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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

ASSESSMENT OF DISTANCE EDUCATION SERVICE QUALITY:

THE CASE OF ALPHA UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

BY

AHMED SEID

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ASSESSMENT OF DISTANCE EDUCATION SERVICE QUALITY:

THE CASE OF ALPHA UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

A Thesis Presented To The School Of Graduate Studies Of Addis Ababa University

In Partial Fulfillment Of The Requirements For The Degree Of Master Of Arts In Management Of Marketing (Education)

BY

AHMED SEID

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Acronym:

1. AUCCDS	=	Alpha University College, College of Distance Studies
2. DE	=	Distance Education
3. DL	=	Distance Learning
4. AV	=	Audio Visual
5. HRD	=	Human Resource Development
6. SPSS	=	Statistical Package for Social Sciences
7. MOE	=	Ministry of Education

ABSTRACT

These days most service organizations are realizing the significance of customer centered philosophies. One of the key challenges for them is how they manage service quality, which holds a great importance for customer satisfaction. The purpose of this research was to identify the gap between customers' expectations and their actual perception of the service performance of Alpha University College, College of Distance Studies thereby measuring the gap between these elements in order to identify the level of the service quality. A questionnaire for this investigation is addressed to a sample population of 31180 and sample size of 380. Out of the 380 questionnaires distributed, 320 of them were returned which resulted in a response rate of 84.2% which was administered in 6 branches with relatively larger number of clients (learners). The sampling procedure used was a non-probability and adopted purposive stratified sampling technique. The measurements used were based on the widely accepted SERVQUAL model. A descriptive statistical analysis (mean and percentage) was used to see the gap between clients actual perceptions and their expectations. The data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative method. A computer data storage program, the Spss was employed for the quantitative data and a critical analysis was made to refine the qualitative ones. Conclusion with remarks was shown that customers' perceptions were consistently lower than their expectations especially in the empathy dimension. The most important focal point for competitive advantage is shown in the responsiveness dimension. Recommendations were forwarded in the areas of employee empowerment, provision of guidance and counseling for distance learners; creating efficient distribution system; establishment of sound record management system; and the need for a continuous market research to improve service quality and to measure and evaluate clients perceptions towards the level of service quality of the institution.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the background of the study, statement of the problem with basic research questions; objectives of the study; significance of the study, limitation; delimitation and organization of the study are presented.

1.1 Background of the Study

Today's marketing environment is characterized by increased competition, uncertain economic conditions, and shifts in global trading relationships. The pressure to understand market conditions and customer requirements is growing to the point where organizations will be compelled to exceed, rather than simply meet, customer expectations. In adapting to this pressure, organizations are looking to service initiatives as a way to create or sustain competitive advantages. Measuring customer satisfaction is, therefore, critical to the process of serving the customer and responding faster and better than competition.

The theory that service quality is an antecedent of customer satisfaction and customer satisfaction exerts a strong influence on future purchase intention than does service quality Cronin and Taylor, (1992). Customers do not necessarily purchase the highest quality service; they may also weigh convenience, price, and availability factors, Cronin and Taylor, (1992). The customer's personal experience with the service provider (that is, courtesy, waiting time, empathy, responsiveness, and so on) also impacts customer satisfaction.

Managers in the service sector are under increasing pressure to demonstrate that their services are customer-focused and that continuous constraints under which service organizations must manage. It is essential that customer

expectations are properly understood and measured and that from the customers' perspective, any gaps in the service quality are identified. This information then assists a manager in identifying cost-effective ways of closing service quality gaps and prioritizes which gaps to focus on a critical decision given scarce resources. In education, it is undeniable, that much education takes place outside of classroom. One such education that takes place outside the classroom is distance education.

Distance education can be defined as the process in which students learn using resources that are far away from them. In other words, distance education (learning) is a program of study where tutor and learners are physically separated from each other in space and time during the process of learning. Distance education can also be known by such different terms as correspondence study, home study, off-campus study, distance study, and distance and open learning all over the world. It involves the provision of education through mode other than the conventional face-to-face method.

Distance Learning has become an important learning option for education system and training solution in the Human Resource Development (HRD) area, Felix,(2006). The growth of distance learning industry has been faster than expected, Huynh, Umesh & Valacich, (2003) through distance learning, organizations have more convenient, practical and cost-effective way to train the employees.

Due to the growth and competition in the distance learning market, distance learning research includes the study of consumer aspects such as consumer services and satisfaction(Shaik,2005; Granitz &Greene,2003; Huynh, Umesh, Valacich,2003). Feedbacks from learners give the instructor important data to determine how well the instructional program satisfies individual learner needs (Steyn & Schuulze, 2003; Long, Tricker, Range Craft, Gilroy, 1999). This in turn offers service providers in the market place important information to

streamline the business process to improve the quality of distance learning. Quality services and support will help the service providers, institutions and organizations in distance learning get a competitive advantage in the market place (Shaik, 2005).

Students or learners are customers of educational service providers Shaik, 2005; Douglas & Douglas, 2006). For service providers to have a long-term competitive advantage in the distance learning market Shaik, (2005), researchers in Distance Learning should pay more attention to studies related to consumer service and satisfaction. As the distance learning industry has become mature in the educational market place Huynh, Umesh & Valacich, (2003), it is providing learners with convenient and flexible learning alternatives.

Distance Education in Ethiopia has a short history in which Alpha University College is a pioneer in the private sector. Alpha Education and Training Share Company was founded in 1994 with the prime objective of offering education and training at certificate, diploma, and degree levels. It grew out of the Institution of National Vocational and Technical Education Enterprise, which was established in 1982. Documented facts certify that it is the pioneer of distance learning in the private sector in Ethiopia. Currently, the company provides such regular programs as kindergarten education, primary and secondary education, and higher education as well as such distance mode of education as primary education, secondary education and higher education. The company runs the primary and secondary education and higher education in distance mode of delivery as well as higher education in regular mode of delivery under the name of Alpha University College and the remaining other programs by its own name (Alpha Education and Training Share Company). The College of Distance Studies under Alpha University College currently offers degree and diploma programs in various fields of studies since 2004 and 1998

respectively. In addition to the degree, diploma, and certificate programs, General Education (grade 5 – 10) is being offered.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Alpha University College, College of Distance Studies is accommodating general education, TVET and degree programs in distance education. As the current statistical data discloses, over 70,000 (seventy thousands) distance learners in all of its programs are enrolled. This figure is expected to grow in the future. This situation has created challenges for the University College to deliver quality service in the various service areas demanded by the learners. The University College managed to minimize the service problems by decentralizing the non-degree programs while keeping the degree programs under the control of the head office. The respective branch offices in the regions are supposed to provide services that were previously delivered by the head office. The various services distance learners received from various departments include determining entry profile during registration, developing and distributing learning matcrials, (modules), semester and term exams, tutorial services, grade reports, certification, etc.

As can be observed from various documentary sources from the various departments of the University College, the constant complaints of distance learners because of repeated examination sessions; repeated submission of tutor marked assignments due to losses or dislocations of these result papers; delays of examination results; mismatches of the number of candidates for the examinations and the actual number of examination papers in different exam centers; the constant flow of distance learners to the Head Office from branches seeking solutions for their academic problems which must have been settled in the respective branch offices etc. are the major factors that have put the service quality of Alpha University college, College of Distance Studies, in question.

As a business organization, the university college is operating in a competitive environment where survival in the market depends upon achieving competitive advantage. The university college should strive to create customer satisfaction in order to maintain and increase its market share so that sustainable competitive advantage is achieved.

In order to systematically assess the level of service quality the University College is delivering, it will become necessary to raise the main research question: How do customers (distance learners) perceive the educational service Alpha University College is providing? Moreover, the study will address the following specific questions:

1. Is Alpha University College, College of Distance Studies, well organized in terms of relevant resources that enable to provide quality services?
2. What is the perceptions of distance learners (customers) about the quality of the services they receive from the institution tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy?
3. Which service quality dimension the University College is offering distance learners (customers) favor and why?

1.3. Objectives of the Study

The general objective of the study is to assess the level of service quality as perceived by the clients (distance learners) of AUCCDS. While thorough investigation is important to understand the problem and explore possible solutions, there is, however, no comprehensive study on the underlying variables assessed with specific to the academic institution. There is, a wider gap between the required and available data on this issue. This study is, therefore, an attempt to fill the data gap by documenting the essential service quality variables and to identify the possible ways and means of solving the service quality

variables and to identify the possible ways and means of solving the service gaps in a sustainable manner.

The aim of the model is to compare customers' expectations with the actual service quality perceptions in terms of tangible asset, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy, and which variable is more important than others to address for service institutions such as this one.

The specific objectives of the study include the following:

- To see whether Alpha University College is equipped with sufficient human and material resources that enables it to deliver quality service.
- To assess the gap between customers' expectations of the service delivery and their actual perceptions regarding their experiences.
- To identify which dimension of the service quality do customers prefer and their justifications.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study is expected to make the following contributions:

- On using customer measure of service quality, service firms gain valuable information concerning how people feel about service being provided and identify poor spots.

- The study will create awareness to those service firms including Alpha University College, College of Distance Studies, about the real importance of customer satisfaction in relation to quality service delivery to maintain sustainable competitive advantage.

- As there are less research studies in the service quality measurement of distance education, this study may help those

who want to conduct further studies in the service quality measurement in distance education.

- Alpha University College, College of Distance Studies, may be beneficiary through the study since the study discloses the status of its quality of service delivery as perceived by its customers.

1.5 Delimitation of the Study

- Among several distance education in Ethiopia, the scope of the study is delimited to Alpha University College, College of Distance Studies, which is a pioneer in the specific services marketing with long years of experience. Compared to others, it is the only University College with a big number of learner population. Out of the 15 branches offices located in the various regions of the country, the study is delimited to six branches with high number of student population.
- As Alpha University College, College of Distance Studies, is a service business, the study is delimited to the service quality aspect of its operation.

1.6 Limitation of the Study

Even though measuring the qualities of services is a well researched phenomena in different service organization, sufficient number of studies on the service quality of educational institutions, particularly distance education, is not made. Therefore, the measurement of service quality and customer satisfactions in distance education has not been well researched which limits the researcher to access more literature. The absence of well organized data base in some departments forces the researcher to dig facts from basic source documents to support the statement of the problem.

At the same time, the galloping costs of transport, stationery and printing, and all consumable items are creating financial constraints to conduct the research activities due to the limited fund available.

1.7 Organization of the Study

This study is organized in five chapters. The first chapter deals with the back ground of the study, statement of the problem, objectives of the study, significance of the study, limitation and delimitation of the study and organization of the study; the second chapter focuses on what literature was available before regarding the topic of the study. The third chapter deals with the research methodology, source of data and procedures. Analysis and interpretation is dealt under the fourth chapter. Chapter five deals with summary, conclusion and recommendations reached to the study.

