



Tangibility and Assurance for Student Support Services in Open and Distance Learning: A Study on Learning Centers of Bangladesh Open University

Masud Mohammad Pervez

Assistant Professor, Marketing, Open School, Bangladesh Open University, Gazipur, Bangladesh

Date of Submission: 04-06-2023

Date of Acceptance: 18-06-2023

Abstract

Student support services are of great importance due to its unique learning process. So, along with learning materials, it must have quality for effective open and distance education. With such a call, the study tried to recognize and measure the two crucial service quality dimensions of SERVQUAL model namely tangibility and assurance each consists of four items in this regard from the view point of learners. The study is descriptive in nature and quantitative in approach that followed survey design with self-administered structured questionnaire to collect data from the learners. The study found both the dimensions crucial and more or less significant to the concerned authority. It also found, the items of each the dimension needs to improve significantly to satisfy and delight the learners as well as effective open and distance program of Bangladesh Open University, Bangladesh. Therefore, the concerned authority needs to take steps and do accordingly.

I. Background and Rationale of the Study

Learner and learning process of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is unique parting both geographically and time. To make a bridge, student support services is a key to this environment. Unique nature of learning process heightened the learner supports a principal issue for its success to ODL institutions (Sanchez and Simpson 2018). Again, ODL acts as a high involvement service industry; it acts with multiple learner support service encounters (Nsamba and Makoe 2017). Furthermore, Sanchez and Simpson (2018) appealed, ODL institutions should increase their awareness of learner supports as it is essential as well as a quality issue.

Now-a-days, distance education institutions are not judged by its quality of learning materials; it more focuses on the quality of student support services (Aluko and Hendrikz 2012). Focus on

quality student support services stands as the most important aspect of teaching and learning in distance education because stakeholders across countries are compelled with their higher education institutions for producing high quality services, processes and students (Belawati & Zuhairi 2007:2). This importance in distance education is also emphasized by some researchers like Aluko and Hendrikz (2012); Belawati and Zuhairi (2007); Thorpe (2004) and; Tait and Mills (2003).

Student support services of distance education includes variety of services like registration, advisory services, learning support services for academic purpose, counseling, career services, provision of study centers and financial assistance (Robinson 1995). These all can be categorized into services which upkeep students' social and emotional needs and results in academic success. Calvert (2005) opined, successful implementation of it can result in a cost-effective resource of improving access and equality of opportunity to mass people for participation in this program and fulfill efficient human resource needs. Therefore, the this study tried to explore the perception of learners toward tangibility and assurance regarding the service quality issues of learner support services for effective open and distance education of Bangladesh open university, Bangladesh.

II. Objectives of the Study

Main purpose of the study is to measure tangibility and assurance dimensions of SERVQUAL model developed by Parasuraman, (1985, 1988) with little adaption in questionnaire for Student Support Services provided through regional and study centers of Bangladesh Open University in Bangladesh. To achieve this, two specific objectives are settled:

1. To measure tangibility and assurance for student support services;



2. To identify problems and provide suggestions.

III. Methodology of the Study

Creswell and Plano Clark (2011, 2014) proposed a general framework that can identify the design and structure of a research strategy and claimed that this general framework is interrelated i.e. what knowledge is being made? What strategies might be adopted? And what data collection methods and analysis will be used in the research?

According to Malhotra et al (2007), basically research design is of two types. The study

$$n = \frac{z^2 \cdot N \cdot p \cdot q}{e^2(N-1) + z^2 \cdot p \cdot q} = \frac{(1.96)^2 \times 9770 \times .5 \times .5}{.05^2(9770-1) + (1.96)^2 \times .5 \times .5} = \frac{9383.108}{25.3829} = 369.6626$$

The only one regional center in the study area and all the twenty four study centers covering all the nine study programs considered as sampling area. Samples drawn proportionately from the given sampling frame, and finally, simple random sampling technique used for different groups. A pre-tested structured questionnaire rolled out to collect data from the learners. For each question, Likert scale 1 to 5 points used where, 1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree (Likert, 1932). The development of the scale instrument was based on

is basically descriptive in nature and quantitative in design. To follow it, researcher used survey method to collect data where cross-sectional design is employed. Both primary and secondary data used for the study. The study concentrated on Rajshahi district with 24 learning centers comprising of 9770 students out of 1506 study centers and 0.52 million learners approximately all over Bangladesh reflects as study population (BOU, 2019). Recipients or learners are treated as sampling unit in the sampling frame. Sample size from the sampling frame determined using the following formula of Kothari (2004):

the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman et al., 1985, 1988, 1991).

