality attributes that is difficult to evaluate, even after experiencing services. Service users are "never certain of these attributes" (Parasuraman et al., 1985, p.48). In accordance with**

**the data, to most students, anyone who becomes a university lecturer should be knowledgeable in their subjects. However, some students questioned their tutors' subject knowledge and teaching skills.**

> **Respondent 5:** ***Tutors are incompetent and lack knowledge of subjects. They do not seem to know anything as a result they cannot give the support we expect from them.***

**A majority of students also complained about the competency of administrative staff. One of the participants in this study suggested that the administrative staff should be trained on how to do their work. This was also found in Daweti's (2003) study where students reported that administrative staff were unreliable, poor organizers and incompetent. Daweti (2003) argues that support and administrative staff need opportunities "to acquire specific competencies to support students in a variety of ways". A discrepancy like the one raised on administrative staff usually happens when there are no formal standards to guide personnel on how to perform their duties and to treat service users appropriately.**

### User Participation Dimension

**Service-user participation and involvement in service quality are important. The inclusion of this dimension emanated from the themes related to "the role of peer support groups" and "self-reliance". Although some students are independent learners, other students "lean" on their study groups as they battle to understand the content. The data indicate that user participation is an important dimension to measure service;**

> **Respondent 4:** ***Most times we get help from peers who have previously done that module, but who also don't know much.***

**The HEQC (2010, p. 10) quality report on Unisa confirmed that Unisa students go to the university's study centers and the main campus "seeking physical and social spaces where they can study, develop and belong to a community of higher education students". Many students have formed face to face and technology mediated study groups to assist and motivate one another as they go through their learning journey.**

**One of the participants reported that she relied heavily on peers to guide her on how to go about with her assignments. Although this participant's observation provides evidence to highlight that student–student interactions are very important, they become inadequate where academic support is inadequate. Including service user participation as a dimension in this study helps illustrate the extent of the importance of peer support.**

**Even though the theories of Moore (1993); Wedemeyer (1981); Knowles (1975) suggest that distance students are autonomous learners, the data of this exploratory study have shown that many students would like to have constant learning interactions with their lecturers, tutors and peers. Some believe that lack of access to lecturers leads to poor performance. Some students do not seem to have the psychological characteristics of being self-motivated (Zimmerman, 2002; Wang et al., 2008). One of the participants mentioned that he was happy studying by himself. However, he expressed his desire to have one-on-one learning interactions with his lecturers, not group discussions. While students were confident about their lecturers' knowledge and skills, many of them were not as confident about their tutors' subject knowledge.**

## CONCLUSION

**Service quality is a complex phenomenon and perhaps not well understood in some higher education and ODL institutions. This study uncovered some problems that need to be acknowledged by ODL institutions and external quality assurance agencies. In most cases, the quality of student support services has been evaluated from the institutional perspective. This has limitations in that students, who are the users of services and who**

**understand the performance of these services, are not given the opportunity to evaluate and determine the quality of their support services. Inappropriate measurements are not likely to address quality within ODL support systems. This limitation could explain why support services have been declared inadequate. The deficiencies within student support services might never be understood if the quality of these services is evaluated from the institutional perspective on an ongoing basis. According to Zeithaml, et al. (1990) the only criteria that count in evaluating service quality are those defined by the service users.**

**Since ODL meets most of the characteristics of a service industry, its quality and the measurement thereof should be viewed from a service user's point of view. The findings of the qualitative study offered empirical support for the six service quality dimensions: tangibles, reliability, delivery, responsiveness, assurance and user participation, to evaluate the quality of student support services in ODL environments. This study indicated that ODL students' evaluations of the quality of their support services reflected the outcome of their experiences and the process of the delivery of services. This is consistent with Parasuraman et al.'s (1985) finding, that service users do not evaluate service quality "solely on the outcome of a service; but they also consider the process of service delivery." This study managed to identify the dimensions of service quality, however there is a need for research to test these dimensions.**

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