1.8 Definition of Terms

Service is intangible activities performed by a person or machine or both for the purpose of creating value perception among customers.

Quality is customer satisfaction index or any service in which satisfaction is measured by any criteria at the end of the service process.

Service Quality is the gap between customers' expectations of service and Their perceptions of the service experience.

SERVQUAL Scale is a principal instrument in the service marketing literature For assessing quality.

Chapter Two

Review of Related Literature

2.1 Definition of Distance Education

The use of different media, other than printed material, is an essential part of distance education. Though the teacher and the learner are separated, and the learner is often an individual who learns in his/her own place and at his/her own pace, the distance education system envisages some sort of a two-way communication. Advancements in satellite communication technology and the expansion in the financial sector have made DE possible. In this instance teleconferencing, electronic networking and others are all used (Marew, 2002:19).

Furthermore, Verlaccihi, , in Keegan, (1993) assert that distance education presupposes the existence of a school that is an organization whose explicit purpose is to teach to a public who wants to learn. Thus, the term "distance education" or "distance learning" have been applied interchangeably by many different researchers to a great variety of programs, providers, audience, and media. Its hallmarks are the separation of teacher and learner in space and time, Perraton, (1998), the volitional control of learning by the student rather than the distance instructor Jonassen, (1992), and noncontiguous communication between student and teacher mediated by print or some form of technology (Keegan, 1989: Garrison and Shale, 1987).

As its definition varies, different terms such as independent study, home study, correspondence study, individual study, autonomous study, and other terms have been used equally to express the term distance education. The term distance education has a number of various meanings in different parts of the world. According to Wossenu and Befekadu (199:16-19), it is known as correspondence education or Open University in the UK, External Studies in

Australia Education in Distance in Spain. Moreover, they noted that other terminology such as University without walls, External Studies, Experimental Learning, Off Campus Education, Extended Campus, and the American External.

After having made a comprehensive review and analysis of the numerous existing definitions of Distance Education, Keegan (1990:40) came up with following definition of Distance Education.

> *A form of education characterized by the quasi-permanent separation of the teacher and learner; the influence of an educational organization, the use of technical media, the provision of two-way communication and the quasi-permanent absence of the learning group throughout the length of the learning process.*

Thus, whether the definitions provided so far share some characteristics in common or not the history of DE shows that there are a number of different definitions provided by several authorities and writers in the area over time.

2.2 Brief History of Distance Education

Informal distance teaching is believed to have begun when people first started to exchange written letters and gave instructions to other person(s). Even though some writers like (Holmberg, 1986) say that it began 150 years ago, the exact period when organized distance education started is still doubtful.

Gough (1980:24) relates that the history and evaluation of distance education based on three reasons. The first of these is access: to allow students who would otherwise be denied educational opportunities to get access to courses. The second is equivalence and integrity; students taught at a distance should receive an equivalent qualification with the same integrity as those earned through the conventional mode. The third is excellence: quest for excellence in quality of learning materials, teaching, support services, academic and

administrative system or professional development staff. He argues that as the resolution of these issues continue to dominate the theory and practice of distance and open learning, many countries in the world, especially those developing, became increasingly attracted to this form of education. Added to these, the roles of increasing political support from governments, the availability of new methods of communication as well as the flexibility of distance education in terms of place, pace, age and time are pressing force to the expansion and development of distance education (Teshome: 4-5).

According to Manjulinka, (996:165), a number of publicly and privately funded colleges offering correspondence education have grown and developed across Europe and the USA in the turn of the nineteenth century. Further, (Nania, 1999 and Manjulinka, 1996: 166), noted that in the early 1990s, Universities and Private schools were offering correspondence courses to elementary, secondary, higher education and vocationally oriented learners (Rohfeld, 1990; Wiesner, 1983) expressed that much of the development and growth of distance education in England and Europe was in response to "demands from workers and women" where as in Sweden and USA, it was a result of the need to reach students living in isolated places. On the issue, (Manjulinka, 1996:165) further noted that this was more dramatically experienced in countries with scattered population spread over large areas.

However, the form and structure of early correspondence based distance education has changed with the advent of new technologies. The technologies have reduced the turnaround time as well as improved interactively. Thus, audio and video resources such as films, cassette tape, and television slowly replaced the original correspondence course formats and in the middle of the 20th century, instructional radio and television became popular. Hence, (Willis, 1993:53 and Fleeischman, 1998: 162) asserted that Open University of UK was established in 1969), combining distance education programs using print and non-print resources. However, "print has always been the dominant medium in distance education and will continue to be the most used of delivery in the

foreseeable future" (Verdun and Clark 1991"81, 1994: 50-154, Marew, 2002:21). IN relation to this Perry, (1984:83-106) noted that among institutions surveyed by him 100% in Africa, 93% in Asia, and 72% in Latin America employed correspondence and print materials in their programs. This further asserts that prints are dominant.

2.2.1 Distance Education in Ethiopia

The initiation of distance education in Ethiopia goes back to 1967 when the Ministry of Education collaborated with Addis Ababa University to establish a correspondence study unit under the Extension Division of the University. The main target of the Unit was to develop senior secondary correspondence course for adults working in various ministries, factories and military organizations in general and teachers in particular.

The extension division of Addis Ababa University led the program until 1976 and transferred it to the Ministry of Education under the Department of Adult and Continuing Education, and later to the Educational Media Agency (EMA). This was partly because of the absence of administrative structure and qualified personnel in the University to especially run the program. However, in two years time after the Ministry took the responsibility to run, the program has shifted its attention to secondary education and achieved a lot in this direction too (EMA, 2003:2). According to documentary sources obtained from MOE, (1985; 1999), the need for distance education in Ethiopia is addressed from six perspectives namely:

Expanding access of secondary education.
Improving the flexibility of education with working conditions
Improving the competence of teachers in primary education
Improving student learning
Reducing educational costs and
Capacity building in the education and civil service sectors.

Regarding this (Tsion and Nekatibeb, 2004: 124) further also noted that the need for instigation of distance education in Ethiopia was related to the above points while, Amare (2000:128), highlights that the inception of distance learning program in the country is at its youngest age (immature) and getting more acceptance in the country's education system.

2.3 Services Defined

The following definitions present the perception of various personalities and associations responsible for contributing significant work over the last four decades, that is, from 1960 onwards, in service management and marketing.

The American Marketing Association (1960) The American Marketing Association has taken a lead in defining services as "activities, benefits or satisfactions which are offered for sale or provided in connection with the sale of goods." This definition provides a limited view of services. However, this was the first major attempt to identify services differently in valuing the output of a society. The definition does not provide for valuing services involved in producing the tangible goods.

Regan (1963) Regan in his definition classified services into two categories. According to him "services represent either tangibles, yielding satisfaction directly (transport, housing) or intangibles, yielding satisfaction jointly when purchased either with commodities or other services "credit delivery". An attempt is made through this definition to give a distinctive focus for such services that are offered directly to the consumers as products.

Robert Judd (1964) According to Robert Judd, service is "a market transaction by an enterprise or entrepreneur where the object of the market transaction is other than the transfer of ownership of a tangible commodity." In this definition three broad areas of services are recognized. They are:-

- Right to possess and use a product (rented goods business).
- The custom creation, repair or improvement of a product (owned product services).
- No product element, but an experience (non-goods services).

An attempt was made through this definition to give an independent status to more and more services and to focus the attention of the researchers for further development.

William J. Stanton (1974) A comprehensive view of service was provided by Stanton. According to him services are "separately identifiable, intangible activities which provide satisfaction when marketed to consumers and /or industrial users and which are not necessarily tied to the sale of product or another service." This definition focuses upon several issues for recognition. They are:-

- Services are those activities that are identifiable separately.
- Services are intangibles that provide want satisfaction to consumers.
- Services are marketed directly to consumers and also to the industrial users.
- A service may be or may not be tied with the sale of another service.

Lehtinen (1983) According to Lehtinin a service product is "an activity or series of activities which take place in interaction with a contact person or a physical machine and which provides consumer satisfaction." This definition recognizes the services that are provided by machines such as vending machines and ATMs, besides the services provided by the contact persons.

Philip Kotler and Bloom (1984) Philip Kotler and Bloom defined service as "any activity or benefit that one party can offer to another and is essentially intangible and does not result in the ownership of anything. Its production may or may not be tied to a physical product." This definition more or less follows

the earlier ones. The focus was given to the absence of ownership as a special feature of services, which has significant business implications.

Services may defined as intangible activities performed by persons or machines or both for the purpose of creating value perceptions among consumers. Since services are intangible activity(ies) or benefit(s) produced by the service provider, in association with the consumer, its its quality results in perception and value assessment by the consumer.

2.4 Characteristics of Services

Services have basically six characteristics that greatly affect the design of marketing programmes. They are:-

2.4.1 Intangibility
2.4.2 Inseparable
2.4.3 Variability
2.4.4 Perishability
2.4.5 Customer Participation
2.4.6 No ownership

2.4.1 Intangibility

Services are intangible. They cannot be seen, tasted, felt, heard or smelt before they are bought unlike physical products. The intangibility creates a feeling of uncertainty about the outcome of a service. For example, a tourist does not know what the exact outcome of experience would be before consuming the service; a woman who purchases services in a beauty parlour for a facial cannot foresee the exact result. This characteristic of the service makes the buyers look for evidence of quality in the service. Buyers try to draw quality inferences from the service environment such as the place, equipment, communication material, symbols and the technical design of the service package. To handle this marketing problem the service providers have to

manage evidence. They would try to make the intangible tangible to the best possible extent. The service design would be in such a way that it must be able to transform intangible services into concrete benefits.

2.4.2 Inseparability

Services cannot be separated from the service provider. In fact, the production, delivery and consumption of a service takes place simultaneously in the buyer-seller interactions. This characteristic of a service creates problems to the marketer, particularly in the case of market expansion. Whenever the service provider intends to offer services, he should have a service production unit that offers the same service quality standards. However, some service organizations are able to reduce direct interactions by introducing new technologies. For example, banking organizations have introduced the cheque facility, the credit and facility, tele banking and ATM to minimize direct buyer-seller interactions.

2.4.3 Variability

Services are highly variable. It is almost impossible to have the same service from the same seller the second time. No two customers can have exactly similar service even though they experience it simultaneously. For example, the experience of bus travelers vary with the seats they occupy. The experiences of passengers sitting on the window side, inner side, front rear and rear of the bus will not be similar, though they take the service simultaneously. A receptionist of a hotel cannot extend the same kind of smile to the customers during all her working hours. Service organizations face major problems in standardizing and communicating the service standards because of this characteristic. While customers look for communicating from the company relating to service standards for arriving at a purchase decision, the service providers often struggle to develop service standards.