Data Analysis, Findings and Interpretation of the Study

Data collected from the field were arranged accordingly, and then processed for necessary statistical measures; finally they were statistically analyzed to achieve the research purpose.

Respondents' Demographics

Table 1 shows the summary of demographics for the respondents:

Table 1: Demographics of Learners

Particulars	Categories	Percentage
Gender	Male	56.3
	Female	43.8
Age (In Years)	<20	4.5
	20-24	20.5
	25-29	33.0
	30-34	12.5
	35-39	18.8
	40 ≥	10.7
Marital Status	Unmarried	65.2
	Married	31.3
	Others	3.6
Residence	Urban	40.2
	Rural	59.8



Occupation	Service Business Unemployed Others	49.1 15.2 22.3 13.4
Income (In Thousands)	no income <10 10-19 20-29 30-39 40 ≥	26.8 8.0 26.8 29.5 6.3 2.7
Study Programs	SSC HSC BA/BSS MBA M.ED	7.1 22.3 59.8 1.8 8.9

Source: Survey data of the study

The above table shows, there are 56% male compared to 44% female respondents that represents more male students are engaged themselves for higher education. Age group of 25-29 shown the highest (33%) learners among the other age groups than 20-24 (20.5%), 35-39 (18.8%), 40 and above (10.7%), 30-34 (12.5%), and less than 20 (4.5%) which indicates that most of the learners are over aged than the intake in normal traditional educational system of Bangladesh. Marital status shows, unmarried students (65.2%) are much more in this education than married (31.3%) and others (3.6%). Again, from the residential status of rural (55.4%) are much higher than the urban (44.6%) indicates that rural students are lag behind in

traditional higher education. Further, employment status reveals 49.1% of them are service holders whereas unemployed 22.3%, Business 15.2%, and others 13.4% respectively. It indicates, employed persons feel higher education during their job for further improvement. Once again, income perspectives show, most income group lies between 20 to 29 thousand(29.5%) per-month compared to 10-19 (26.8%), 30-39 (7.2%), 40 & above (3.6%) though it is mentionable that a higher number of learners have no income (26.8%) or dependent. Last of all, study program shows, BA/BSS students are highest (59.8%) followed by HSC (22.3%), M.ED (8.9%), SSC (7.1%) and MBA (1.8%) means most of the learners are interested for BA/BSS degree.

Table 2: Tangibility Measures

Scale	Tangibility_1 Good Infra-structure (percent)	Tangibility_2 Clean and Comfortable Space (percent)	Tangibility_3 Study Materials are Visual and Attractive (percent)	Tangibility_4 Sufficient Logistic and Technology Support (percent)
Valid				
SD	23.2	12.4	14.4	19.4
D	27.6	19.3	11.8	36.7
N	13.7	19.1	16.7	12.6
A	18.2	30.8	38.4	12.6
SA	17.3	18.4	18.7	18.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Survey data of the study



The above table shows, in the context of ‘Good infra-structure’, more than half of the learners are disagreed. So, it is not a good sign and needs to improve as quickly as possible. For ‘Clean and Comfortable Space’, almost thirty percent of learners are against the statement. It looks a little problem exist in this area but needs to put concentration. Similarly, in terms of ‘Study materials are visual and Attractive’, more than

twenty six percent learners are not agreed to it. Though finding looks comfortable a little concentration needed to upgrade the position further. Finally, for ‘Sufficient Logistic and Technology Support’, more than fifty five percent learners are against the statement. Therefore, higher degree of concentration needs to improve the scenario to make things more tangible to the learners.