However, variability of services can be used as an opportunity by service organizations. Since innovation is the key to success, this characteristic offers

enormous opportunities to introduce several changes in the service offer without disturbing the basic structure of the offer. The service provider can offer better experiences and delight to the customers by introducing surprise changes in the service package.

2.4.4 Perishability

Services perish. They cannot be stored. Thus, a train that leaves the railway station half-full means that the service of the empty half remains unused. An unutilized service capacity cannot be used further. When the demand is stable, perishability cannot be a problem to the service organization. But service firms face many problems when demand fluctuates. The major challenge to these firms to balance the supply-demand positions.

Thus, demand management is one of the major tasks for the service firms.

2.4.5 Customer Participation

Service production is not a one-sided activity. Customers are co-producers of service. The production quality of the service greatly depends upon the ability, skill and performance of the employee as well as the ability and performance of the customer. In the service interaction, although the employee and the customers are not equal part of production, the role of the customer cannot be overemphasized. Service firms should make the customers aware of the service package and the production process through proper communication media. They should take necessary steps to train customer, if necessary, to provide quality experience of the service. Perfection from the organization's side in service production cannot ensure positive results unless the consumers are involved with the process. Therefore, specific and special orientation to different groups of customers is necessary.

Customization is one of the key strategies the service firms adopt to ensure efficient and effective participation of customers. Customer participation is

active in services such as medical treatment, hair dressing, health care, colleges, etc.

2.4.6 No Ownership

Service consumers will have experience but not ownership. Since the services are intangible and perishable, the question of ownership doesn't arise. But this characteristic will add to the problems of the service marketer. Convincing the customer tangible goods on which he will have ownership through transfer of title is much easier than selling an experience where nothing remains after consumption, except the memory of it. Customers' dissonance would be higher in the case of services than goods.

Due to the above-mentioned characteristics of services, service providers face varied problems and challenges in marketing, when compared to producers of goods.

2.5 Service Management

According to Lovelock (2001), services are economic activities that create value and provide benefits to the client at specific times and in specific places because of a desired change in, or on behalf of, the one that receives the service.

According to Meirelles (2006), a service is essentially intangible and only assessed when combined with other functions, that is, with other tangible productive processes and products. This intangible nature is associated with this process, which cannot be touched in advance of use. In other words, the providing of a service tends to occur simultaneously with consumption. Production occurs starting the moment the service is ordered and it finishes as soon as the demand is met.

Services have some specific characteristics that differentiate them from the manufactured good. Gianesi and Correa (2004) say the following special

characteristics of service operations are the main ones: intangibility, client participation and simultaneous production and consumption.

According to Coelho (2004, p. 36), "in service management it is important to understand how clients assess the quality of the service provided, that is, how quality is perceived by the client". The quality of education especially higher education is fundamental to a country's development because universities are the ones that prepare the professionals who will work as managers in companies and manage public and private resources and care for the health and education of new generations.

According to Lovelock (2001), education service is classified as a service with intangible actions, directed towards the minds of people, with continuous delivery, conducted through a partnership between the service organization and its client, and although it provides high personal contact, there is low customization.

The institutions must work to obtain a standard of quality that exceeds client and/or student expectations and needs, extrapolating the assessments from legal demands (PEREIRA. 2004).

2.6 Quality Management

Quality management is a broad theme that encompasses every sort of organization, multinational or national, eastern or western, large or small, services or manufacturing and public or private (DELAZARO, 1998). According to Oliveira (2004), its concept depends on the context in which it is applied, in face of the subjectivity and complexity of its meaning. Bateson (2001, 363) says, "Quality is generally considered an attribute in consumer choices".

Quality in services can be defined as a customer satisfaction index for any service, and this satisfaction can be measured by any criteria (SATOLLO et al., 2005).

Quality in services provides a competitive factor for continued consumption, especially when intangibility relations are tightened between quality and the services. Responsibility and trust, two of the dimensions of service quality grouped by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985), generated by prior experience, are important factors for determining perceived quality by clients (ZANELLA, LIMA and LOPES, 2006).

Quality is judged according to perceived satisfaction. According to Gronroos (2005, p. 54), perceived quality is determined "by the gap between expected quality and experienced quality", that is, it is the difference between client perceptions and expectations.

Satisfying the clients' immediate and explicit expectations should be sought in the short term. However, in the mid and long term, it is important to develop competences to achieve their real needs, even those that are not explicit or are unconscious (COELHO, 2004, 37).

According to the same author, quality is only measured at the end of the process, that is, when the service has been concluded, and there is no way to change client perception regarding the service received.

2.7 SERVQUAL

Just over a decade ago, Parasuraman et al. (1985) initiated a research stream that many consider to be the most comprehensive investigation into service quality. Briefly, Parasuraman et al. (1985) proposed service quality to be a function of pre-purchase customer expectations, perceived process quality, and perceived output quality. They defined service quality as the gap between customers' expectations of service and their perceptions of the service experience, ultimately deriving the now-standard SERVQUAL multiple-item survey instrument (Parasuraman et al., 1988).

The SERVQUAL scale is a principal instrument in the services marketing literature for assessing quality (Parasuraman et al., 1991; Parasuraman et al., 1988). This instrument has been widely utilized by both managers (Parasuraman et al., 1991) and academics (Babakus and Boller, 1992; Carman, 1990; Crompton and Mackay, 1989; Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Johnson et al., 1988; Webster, 1989; Woodside et al., 1989) to assess customer perceptions of service quality for a variety of services.

What are the SERVQUAL Gaps?

- Gap 1: The difference between management perceptions of what customers expect and what customers really do expect
- Gap 2: The difference between management perceptions and service quality specifications the standards gap
- Gap 3: The difference between service quality specifications and actual service delivery are standards consistently met.
- Gap 4 : The difference between service delivery and what is communicated externally are promises made consistently fulfilled?
- Gap 5 : The difference between what customers expect of a service and what they actually receive
    - Expectations are made up of past experience, word-of-mouth and needs/wants of customers
    - Measurement is on the basis of two sets of statements in groups according to the five key service dimensions

2.7.1 Reasons for the Gaps

- GAP 1 – not knowing what customers expect
    - lack of a marketing orientation
    - inadequate upward communication 9from contact staff to management)
    - too many levels of management

- GAP 2 – the wrong service quality standards
  - inadequate commitment to service quality
  - lack of perception of feasibility –'it cannot be done'
  - inadequate task standardization
  - the absence of goal setting
- GAP 3 – the service performance gap
  - role ambiguity and role conflict – unsure of what your remit is and how it fits with others
  - poor employee or technology fit- the wrong person or system for the job
  - inappropriate supervisory control of lack of perceived control – too much or too little control
  - lack of teamwork
- GAP 4 – when promises made do not match actual delivery
  - inadequate horizontal communication – between departments or services
  - a propensity to over promise

Gap Analyses

GAP 1

What is it?

GAP1 is the discrepancy that can exist between the perception of executives and the real expectations of consumers.

What Causes it?

Management's failure to correctly identify client expectations.

How to correct it?

Open formal and informal channels of communication from the clients to the top, passing through the people in contact with the public; better market surveys on service quality and apply them with greater frequency, and; reduce hierarchy levels.

GAP 2

What is it?

GAP 2 is the discrepancy between management's perception of client expectations and the specifications of service quality, that is, it is the supply of low quality even though the company has appropriate procedures.

What causes it?

Limited resources, lack of operational tools to bring the client's voice to service specifications; management's indifference and rapid change in market conditions.

How to correct it?

Management's commitment; Make resources available and use tools to bring the voice of the client to specifications (for example, QFD-Quality Function Deployment)

GAP 3

What is it?

GAP 3 is the discrepancy between service quality specifications and the service actually delivered.

What causes it?

Lack of knowledge about specifications, lack of ability to carry out the specified or lack of commitment by collaborators.

How to correct it?

Make specifications known, ensure the necessary profile of the collaborator at recruiting or complete it with training; and assess collaborator performance through greater and better supervision or improvements in team work and in the organizational climate.

GAP 4

What is it?

GAP 4 is the discrepancy between the service's specified quality and what the company communicates externally.

What causes it?

Lack of communication and the client does not know what to expect or more is promoted than actually delivered.

How to correct it?

Improve the communication between the diverse sectors of the company and between it and the target public for the communications or hold communication to what is actually delivered.

GAP 5

What is it?

GAP 5 is the difference between what the client expects and what the company actually delivers.

What causes it?

A gap or a series of gaps from 1 to 4.

How to correct it?

Correcting those gaps with problems.

fig1. Five gaps of the SERVQUAL Model

Source: Adapted from Satolo et al. (2002).

2.7.2 Service Quality Dimensions

2.7.2.1 Tangibles:- The appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel and information material.

2.7.2.2 Reliability:- The ability to perform the service accurately and dependably.

2.7.2.3 Responsiveness:- The willingness to help customers and provide a prompt service.

2.7.2.4 Assurance:- A combination of the following

- **Competence –** having the requisite skills and knowledge
- **Courtesy-** politeness, respect, consideration and friendliness of contact staff.
- **Credibility-** trustworthiness, believability and honesty to staff
- **Security –** freedom from danger, risk or doubt

2.7.2.5 Empathy:- A combination of the following:

- **Access (physical and social) –** approachability and ease of contact
- **Communication-** keeping customers informed in a language they understand and really listening to them
- **Understanding the customer-** making the effort to get to know customers and their specific needs.

2.8 Service Failure and Recovery in Service Organizations

Service recovery according to Zenithal et al (2006:214) this refers to the actions taken by an organization in response to a service failure. They further suggest the reasons for service failures as ranging from unavailability of service when as and when promised, too late or too slow delivery of service, incorrect or poor execution of outcome, and rude or uncaring attitudes of employees. Service failure can create negative feelings, and bring about undesired responses from the customers and when left unfixed can lead to customers leaving, telling other customers about their negative experiences, and even challenging the

organization through consumer rights organizations or legal channels, but a well handled service recovery can have positive effects on the other hand. According to Zeithaml et al (2006:214), "resolving customer problems effectively has a strong impact on customer satisfaction, loyalty, word of mouth communication, and bottom line performance".

2.8.1 Service Recovery Strategies

According to Zeithaml et al (2006:215-235) an effective service recovery strategy has multiple potential impacts, it can increase customer satisfaction and loyalty and generate positive word of mouth communication. Service recovery strategies can be implemented as follows: 1) Make the service fail-safe by doing it right the first time: through ensuring reliability which is a dimension of service quality 2) Encourage and track complaints: by listening to customers and making it easy for them to complain.

3) Act quickly by responding immediately: through (a) taking care of the problems either electronically or phone calls,(b)empowering employees to solve problems as soon as they occur and(c) allowing customers to solve their problems themselves through building systems that allow them to do so. 4) Providing them with adequate explanations to understand why the service failed 5) Treating customers fairly in terms of the outcome of the service they receive. 6) Cultivate relationships with customers so that when and if service fails, forgiveness would not be hard to find and 7) Learning from recovery experiences to avoid repetition and rectify their solutions permanently.

2.9 Service Quality in Education Sector

Service Quality in Universities

It is also interesting to note the application of SERVQUAL to education for example, to business schools (Regotti and Pitt) and higher education institutions (Ford et al..,1993; McElwee and Redman,1993). The extent to

which students perceive the level of service performance meets their expectations reflects the quality of service (Zammuto et al., 1996). It was found that perceived poor service quality will ultimately affect funding and viability in the university sector reducing the popularity of the institution and thus the number and standard of applicants, but that the effect us indirect and relatively slow. Nonetheless, dissatisfaction expressed by the direct users of the service, students, will have an effect. Student dissatisfaction, if on a sufficient scale, will result in reduced applications in subsequent years as the reputation for poor quality increases, even though existing, students are likely to be constrained to remain.

The earlier researches on service quality in higher education emphasized academic more than administration, concentrating on effective course delivery and mechanisms and the quality of courses and teaching (athiyaman, 1997; Bouner, 1998; Cheng and Tam, 1997; McElwee and Redman, 1993; Palihawadana, 1996; Soutar and McNeil, 1996; Varey, 1993; Yorke, 1992). The measurement of service quality of courses and programmes often rely on research instruments (e.g. student feedback questionnaires) devised by representatives of the higher education institutions. Kamal and Ramzi (2002), however, attempted to measure student perception of registration and academic advising across different faculties and other administrative services to assure positive quality service that complements the academic.

There are many reasons for focusing the administrative service quality in a university. The first exposure of the student to the university is through the admission and registrar's services so providing high quality service to students contributes to the positive assessment of the university. Compared with the academic units, the administrative departments of the university, such as the registration office, financial office or library, are more likely to be a replication of the bureaucratic units of governmental or public institutions (Salem, 1969). While registration in the Western universities has rapidly adopted in the banking touch-tone telephone systems, universities in developing countries

attempt to struggle with bureaucracies and inefficient infrastructures; hence registration remains tied to a traditional manual process.

Globalization and information technology have brought challenges to educational institutions. The education service providers are facing with an increasing competition as more new programs offered, new delivery means of the existing program (i.e. distant learning or e-learning) are introduced, new institutions are established (both public and private), and new foreign entities enter the market. With this, service quality perceived by students becomes one of the key success factors.

Consumer satisfaction plays a very important role in business administration, not only because it has direct influence on the performance of the organizations, but because it is highly associated with the competitive advantages of the institutions and organizations in the marketplace (Greenland, Coshall, and Combe, 2006). In distance learning, as institutions and organizations provide the learners with training and learning services, students and learners are customers in the educational service settings (Stevenson and Sander, 1998; Moisio and Smeds, 2004; Doublas and Douglas, 2006).Customer satisfaction can reasonably be considered to be learner satisfaction.

In educational studies, the learners' satisfaction has been widely used as a critical dependent variable to evaluate success of the programs.

Compared with other outcome variables in educational studies, learner satisfaction is not an equivocal and obscure indicator. It shows the success of communication between learners and instructors, which is a measure quality and success of the entire program (Thurmond, Wambach, and Conners, 2002). The learner is one of the important stakeholders in the educational arena (Yeung, 2001; Yang and Cornelious, 2004). As for distance learning, it is reasonable that the learners' perception will be considered as a crucial

indicator to evaluate the quality of distance education (Steyn and Schulze, 20003).

In the business area, consumer satisfaction often denotes whether the service provider met the consumers' need (Steyn, and Schulze, 2003). Anderson, Fornell and Lehman (1994) propose there are at least two viewpoints in the definition of consumer satisfaction. The first viewpoint is a transaction-specific perspective, which refers to the consumers' post-purchase appraisal or judgment of the products or service based on expectations at the specific purchasing time or location. The second viewpoint is cumulative satisfaction, which refers to consumers' overall appraisal of purchasing and consuming experience toward the products or service. Therefore, we may regard learners' satisfaction as the learners' overall post-using evaluation toward the educational service.

2.10 Employee Empowerment in Service Organizations

The term Empowerment has been given different definitions, and looked at through different lenses depending on what the writer is trying to portray. It has been defined in relationship to 31 leadership and independence of the employee regarding service encounters, and is compared to the opposite approach referred to as the production line method which is the traditional method of delegating authority to subordinates by their superiors. According to Looy et al (2003:143,) "empowerment means providing service employees with enough autonomy to allow them to handle unforeseen problem situations such as complaints". It refers to employees being more proactive and self-sufficient in assisting an organization to achieve its goals, as Herrenkohl et al, (1999:373) explains. Due to the role of the employees in service organizations, and the value customers place on service quality, the management would have to adopt a system or approach that can yield satisfactory results. As to Looy et al (2003:231)explains, that there are basically two approaches that a company

can choose to adopt, the traditional method of delegation or the empowerment approach.

a) The production line approach: the industrial way of delivering services, is characterized by simplification of tasks, clear division of labor, substitution of equipment and systems for employees, and little decision-making discretion afforded to employees.

b) Empowered approach: less emphasis is put on the systems surrounding the service employees, who are given more discretion and autonomy.

Many studies have shown that due to the nature of services, either of the two approaches tends to have a distinct impact on the service delivery process, customer perceived service quality, the service quality, customer satisfaction, employee, and the customer. This is also because Service organizations in contrast to organizations that are into the production of physical goods have a different approach and contact method with their customers which is more personal; hence the issue of empowerment as regards to how employees are equipped to make independent decisions regarding customer service. However, Grönroos (2001:346) views employee empowerment as a part of the internal marketing process in an organization which when correctly implemented can have a decisive impact on job satisfaction of employees which may in turn improve the part-time marketing impact of employees in customer -contact. 4.5.1. The dimensions of empowerment various service literature (Looy et al: 2003), (Zeithaml et al: 2006), describe employee empowerment as having many dimensions ranging from the individual employee level to the organization level of empowerment. Looy et al (2003:232), points out that the most important reason for empowerment at the individual employee level is the belief that autonomy motivates people, they further argue that people are willing to take initiatives and make decisions rather than being dictated to regarding their jobs. With reference to Looy et al (2003:233), there are five dimensions as a driving force behind individual work motivation: The individual employee level:

Meaning: the extent to which an individual experiences a task as personally meaningful. Competence: the extent to which an individual feels confident about his/her capabilities to perform the task. Self-determination: the degree of influence that an individual has on how to perform the job. Strategic autonomy: the degree of influence an individual has on the content of the job. Impact: the degree of influence an individual has on the direct work environment. The organization level: Looy et al (2003:237), points out that employees cannot be empowered without the necessary organizational supports that are required to stimulate actions such as taking initiatives and acting independently. For employees to be successfully empowered, the organization needs to create the environment where such attitudes and behaviors can be developed. According to Looy et al (2003:238), "empowered organizations have everything in place to facilitate the pushing down of information, knowledge, rewards, and power". Sharing information: empowerment of employees would be unsuccessful if they have novice concept (b) the service delivery process a whole(c) past and current performance of the organization as a whole and (d) setting of goals in the organization by knowing what needs to be done, not what is allowed to be done. Knowledge and competence development: the competence base of employees need to be developed continuously, and should not be limited to only hiring competent employees for a short-term result. Over time organizations should train, and educate the employees to have an extended range of skills.

Rewards: going hand in hand with employee empowerment is responsibility and rewards for taking such responsibilities. While increasing competencies is beneficial in itself, monetary rewards are a justification for it. However, both of the dimensions are related to independence of the employee regarding work and service, and are all aimed at achieving organizational effectiveness and employee satisfaction as a way of achieving the organization's objectives.

2.10.1 Implications of Employee Empowerment in Service Organizations

Many service management literature suggests its benefits as related to both customer and employee satisfaction. As listed by Grönroos (2001:347-348) that the benefits are: Quicker and more direct response to customer needs: customers experience spontaneity and willingness to help by the employees at unusual circumstances compared to the traditional mode of having to wait for a decision by a supervisor. This has an effect on perceived service quality. Quicker and more direct response to dis-satisfied customers in service recovery: like as above employees are able to help them recover in event of service failure without the supervisor's intervention. Employees are more satisfied with their jobs and feel better about themselves: the feeling of job ownership leads to less job absenteeism and reduced employee turnover. Employees will treat customers more enthusiastically: considering the motivating effect of empowerment, they become enthusiastic part-time marketers. □Empowered employees can be a valuable source of new ideas: as a result of direct customer contacts they have insights into customer problems, ideas and wishes which they can share with management to facilitate improvements. Empowered employees are instrumental to creating good word of mouth referrals and increasing customer retention: as a result of serving customers in a quick, skillful and service-oriented manner, surprising them and making them spread good word of mouth and stay with the same service provider.

Although praised in much service literature as being the ultimate management practice for service organizations, as Yeh-Yun Lin (2002:1), ascribes that a major step in transforming an organization is to empower employees to act on the organizational vision. It however does not guarantee success for organizations practicing it. This shows that employee empowerment can have both positive and negative implications to organizations practicing it.

2.10.2 Importance of Employee satisfaction in service organizations

As a nature of the intangibility of service, customers look for tangible things to give them a clue of what the service they are buying is worth. However majority of the clues they are searching for, they evaluate through their interactions with the service supplier (the contact employee). Therefore, a huge part of their judgments will hinge on the attitudes and qualities expressed by those employees. According to Sureshchander et al (2002:10), such of these behaviors help customers to differentiate a gratifying service experience from a dissatisfactory one, and further suggests that firms should train, motivate, and reward their employees for demonstrating such desirable behaviors in service encounters. According to Zeithaml et al (2006:357-358), "Satisfied employees make for satisfied customers" (and customers can in turn reinforce employees' sense of satisfaction in their jobs). Looy et al (2003), Grönroos (2001), have suggested that if employees are not satisfied with their jobs, achieving customer satisfaction will be difficult. Looy et al (2003) and Grönroos (2001) further suggest that the service climate and the human resource experience that employees have within the organization are reflected in howcustomers experience the service. The bottom line of their argument is that customer perceptions of service quality is impacted by customer-oriented behavior of employees and that all the five dimensions of service quality can be influenced directly by the service employees. They coin the logic that employee satisfaction and loyalty precedes customer satisfaction and loyalty and ultimately profits using the service profit chain (Zeithaml et al).