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation for Tangibility

Tangibility		Mean	SD
Tangibility_1	Good Infra-structure	3.14	1.37
Tangibility_2	Clean and Comfortable Space	3.36	1.24
Tangibility_3	Study Materials are Visual and Attractive	3.42	1.17
Tangibility_4	Sufficient Logistic and Technology Support	3.03	1.41

Source: Survey data of the study

The above table shows, mean value of Tangibility_3 (3.42) and Tangibility_2 (3.36) are much higher with lower standard deviation of 1.17 and 1.24 respectively comparing to other two variables: Tangibility_1 with mean 3.14, standard deviation 1.37 and Tangibility_4 with mean 3.03, standard deviation 1.41. Findings dictate that

Tangibility_3 and Tangibility_2 are in a better position comparing to Tangibility_1 and Tangibility_4 variables. But still, a large portion of learners are not satisfied with the existing performance. Therefore, concerned authority needs to put focus dully to improve the performance to make things more tangible to the learners.

Table 4: Assurance Measures

Scale	Assurance_1 Tutors and employees/staff provide counseling to learners to boost-up confidence. (percent)	Assurance_2 Employees/staff are always polite with learners. (percent)	Assurance_3 Tutors and employees/staff have sufficient knowledge to answer/feedback learners’. (percent)	Assurance_4 Learners’ feel safety in any dealings. (percent)	
Valid	SD	16.6	18.8	10.9	12.6
	D	26.6	29.0	20.2	27.7
	N	18.5	18.4	21.2	17.3
	A	22.8	17.6	31.6	28.6
	SA	15.5	16.2	16.1	13.8
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Survey data of the study

Table shows, for the statement of ‘Tutors and employees/staff provide counseling to learners to boost-up confidence’, more than forty three percent of the learners are disagreed. So, improvement obviously needs in this area. For ‘Employees/staff are always polite with learners’, almost half of the learners are against the statement.

So, again caution and activities need to improve it. Furthermore, in terms of ‘Tutors and employees/staff have sufficient knowledge to answer/feedback learners’’, more than thirty percent learners are not agreed to it. Though findings look a little better than others, concentration needs to monitor and looks for further improvement. Lastly,



for 'Learners' feel safety in any dealings', more than forty percent learners are not agreed to the

statement. Therefore, high level of concentration needs to improve the situation to assure the learners.

Table 5: Mean and standard Deviation for Assurance

Assurance		Mean	SD
Assurance_1	Tutors and employees/staff provide counseling to learners to boost-up confidence.	3.31	1.27
Assurance_2	Employees/staff are always polite with learners.	3.23	1.34
Assurance_3	Tutors and employees/staff have sufficient knowledge to answer/feedback learners'.	3.53	1.09
Assurance_4	Learners' feel safety in any dealings.	3.47	1.17

Source: Survey data of the study

Table shows, mean value of 'Tutors and employees/staff have sufficient knowledge to answer/feedback learners' (3.53) and 'Learners' feel safety in any dealings' (3.47) are much higher with lower standard deviation of 1.09 and 1.17 respectively than the other two variables: 'Tutors and employees/staff provide counseling to learners to boost-up confidence' with mean 3.31, standard deviation 1.27 and 'Employees/staff are always polite with learners' with mean 3.23, standard deviation 1.34. It looks that Assurance_3 and Assurance_4 are in comfortable position comparing to Assurance_1 and Assurance_2. But, concerned authority needs to put their concentration for all the variables as still a large portion is not satisfied with the existing performance.