2.10.3 The Role of the Employees in Service Organizations

The role of employees in service organizations is comparable to the role of the service itself, as pointed out by Zeithaml at al (2006:349), that employees are the service and the brand. Their importance to the firm is critical to both service delivery and service production. In services it's all about the people (employees) because they appear more often to be the most tangible clue to the

quality of the service. Zeithaml et al (2006:350,) explains that the people factor in services is a very important element in the evaluation of that service "as all human actors who play a part in service delivery and thus influence the buyers perceptions" from the company's personnel to the other customers in the service environment. Employees like the mirror of an organization are the interface between the organization and the customer, what they portray is what the customers sees and uses in their evaluation of the service experience. Zeithaml et al (2006:350), defines their role in the organization and to the customer. According to them "satisfied employees make satisfied customers" and vice versa, as the customers of the employees and their relevance is give n below:

Employees are the service: in many instances the contact employee is the service (in majorly hospitality industries) hence the offering is the employee. Investing in them is investing in the improvement of the manufactured product. Employees are the organization in the customer's eyes: the employee personifies the firm even if they do not perform the entire service, they represent the firm to the client, their professional, or unprofessional behavior affects the perceptions of the customer about the firm. They are the brand: the image that a customer has about the firm is formed by their interactions with the employees of the firm, the brand image of the firm is not built and maintained by their core product or service, but is a function of the employees working there. They are the marketers: due to the intangibility of services, the marketing, production, and consumption is simultaneous in nature, since the employees are the representative of the firm their attitudes, behaviors and functionality can directly influence customer satisfaction. Whether acknowledged or not, whether actively selling or not service employees are performing marketing functions. The employees relationship to the customer and to the organization has a huge relevance, its balance is necessary to the success of the both parties in the exchange relationship as their influence on the service, service delivery, service production and ultimately customer

satisfaction is very substantial, also is their profitability to the organization necessary to the sustenance of the business. These customer-contact employees according to Zeithaml et al (2006:358) are referred to as boundary spanners. Grönroos (2001:346) also describes the employees as part time marketers of the organization. Considering the nature of services "production-consumption-marketing" becomes a simultaneous activity. This signifies that employees are also responsible for marketing the services of the company whilst delivering the service to the customer. As illustrated in the diagram above the contact employee is the boundary spanner between the organization and the customer. According to Zeithaml et al (2006:355-356) in marketing services it's all about promises. The service triangle is a strategic framework that illustrates the importance of people in the ability of the firm to keep its promises.

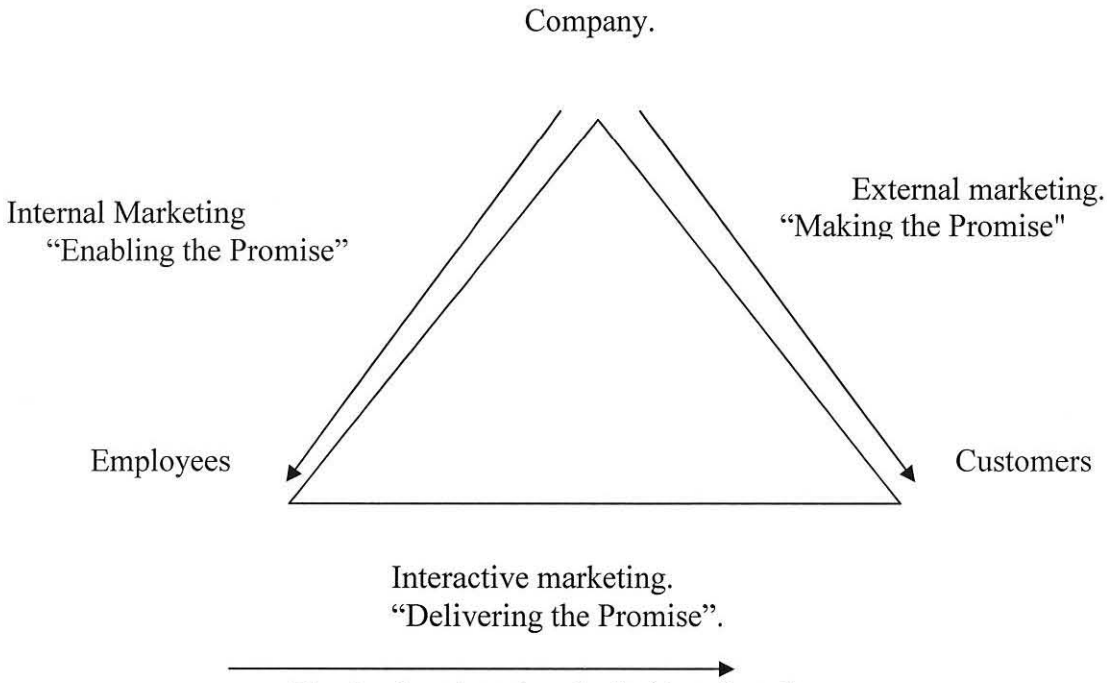

Fig. 2 Service triangle (Zeithaml et al)

The triangle shows three interlinked groups that work together to develop, promote and deliver services. Through a process of external marketing, the company engages in activities to set up customers' expectations and make promises regarding what is to be delivered. Through the process of internal marketing, the company aids the service providers in their ability to deliver on the service promise by recruiting, training, motivating, rewarding, and providing equipment and technology. As Durkin et al (1999:126), argues that the process is based on the idea of the employee as the customer, and the concept is considered to have considerable value, as it directs management's attention to employees and emphasizes the role of employees in the implementation of strategies. The first customers of the organization are its employees also referred to as by many researchers as the internal customers. Employees would pursue the goals of an organization if they feel they are part of it and are also responsible for it. Grönroos (2001:351), puts forward that when employees realize that they are able to involve themselves in improving something that is important to them, they will be more inclined to the business and to the goals of the internal marketing strategy.

Through a process of interactive marketing or real time marketing, the promises are either kept or broken by the service providers. People are critical at this juncture, if promises are not kept customers are dissatisfied and eventually leave or switch to other service providers The role of the employee is very important, as the other two, but more critical because, it is the make or break point in the process.

2.11 Document Analysis

An assessment of documents from various departments, that is, from the Department of Self Learning Materials and Exam Development; Tutorial Department; Public Relations Division, and Administrative Departments disclose that in the last six months, from May, 2009 to October 2009, 270 distance learners were made to sit again to take re-examination and do again

the tutor marked assignments due to loss and dislocation of their results, that is, May 2009 (42 students), June 2009 (48 students), July 2009 (40 students), August 2009 (51 student), September 2009 (52 students), October 2009 (37 students). Financial documents from the Finance Department disclosed that a total of Birr 12019 was collected from these distance learners for taking the exams and repeat the assignments.

In Public Relations division, a total of 456 distance learners wrote their views regarding the quality of service out of which 160 and 90 are grievances related to poor customer service delivered by front line employees and poor records management systems respectively. Other types of grievances in rank order are long bureaucratic chain, tutorial and exam problems; poor service delivery in branch offices; poor locations of the various offices of the institution, delays of exam and assignment results, etc.

These and other related service problems have been the concern of top management body of the University College, College of Distance Studies, and as a result a committee of three professionals was formed to assess the underlying causes for customer complaints and as to why exam and tutor marked assignment results disappear before and after being encoded. The committee tried to investigate and reported its findings addressed to the Vice President of the college of distance studies dated 19/05/00, E.C.

A statistical data from the University College's administrative department regarding employee turnover disclosed that out of 450 total employees in the 2008 - 2009 budget year, 101 of them left the organization which accounts 22.4 % of the total employees out of which 86 employees resigned, seven of them left the organization because their contracts were terminated by the employer, Alpha University College, College of Distance Studies for several reasons, and 8 of these employees disappeared from their work place without notifying the employing organization.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH Nature AND METHODOLOGY

The study uses an opinion survey approach involving both quantitative and qualitative data with the emphasis on the latter, collected from the field through different mechanisms. Alpha University College, College of Distance Studies, has fifteen branch offices and 85 sub-representative offices within Ethiopia and abroad. The participants in the delivery of the educational service are many in number compared with the regular mode of delivery. The main ones are course writers and editors, tutors, administrative staff, and students.

3.1 Nature of the Study

As it has been mentioned in the first part of this research paper, the main aim of the study was to assess the gap between customers' expectations and perceptions, and service quality performance of Alpha University College, College of Distance Studies, from the clients' perspective. This research has tried to examine the proposed basic questions based on the data collected from the representative sample, and therefore categorized as survey research.

3.2 Sources and Instruments of Data Collection

The data for this study were collected from both secondary and primary sources. The secondary data consist of library sources. Most of the literatures were obtained from Alpha University College libraries, Addis Ababa university libraries, and some other open sources of internet. Other materials had been accessed from relevant departments or offices of the University for which the study is conducted.

Primary data are of prime importance of this study. The data were collected mainly through structured questionnaire and opinion surveys. That is, the study employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection approaches so as to clarify the findings and supplement each other.

3.3 Sampling Procedures and Techniques

This study used a non-probability sampling procedure and adopts purposive or judgmental sampling techniques. The reason for choosing this sampling procedure emanates from some pertinent factors such as physical setting of the study areas, the nature of the study, and the purpose of the study. Firstly, the research is essentially based on large and scattered branches where it is difficult to obtain all members of the population to be sampled. Secondly, the purpose of this study is basically to collect and analyze data on perceptions and view of customers with regard to the service they are provided.

There is only one single population to be considered in the study. Out of the two programs namely TVET and Degree programs, the degree program is treated. As of Sene 30, 2001 E.C., the number of distance learners in the program is 31180 which is considered to be the sample population under study. Accordingly, in line with the principle of stratified sampling procedure, the respondents in the degree program are divided into departments and respective study centers. Of 15 branches included, only the first six of them with greater number of students in the sample population, 380, is believed sufficient. All departments are included in the survey. According to documents obtained from office of the Registrar, the study centers, when ranked based on the number of distance learners from 1st to 6th are: Addis Ababa (8840), Awassa (5000), Adama (4611), Dessie (4455), Gondar (4215), Jimma (4059).

difference, may lead difference in perception. The 320 respondents are from all departments of the degree program, which show the participation includes each department to obtain fair information.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of respondents

Factor	Occupation	Number	Percentage
Occupation	Business men	6	1.88%
	Government Employees	228	71.25%
	NGO	47	14.69%
	Others	5	1.56%
	Private	34	10.63%
	Grand Total	**320**	**100.00%**
Age	Above or Equal to 46	29	9.06%
	Between 31 to 35	67	20.94%
	Between 36 to 40	68	21.25%
	Between 41 to 45	52	16.25%
	Less than or Equal to 30	104	32.50%
	Grand Total	**320**	**100.00%**
Gender	Female	65	20.31%
	Male	255	79.69%
	Grand Total	**320**	**100.00%**
Department	Accounting	63	19.69%
	Business Management	32	10.00%
	Developmental Management	13	4.06%
	Economics	18	5.63%
	Education	13	4.06%
	Law	67	20.94%
	Management	91	28.44%
	Public Administration	11	3.44%
	Rural Development	2	0.63%
	Social work	7	2.19%
	Social works	2	0.63%
	Urban Development	1	0.31%
	Grand Total	**320**	**100.00%**

4.2 SERVQUAL GAPS MEAN ON TANGIBILITY DIMENSION

The main purpose of this study was to check and find out whether there is a gap in the service quality between customers expectation and perception of Alpha University College, College of Distance Studies. When evaluating service quality, clients examine fine dimensions: Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurances, and Empathy. As it is indicated in table II, in the tangibility dimension, the expectations and perceptions of clients were compared in order to find the gap using a 6-item questionnaire. The respondents were required to write and figure out the gap by writing their expectation and perceptions regarding the status of the physical facilities: buildings and office equipment, tutors and convenient tutorial class rooms, brochures and guides, books, AV material, neatness and dress of employees. The service quality gaps for the tangibles were calculated in the form of equation. Negative service quality gaps were recorded in all of the six items which indicates that the service quality rendered by AUC CDS was lower than clients expectations. Moreover, this situation indicates that customer perceived that the level of service provided by the institution did not meet their expectation. The results of the six item tangibles are presented in the following table.

Table 2: SERVQUAL Gap Mean of Tangibles

No	Attributes	Gap (P-E)
1	Building and office equipment	-0.51
2	Tutors convent tutorial class	-0.65
3	Brochures statement guides	-0.46
4	Learning materials	-0.52
5	Audio Visual	-1.05
6	Neat and Well-dressed employees	-0.61
	Mean of tangibility dimension	**-0.63**

not react. Even though the respondents touched various aspects of this dimension, the researcher managed to screen responses related to the particular question. 98 respondents (33.2%) expressed their high satisfaction. 54 clients (18.3%) responded that even though AUC CDS have some weaknesses in this aspect, the service is not that poor. Another 54 respondents (18.3%) disagreed about the good service delivery. These clients complained that employees are not well dressed and no identification tag is attached to their clothes, so that it would not be easy to identify the employees from the clients specially when they are out of their respective office and mix with clients. Fifty eight, (19.7%) of the respondents disagreed that offices are not well situated so that related activities can be completed quickly They complained about going through different office in inconvenient office locations, i.e. going up stairs and down stairs, back and forth to see different officials located for apart from each other. Regarding office facilities (computers, printers, photocopy machines, fax. shelves etc) 31 (10.5%) respondents answered that these facilities are found better only in the head office while most branch offices lack these facilities.

The second part of this questionnaire in the dimension refers to the understandability and availability of learning materials. Out of the 320 questionnaires returned, 274 (85.6%) of them responded. Out of these responses, 131 (47.8%) of them answered that the learning materials are in excellent standard in their understandability while 68 (24.8%) respondents complained that there is low clarity, readability and high topographic errors in the materials. As to the availability of learning materials, 75 (27.4%) respondents confirmed that they are not served with the books whenever they need. They complained that they have to come several days in order to get the necessary learning materials each semester.

As it can be observed from the above data, the greater majority of the respondents, 152 (51.5%) have confirmed the physical facilities and other tangible items are to the desired standard. The other group of respondents, 58,

have totally disagreed of the convenience of the physical facilities specially the appropriateness of office locations for follow-up of specific cases. It can be inferred that even though the majority of the respondents have confirmed the fitness of the facilities, it lacks uniformity through all other branch offices.

The other item in the tangibles service quality dimension is the preparation and distribution of learning materials. As it is stated above, many of the respondents have confirmed the learning materials are up to the desired standards. That AUCCDS should keep up its quality standards specially in learning materials. It can be inferred the learning materials preparation (modules) is in good situation.

There are still several respondents complaining about the understandability and clarity of the learning materials and some have complained on the availability of these materials whenever they need them. This shows that some learning materials need to be modified or otherwise changed. It also shows there is a problem in getting ready the print materials to learners on the courses delivered every semester.

Table 4 : Mean Score on Reliability Dimension of AUCCDS

No	Attributes	Gap (P-E)
1	Keep improving and upgrading the Services	-0.99
2	Carry out activities as promised	-0.65
3	Sincere interest to solve learner problem	-0.66
4	Maintenance various recurs of clients in strict confidence	-0.78
5	Strict time schedule for delivery of service	-0.64
6	Maintain error free records	-0.68
	Mean of Reliability dimension	**-0.73**

4.2.2 SERVQUAL Gap Mean Score Analysis for Reliability Dimension

The analyses were made in order to measure the gap between customers' expectation and their perception of all the attributes or items in the reliability dimension as shown below. The overall results of respondents regarding this dimension were presented in Table 4, (-0.73%). The biggest gap score (-0.99) was found in item no 1. "a continuous improvement and upgrading services" followed by the gap score (-0.78) found in item no 4 "Maintain various records of clients in strict confidante" . all other attributes such as item no 6 (-0.68), item no 3 (-0.66) , item no 2 (-0.65) and item no 5 (-0.64) all show service quality shortfalls. The overall reliability item gap score is -0.73, which indicates that the overall reliability attribute scores were below customers' expectation and the gap is statistically significant.

In the open-ended question, the second service quality dimension, reliability, refers to the provision of the company's service as they are promised to be consistently in terms of performance. The questions paused in this regard were whether Alpha University College, College of Distance Studies provides the promised services consistently and accurately if not what the reasons may be. The respondents in this service quality dimension, are 264 (82.5%) of the 320 respondents who returned the questionnaires, 56 (17.5%) of them made no comment regarding this issue. Out of the 264 respondents 96 (36.4%) of them have confirmed that the distance institution provides the services as they are promised. Those who disconfirmed that the promised services were not delivered at the desired state, account for 168 (63.6%). Their reasons for unreliable quality service delivery are stated as follows: Lack of consistency in most activities; lack of proper office facilities; uncooperative manner of employees; loss of records (documents) and student grades; low speed in performing activities; unreliable student grades; low competency of employees, unavailability of distance learning materials needed by distance learners; absence of counseling services; low managerial control over lower level employees; poor system for executing activities; less number employees in

some functional areas to give services; absence of some tutors during tutorial sessions; qualification and dressing manner of some tutors are considered.

As one can observe from customers responses, this service quality dimension is so crucial that failure in delivering proper services in the above aspects may be followed by failure in market competition. The one hundred sixty eight respondents, which represent 63.6 % of the total respondent, is quite a significant number. The data show there is a big gap between clients expectations and perception because 63.6% represents dissatisfied customers.

Table 5: Mean Score on Responsiveness Dimension

No	Attributes	Gap (P-E)
1	Communicate employee when service is delivers	-0.77
2	Available of employees to help clients	-0.85
3	Prompt service delivery	-0.73
4	willingness employ to help clients	-0.76
5	Response to clients requests even when the situation is difficult	-0.83
	Mean of Responsiveness dimension	**-0.79**

*E = Expectation, P= Perception

4.2.3 SERVQUAL Gap Mean Score Analysis for Responsiveness Dimension

Big discrepancies were found in the customers' actual perceptions of service quality provided by AUCCDS regarding the attributes examined in responsiveness dimension as follows. The big gap score (-0.85) was found in this dimension in item no 2. **"**Availability of employees to help clients" followed by the gab score (-0.83) found in item no 5 **"**respond clients requests even when situations seem difficult**".** Other gap scores in this dimension, that is, item no 3 (0.75) "prompt service delivery**",** item no.1 (-058) "employee

communication when service is delivered**",** all show service quality short falls. The lowest gap score (-0.40) "willingness of employees to help clients though negative score, show in consistency with the other gap scores. The overall responsiveness dimension gap score is -0.79. The five attributes or items examined in the dimension indicate the perceptions of clients show negative gap scores, which is a sign of clients' dissatisfaction that requires serious attention.

For the ended responses this service quality dimensions to be measured using the SERVEQAL scale is the *'Responsiveness Dimension'*. In this service dimension, respondents were required to answer question of whether the college of Distances Studies provides the right services promptly and willing to help customers. Out of the 320 questionnaires returned, 265 clients, 82.8% gave answers while 55 of them, 17.2% left it blank. Out of the above respondents, 110 of them 41.5% affirmed that they get the necessary services as scheduled; while 155 of them, 58.8% disagreed that the institution did not provide prompt services and employees do not show willingness to help. Those who disagreed about the respondents of the service dimensions stated their reasons, poor service delivery system, poor attitudes of employee's towards clients, throwing some unnecessary words at client etc.

From the above description, the number of respondents that affirmed the provision of services scheduled is 110 out of 265 respondents. On the other hand, the greater majority which account 155 out of the some figure disagreed the service provision lacks responsiveness along with their reasons. Therefore, these figures indicated the existence of huge gap between clients' expectation and perceptions.

Table 6: Mean Score on Assurance Dimension

No	Attributes	Gap (P-E)
1	Client confidence the strength of employees	-0.87
2	Safety of transaction	-0.59
3	politeness and courtesy	-0.79
4	Competence of employs	-0.93
	Mean of assurance dimension	**-0.80**

* E= Expectations, P=Perceptions

4.2.4 SERVQUAL Gap Mean Score Analysis for Assurance Dimension of AUCCDS

These analyses were made in order to measure the gap between the customers' expectations and their actual perception regarding the attributes or items in the assurance dimension as shown below. The big gap score (-0.93) was found in this dimension, item no.4 **"**competence of employees**"**, followed by the gap score (-0.87) found in the item no 1 "client confidence in the strength of employees". The overall dimension gap score is -0.80. The other attributes in the dimension, -0.79, "politeness and courtesy of employees**"**, and -0.59, "safety of transactions**"** all show perceptions fall below customers expectations. The gap scores all show that there are high discrepancies between customers' expectations and perception in this situation, the assurance dimension, distance learners' perception is much below their expectation. The gap score -0.80, shows that there is low service quality. The gap score -0.80 is statistically significant. Alpha University College of Distance Studies needs to give due consideration to these service attributes.

For the open-ended question for service quality dimension, Assurance/Security refers to the confidence clients have on employees as to their skill of performance, consistency of their courtesy and safe transactions. The respondents were required to approve their satisfaction by writing 'yes' or

disapprove their satisfaction by writing 'No' and the reasons for their disapproval. Out of the 320 questionnaires returned, 278 or 86.9% of the respondents answered. Out of the 278 respondents, 126 or 45.3% confirmed that employees are skilled, courteous and honest in their dealing with them while 182 or 54.7% of them reacted that the skills, courteousness and honesty in not to the desired state. These respondents wrote that some of employee's lack skill training and some of them enter into unfair transactions with clients while delivering services.

As it can be observed from the above data quite a big number, 182 out of 278 wrote their dissatisfaction by confirming that employees don't have the necessary skills and honesty demanded by clients. Even though the number of respondents that stated employees are honest and skilled is lower, the situation indicates that the institution needs to invest more on employees empowerment and supervision.