Major Problems and Suggestions of the Study

Based on the findings, the following problems and corresponding suggestions are developed:

- The study suggests that there should be a proper communication and feedback delivery structure among learners, front line support providers and the administration of regional centers as respondents are dissatisfied with it.
- Administrative support staff has a very crucial role in distance education system but most of the respondents complained that both the regional office and study center office staff are not well trained to deal with learners' queries. Therefore, effective learner queries like counseling on courses, admission, readmission and procedures demands intensive training for the staff.
- Many students are unable to attend tutorial sessions regularly and do not have access to tutors in their local communities who can help them with their academics when necessary. Therefore, BOU may train and employ capable tutorial center and tutors in the local areas to get rid of it.
- The practice of student support in distance learning will face difficulties as technology

continues to transform the ways in which teaching is delivered in online learning environments. Therefore, technology-based student support services needs to be considered and upgraded fully.

IV. Conclusion

The study reflects the perception of learners towards the two significant indicator of student support services namely tangibility and assurance. The findings of this study have demonstrated several areas of support services that need proper attention for improvements in order to support learners learning effectively. The findings may assist student support administrators as well as policy makers to look into the matter about study centers and regional centers to help develop an effective student support program for BOU.

References

- [1]. Aluko, R. & Hendrikz, J. 2012. The use of Technology in an ODL Programme: The Journey over the Past Decade. (Retrieved from uir.unisa.za, on 7 February, 2023).
- [2]. Bangladesh Open University, 2019, <https://www.bou.ac.bd>
- [3]. Belawati, T. & Zuhairi, A. 2007. The Practice of a Quality Assurance System in Open and Distance Learning: A Case Study at Universitas Terbuka Indonesia (The Indonesia Open University).
- [4]. The International Review of Research in in Open and Distributed Learning, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 1-15.
- [5]. Calvert, J. (2005). Distance education at the crossroads. Distance Education, 26 (2), 227-238.
- [6]. Creswell, J.W. & Plano Clark, V.L. 2011. Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research, (2nd Edition). Thousand Oak, CA: Sage.



- [7]. Kothari, C.R. 2004. Research methodology: Methods and techniques, New Delhi: New Age International.
- [8]. Likert, R. 1932. A Technique for the Measurement of Attitudes. *Archives of Psychology*, 140, pp. 15–20.
- [9]. Malhotra, N. K., and Birks, D. F. Marketing research: An applied approach, (3rd edition), Spain: Pearson Educational Limited.
- [10]. Nsamba, A. & Makoe, M. (2017). Evaluating Quality of Students' Support Services in Open Distance Learning. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, 18 (4) , 91-103 . DOI: 10.17718/tojde.340391.
- [11]. Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V. A. & Berry L. L. 1985. A Conceptual Model of Service Quality and its Implications for Future Research. *The Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 49, No. 4, pp. 41-50.
- [12]. Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V. A. & Berry L. L. 1988. A Multi-item Scale for Measuring Consumer Perceptions of Service Quality. *Journal of Retailing*, Vol. 64 No. 1, pp. 12-40.
- [13]. Parasuraman, A. Berry, L. L. and Zeithaml, V. A. 1991. Refinement and Reassessment of the SERVQUAL Scale. *Journal of Retailing*, Vol. 67, No. 4, pp. 420-50.
- [14]. Robinson, B. 1995. "The management of Quality in Open and Distance Learning." In *Indira Gandhi National Open University, Structure and Management of Open Learning Systems*.
- [15]. Proceedings of the Eighth Annual Conference of the Asian Association of Open Universities, New Delhi, India.
- [16]. Sánchez-Elvira Paniagua, A and Simpson, O. 2018. Developing Student Support for Open and Distance Learning: The EMPOWER Project. *Journal of Interactive Media in Education*, 2018(1): 9, pp. 1–10, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/jime.470> Tait, A. 2003. Reflections on Student Support in Open and Distance Learning. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, Vol.4 No.1 pp.1-10.
- [17]. Thorpe, M. 2004. Evaluating the Quality of Learner Support. In: Brindley, J. E., Walti, C. and Zawacki-Richter, O. (Eds.), *Learner Support in Open, Distance and Online Learning Environments*. Studien und Berichte der Arbeitsstelle Fernstudienforschung der Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg, 9. Oldenburgh, Germany: Bibliotheks und Informationssystem der Universität Oldenburg, pp. 251–258.