Table 6: Mean Score on Empathy Dimension

No	Attributes	Gap (P-E)
1	Consider individual needs of clients	-0.83
2	Provide customized Service	-0.69
3	Convince service hours for distance learners	-0.92
4	Guidance and counseling provision	-0.83
5	Sufficient number of workers at busy hours	-1.10
	Mean of Empathy dimension	**-0.87**

* E= Expectations P= Perception

4.2.5 SERVQUAL Gap Mean Analysis for Empathy Dimension

Big discrepancies were found in the customers' actual perceptions of service quality provided by Alpha University College, College of Distance Studies with their expectation regarding the attributes examined in the empathy dimensions

as follows. The big gap score (-1.10) was item no.5 "sufficient number of *workers employees at busy hours"* followed by the gap score (-0.92) found in item no 3 ***"convenient service hours for distance learners".*** The other attributes all show negative score gap for clients' perception which are statistically significant. The overall score gap, -0.87, shows lowest service quality. The service giving organizations in this regard must give due consideration to reduce the gap between perception and expectation to the maximum possible.

Responses from the open-ended questions for the fifth service quality dimension, Empathy refers to the provision of individual attention to customers, existence of convenient operating hours for all customers and the understanding of the specific needs of customers, (learners) in this situation. A question was paused to the distance learners whether the employees of AUCCDS meets this quality dimension in their service provision. Out of the 320 questionnaires returned, 292 (91.25%) of the respondents gave responses to this question 28 (8.75%) of the respondents did not react in any ways. Although the 292 respondents did not give responses to all of the three aspects of this service quality dimension, the responses are classified as follows:

As to time schedule, 168 (57.5% respondent complained that AUCCDS use the usual five working days Monday-Friday put in the labor law for government employees and adds only half of Saturday to give service. These respondents stated that they are adult learners who are employed elsewhere to earn their living and don not have enough time to get the desired services during the regular working hours. Most of them wrote that they use their annual leaves in order to visits these offices. They wrote that the rest of weekdays, the offices of the institution are not functional when they are free. 87 (29.8%) of the respondents confirmed that the specific needs of clients is well studied. 37 (12.7%) of the respondents complained that employees do not identify clients in order to understand and consider their specific needs. All respondents that answered regarding customized service stated its total absence.

As it is stated quite a big number of the respondents do not favor the available service time schedule. The clients favor a service time schedule to be on week rest days so that they can receive the services without being overstretched. As to the consideration of specific needs of clients only 124 (42.5%) respondents reacted while the greater majority 168 (57.5%) did not write any ways. Out of those who reacted, 124, the larger figure, 87 (29.8%) wrote their confirmation that their specific needs were recognized while the rest complained about it. From the above description and interpretation, it can be observed that institution needs to work more on this service quality dimension.

Results of Opinion Survey Questions

A question was paused lastly requiring respondents to give their general comment on their expectations and perceptions regarding the provision of services and the difference between their expectations and perceptions, out of the 320 questionnaires returned, 302 (94.4%) wrote their reaction. Various aspects of the service delivery were mentioned in the general comments, such as absence or poor communication mechanism to give or receive information regarding their needs; delay of results and poor document handling; employees' manner; modules, work sheets, absence of Audiovisual materials to support tutorials etc. All of the comments rotate around the service quality dimensions stated earlier. In order to express these comments in specific figures they are put as follows:

Those who commented on poor communication system account for 23 (7.6%).Those who complained regarding delay of exam results and poor document handling account for 66 (21.9%). The other respondents who expressed their grievances of the bad manner of treating clients by employees account for 69 (22.8%). Respondents who showed high satisfaction in the understandability and readability of the learning materials prepared by the institutions are 65 (21.5%) . Those who complained about the poor quality and untimeliness of worksheets and the unreadability of certain learning materials

(books) that need to be modified or changed account for 46 (15.2%). The last group who stated its complaints regarding the absence of Audio-visual materials that are used to support modules and tutorials account for 33 (10.9%).

The above comments on the perceptions of distance learners regarding communications, clients' demands to be communicated through different communication media to give or receive information are observed. Those who showed grievances on the poor treatment of employees on clients are greater in number. It can be inferred that the institution is investing low on employees' empowerment in terms of skill training, motivation, and ethical behavior. The other group of respondents who commented on the unnecessary delays of examination results and mishandling of clients (distance learners) records is the second highest number. One can observe that the system designed for testing and evaluating takes unnecessary longer time that shouldn't have been the case and the poor handling of clients documents is exposed to losses and mis-locations which may result in unreliable grade reports and unnecessary repayments for courses already taken.

Those who showed high satisfaction in the preparation of distance materials as to their readability and understandability are also big in number. This implies that the institution in a favorable situation regarding its distance learning material. The group that complained about the poor quality of worksheet stated that distance learners work independently and submit to the respective offices for grading and some books for some distance courses that have low understandability and readability has expressed its needs for their modification or change. It can be inferred that these clients are not satisfied. Low satisfaction of clients in any aspect of clients' service is potentially harmful to the distance institutions with these distance materials. Clients' dissatisfaction is usually followed by client losses. The last group members that showed dissatisfaction on the delivery of tutorial services that are not supported by Audio-visual materials, have expressed their concern that as distance learning

is an independent learning mode, the distance learning materials (modules) needs additional materials that help to clarify the print materials. One can observe from the above description the provision of Audio-visual materials is indispensable to distance learners.

4.2.6 Over All Service Quality Gap mean Scores for All Dimension

The gap scores for the expected and perceived level of service quality for each service quality dimension, a number of service attributes is considered important to the respondents by grouping all service attributes into five service quality dimension and for each of the service quality dimension the overage difference (gap) between E and P (SQ= P-E) measures the service quality for Alpha University College of Distance College of Distance Studies.

Table 7: The Overall Assessment of Services Quality Gap

Service Quality Dimensions	Overall service quality gap
1. Tangibility	-0.63
2. Reliability	-0.75
3. Responsiveness	-0.79
4. Assurance	-0.80
5. Empathy	-0.87
Average	-0.77

* E= Expectation, P = Perception

4.2.7 Analysis of the Relative Importance of Five Service Quality Dimensions

One of the main purposes of this thesis is to identify and analyze the relative importance of the five service quality dimensions as perceived by clients (distance learners) of Alpha University College, College of Distance Studies so that service quality performances may be improved. The purpose of the analysis was to determine the relative contributions of each dimension in influencing the overall service quality perception customers and identify the critical dimensions that customers focused for over all service quality so that the recommendations may help the management of Alpha University College, College of Distance Studies to prioritize their efforts and resources to implement the changes needed to improve dimensions according to the priorities depicted is the study.

Table 8: The relative importance of each of the five dimensions

No	Service Quality Dimensions	Weighted Score	Rank
1.	Tangibility	2064	4th
2.	Reliability	2291	3rd
3.	Responsiveness	2458	1st
4.	Assurance	2407	2nd
5.	Empathy	1953	5th

The above table is a summary of the ranking for the five dimensions for Alpha University as perceived by its clients. Concerning the question of quality improvement, the most important dimension to which highest weighted score

(2, 458) was assigned to Responsiveness dimension which has the third highest negative SERVQUAL score in this study as perceived by customers. The result suggests that the responsiveness dimension, that is, the willingness to help customers and provide prompt service is the most important dimension customers expect of the University College understudy. Therefore, the management of Alpha University should know the value this dimension as the main contributor of client (learner) satisfaction of the total service off thing for proper resource allocation. The responsiveness dimension is followed by Assurance dimension for which the second highest weighted score (2407) was assigned by customers.

The assurance dimension rated as second implies that customers preference in the knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence is high for this dimension includes competence to perform the service, politeness and respect for the customers, and effective communication with the customers. Reliability is the third important dimension, followed by tangibility as the fourth important dimension as perceived by all clients (distance learners) of AUCCDS. In this paper, it appears that Empathy is the least important service quality dimensions from clients perspectives.

CHAPTER FIVE
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATION

This part of the study deals with the summary of findings, conclusion dram these from, and the possible recommendation forwarded.

5.1 Summary

5.1.1 Service Quality Gap Score for all Dimensions

The purpose the summary is to indicate the highlights of the study which in turn facilitates the conclusion and recommendations. In the consideration of service quality dimension, empathy, shows the highest service quality gap score, (-0.87, followed by the dimension of assurance, (-.0.80), and the responsiveness dimension is the third highest service quality gap,(-0.79). This indicates that the clients (distance learners). Of AUCCDS are highly dissatisfied with the service delivery with respect to the above service dimension.

When items in each dimension are observed, the most serious defect, the availability of sufficient number of workers at busy hours of each day, which showed a gap score of (-1.10), the absence of AV materials as support to print modules, (-1.05), and keep improving and upgrading the service quality, (-0.99) are the service attributes which show the respective negative score gaps in the provision of quality services.

In the open ended questions, the highest negative service quality gaps are observed in delivering services as promised. The result shows that 63.6% of the respondents answered that the promised services are not fulfilled, followed by 58.8% responded that there is no prompt service delivery in the institution and 54.7% also disagreed regarding their skill and competence of employees.

5.1.2 The Relative Importance of the Five SERVQUAL Dimensions

Concerning the question of service quality improvement, the most important dimension to which highest weighted score,(2458). Was attributed to responsiveness dimension. The result suggests that in this dimension, the willingness to help clients and provide prompt service is the most important dimension customers expect from AUCCDS. The second highest important dimension is the assurance dimension with a weighted score of 2407, which implies customers preference in the knowledge, courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence, their competence to perform service, politeness and respect for the clients, effective communication with customers, and the third highest dimension, with a weighted score of 2291, that is attributable to poor manner of employees, poor document handling, absence of AV materials, low level of understandability and readability of modules.

Those respondents who showed high satisfaction is attributable to the preparation of distance learning materials. The clients expressed their satisfaction as to the readability and understandability of these materials.

The considerations of service quality dimension for each of the five dimensions are summarized as follows. In the tangibility dimension, the highest discrepancy service gap is 1.05. This is the highest service gap. The shortage or the unavailability of audio-visual materials that supports the print medium of learning. The lowest negatives score -0.46 is attributed to learning materials (modules) which shows less evil. The overall gap mean -0.63 also indicates high customer dissatisfaction. In the open-ended question, questions raised about the quality and availability of learning materials. 131/274 respondents (47.8%) expressed their satisfaction as to the readability and availability of the modules while others reacted.

In the Reliability Dimension, the biggest score gap (-0.99) in item no one regarding the level of continuous improvement and upgrading service. The

overall result is negative gap score of -0.73 that showed a figure below customers' expectation. In the opened question, 63.6% (168) of the respondents disconfirmed the promised services are not delivered at the desired level, which the figure represent dissatisfied customers.

In the third service quality dimension Responsiveness, almost all attributes are with high negative score gap, -0.85 being the highest found in item no.2 that refers to the availability of employees at workstation to help clients. At the same time, the overall responsiveness dimension gap score is -0.79, which is a sign of clients' dissatisfaction that requires serious attention. In the open-ended questions that required responses regarding the delivery of prompt service to clients, 58.8% (155) of them disagreed by staffing that the institution did not provide prompt services.

The Assurance Dimension, showed a big gap score, -0.93 found in item no.4 that referred to the level of competence of employees. Other attributes within dimension showed big scores to denote lower service quality delivery with a high an overall assurance dimensions gap score to -0.80 in which the service institution must give due consideration. In the open ended questions, the question raised about clients confidence on employees skill of performance, consistency, courtesy and safe transaction, 126/278, 45.3% of them confirmed that employees are skilled courteous and honest while 182/278, 54.7% disconfirmed the situation.

The last service quality dimension, Empathy, shows the highest score gab (-1.10) in one of the attributes, item no 5, the availability of sufficient number of employees at busy hours. Among all the dimension, Empathy is the one dimension that has the biggest overall gap score, -0.87. In the open-ended questions, issues like existence of convenient operating hours for clients and understanding the specific needs of clients by employees were raised. 168/292, 57.5% complained that the regular working days are not convenient. As recognition of the specific needs of clients by those employees of AUCCDS, the

greater majority did not react for this question; those who reacted, 124/292, 42.5% of them confirmed that their needs were recognized.

For the general comments required from clients to state their feelings about the difference between their expectations, and perceptions, 94.4%, 302/320 reacted. The comments were scattered among several issues as absence of audiovisual materials, poor delivery of tutorial services, poor communication system, delay of examination results, loss of grades and documents, poor quality of worksheets and learning materials etc. At the same time big number of respondent acknowledged the high quality standard of the learning materials, modules.

As to the overall service, quality mean, the average gap between E and P is -0.77. Which is statistically the rank order helps the management significant.

Regarding the relative importance of the five serve Quality Dimension to clients, so that service quality performance may be improved and the relative contribution of each dimension in influencing the overall service quality perception of customers is determined so that recommendation may help the management of AUCCDS to set priorities for resource allocation. Hence, the most important dimension as ranked by clients, learners is Responsiveness with a weighted score of 2458, followed by Assurance with a weighted score of 2407. The third rank goes to Reliability, the fourth and the fifth rank to tangibility and Empathy with weighted scores of 2084 and 1953 respectively.

5.2 Conclusion

Individual learners and group learners have a need for high quality distance learning to assist them in fulfilling their lifelong learning goals. Organizations need for high quality distance training is increasing at a higher speed because it is flexible, convenient and cost effective. Distance learning is expected to play an important role in the Human Resource Development.

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Addis Ababa University

School of Graduate studies

Questionnaire to be filled by Distance Learners of Alpha University College, College of Distance Studies.

Dear participants:

You are being asked to participate in a survey that intends to measure service quality performance of Alpha University College, College of Distance Studies, a private firm, from learners/ customers' perspectives and recommend solutions to help the respective institution of distance learning. The research result is believed to solve the existing Service quality gaps by identifying the area that needs improvement.

Therefore, I respectfully request your genuine cooperation in answering the questions clearly and frankly as possible. The researcher would like to assure you that the information you provided would be used for research purpose only and all responses will be treated in strict confidentiality.

Thank you in advance for your cooperation!

Section I :- Classification/ Identification Questions

Note: You do not need to write your name!

Answer by placing a thick mark (✓) in one of the blank spaces corresponding to each item.

1. Sex. Male = □ Female = □

2. Level of education

   Certificate = □ Diploma = □

   Bachelor Degree = □ Masters Degree & above = □

3. Occupation:-

   Business men (merchant and Investor) = □ Government employee = □

   NGO, Self employed and Private organization employee = □

4. Field of Study

□Managements	□ Business Management	□PADM
□Accounting	□Rural Dev't Mgt	□ Teaching
□Economics	□Urban Dev't Mgt	
□Development Mgt	□ Social Works	

Section II Survey questions

Survey question A :

Questions used to measure the relative importance of the five service quality dimensions in improving** Alpha University College, College of Distance Studies **service quality from learners/customers perspective.

4. Listed below (**"a"** to **"e"**) are five service quality dimensions pertaining to Alpha University College, College of Distance Studies and the services it offers offer. Please rank all the five service quality dimensions by giving the 1st rank for the most important service quality dimension to you and the last (5th) rank for the service quality dimension that is least important for you. *Please give a rank (1st, 2nd 3rd, 4th, and 5th) in the rank column.*

No.	Service Quality Dimension	Definitions of the Service quality Dimensions	Rank
a	Tangible	The appearance of the University College physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials.	
b	Reliability	The University college's ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately.	
c	Responsiveness	The institution's Employees willingness to help customers and provide prompt service.	
d	Assurance	The knowledge and courtesy of the institution's employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence.	
e	Empathy	The caring, individual attention the University College provides its customers.	

Survey question B.

Select an appropriate answer from the five (1-5) given alternatives and put a thick mark (✓) in spaces corresponding to each item. Each question number has two questions. Under (a) your are asked to indicate your opinions that show the extent to which you think the features Alpha University College, College of Distance Studies should posses (Your expectation) and under (b) you are asked to respond your feelings or experiences of Alpha University College, College of Distance Studies' performance (your Perception).

SERVQUAL Dimensions		SERVQUAL Items	Degree of Agreement				
			Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Tangibles	1	A. Infrastructures and class rooms of tutorial center facilities of offices of a strong distance are quite suitable for learning and tutoring. B. Alpha University College College of Distance Study (AUC CDS) have suitable infrastructure, class rooms of tutorial session and good offices.					
	2	A. In a competent University College of Distance Studies, tutors are well prepared, qualified, and neat. B. Tutors of AUC CDS are neatly dressed and qualified.					
	3	A. In a strong distance institution distance learners do not face difficulties in locating the offices and classrooms because of proper indicators. B. AUC CDS have indicators to guide clients to locate offices and tutorial classrooms.					
	4	A. Course modules as self-learning materials of a competent university of distance learning are well prepared to fit the distance learner's level. B. The modules of AUC CDS are well prepared to fit the understanding level of the distance learner.					
	5	A. In strong university college of distance learning, tutorial sessions are supported by audiovisual materials. B. AUC CDS conduct tutorial session with the help of Audio Visual Materials.					
	6	A. Employees and support staffs members are neat and attractive in a complete at Intuitions. B. The employees of AUC CDS are well dressed, neat and attractive.					

SERVQUAL Dimensions		SERVQUAL Items	Degree of Agreement				
			Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Reliability	7	A. Strong Universities continuously strives to update the quality of their performances following learns needs. B. AUC CDS Makes continuous efforts to improve the quality its performances to increase learner's needs.					
	8	A. Educational institutions specify the types of services to be delivered and promise to execute them to distance learners. B. AUC CDS delivers its various services exactly as promised.					
	9	A. When clients of strong distances institution, encounter problems, the institution try to solve these problems and make clients feel secure.					
		B. AUC CDS tries to solve clients problem and make them feel secure.					
	10	A. Competent educational institutions maintains the various records of their learners in strict confidence.					
		B. AUC CDS keeps the various records of the distance learners in a well preserved and confidential manner.					
	11	A. Strong university colleges deliver their serves at times they are promised to be. B. AUC CDS delivers its services at the each time they are promised to be delivered.					
	12	A. Records of the competent university colleges that refer to their clients are kept error free. B. AUC CDS keep its records of its clients free from any kind of error.					

SERVQUAL Dimensions		SERVQUAL Items	Degree of Agreement				
			Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Responsiveness	13	A. Clients strong distance institution expect that the employees of their institutions to inform than when exactly serviced are to be delivered. B. The employees of AUC CDS inform clients exactly when services are to be delivered.					
	14	A. Employees of strong university colleges are expected to be available needed. B. The Employees of AUC CDS are always available when ever they needed.					
	15	A. Employees of strong University College provide prompt services. B. Employees of AUC CDS provide prompt services.					
	16	A. Employees of strong university colleges of distance are willing to help clients/learners.					
		B. Employees of AUC CDS are willing to help distance learners.					
	17	A. Employees of strong institutions of distance studies are ready to respond to clients requests even when they seem to be crowded. B. Employees of AUC CDS respond to clients requests even when they are busy.					

6. How do you evaluate the employees of Alpha University College, College of Distance Studies, as to their concern and care they take in giving individual attention?

_____
_____
_____
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_____

General

Please write your opinion and give suggestions if any, about your expectations of the kind of services you would receive and compare your actual experience of the level of service quality of Alpha University College, college of Distance you have encountered.

Note: In answering the above question, try to view the entire service variables,

_____
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_____

_Thank you

Table 3 : Mean Score on Reliability Dimension of AUCCDS

No	Attributes	Gap (P-E)
1	Keep improving and upgrading the Services	-0.99
2	Carry out activities as promised	-0.65
3	Sincere interest to solve learner problem	-0.66
4	Maintainace various recurs of clients in strict confidence	-0.78
5	Strict time schedule for delivery of service	-0.64
6	Maintain error free records	-0.68
	Mean of Reliability dimension	**-0.73**

Table 4: Mean Score on Responsiveness Dimension

No	Attributes	Gap (P-E)
1	Communicate employee when service is delivers	-0.77
2	Available of employees to help clients	-0.85
3	Prompt service delivery	-0.73
4	willingness employ to help clients	-0.76
5	Response to clients requests even when the situation is difficult	-0.83
	Mean of Responsiveness dimension	**-0.79**

*E = Expectation, P= Perception

Table 5: Mean Score on Assurance Dimension

No	Attributes	Gap (P-E)
1	Client confidence the strength of employees	-0.87
2	Safety of transaction	-0.59
3	politeness and courtesy	-0.79
4	Competence of employs	-0.93
	Mean of assurance dimension	**-0.80**

* E= Expectations, P=Perceptions

Table 6: Mean Score on Empathy Dimension

No	Attributes	Gap (P-E)
1	Consider individual needs of clients	-0.83
2	Provide customized Service	-0.69
3	Convince service hours for distance learners	-0.92
4	Guidance and counseling provision	-0.83
5	Sufficient number of workers at busy hours	-1.10
	Mean of Empathy dimension	**-0.87**

* E= Expectations P= Perception

Table 7: The Overall Assessment of Services Quality Gap

Service Quality Dimensions	Overall service quality gap
1. Tangibility	-0.63
2. Reliability	-0.75
3. Responsiveness	-0.79
4. Assurance	-0.80
5. Empathy	-0.87
Average	-0.77

* E= Expectation, P = Perception

Table 8: The relative importance of each of the five dimensions

No	Service Quality Dimensions	Weighted Score	Rank
1.	Tangibility	2064	4th
2.	Reliability	2291	3rd
3.	Responsiveness	2458	1st
4.	Assurance	2407	2nd
5.	Empathy	1953	5th