

Assessing Service Expectation and Perception of Public Library Users: Towards Development of User Needs and User Satisfaction Measurement Instruments for the National Library Service of Malawi

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Abstract

The research sought to develop user needs assessment and user satisfaction measurement instruments for the National Library Service of Malawi. Using focus group sessions and a questionnaire survey the research determined from a sample of users of the National Library Service their expectation and perception of the service/facility provisions of the National Library Service. Some of the findings from the research on services/facilities that act as indicators of library effectiveness to the sampled users are not evident in the literature. On basis of the findings, user needs assessment and user satisfaction measurement instruments have been developed for the National Library Service. The paper gives suggestions on the effective use of the developed instruments. The paper points out that the user needs assessment and user satisfaction measurement instruments can positively act as management tools that can assist the National Library Service in decision making, long term planning, budgeting, employee training and development in addition to being a mechanism for continually enhancing and improving the relationship between the National Library Service and its users.

Keywords: service expectation; service satisfaction; management tools; public libraries; user surveys

1. Introduction

In the introduction to their book on performance measures for academic libraries McClure *et.al.* (1990) write: “accountability has been one of our society’s major concerns... librarians are increasingly interested in knowing how well their libraries satisfy users and in gathering data they can use in planning, internal decision making and communicating with... administrators”.

All libraries (public, academic, specialist) need to develop plans regarding their goals, service priorities, resource allocation etc. For these plans to be effectively developed and implemented regular gathering and analysis of performance data is necessary (Steward, 1997). And so is user feedback on how well services meet their needs (Lopata and McClure, 1995) and user “comment on desirable new services and enhancements to existing services” (LaTrobe University, 2001). In short, user needs assessment and user satisfaction measurement outputs assist library management to: set strategic objectives that help meet user’s needs; set appropriate priority areas; preempt problems; justify present funding or increased funding from administrators, policy makers, donors etc.; allocate resources in such a way as to ensure that the library concentrates, in the words of McClure (cited in Steward, 1997), on “what makes a difference” to users.

All in all, user needs assessment and user satisfaction measurement instruments act as “practical management tool(s)” (Alston, 1995) that potentially aid librarians in their day-to-day activities, long-term planning, and provide objective data to supplement “intuition and anecdotal information” in decision making (Lopata and McClure, 1995).

2. The Case of the National Library Service of Malawi

The National Library Service (NLS) is a statutory corporation established under an act of the Parliament of the Republic of Malawi. It started operating in 1968. Its mission is “to ensure that people in Malawi, in both rural and urban areas, have access to reading/information materials which they may require in connection with their studies, their professional or other work, for the maintenance of literacy, for recreation, for general enlightenment and in

support of the democratization process in Malawi” (National Library Service Board, 2002).

The NLS reaches the public by making use of three channels. Firstly, through use of what are described as “full-time service points”- fully functional and conventional libraries- dispersed among cities, towns, and trade centers in the country. Secondly, through use of Rural Community Information Centers. Lastly, through use of Library Centers situated in, and operated by, schools and other learning institutions spread throughout the country. For funding, the NLS is mainly dependent on the Malawi government. Additional funds are provided by local authorities and international donor organisations.

The National Library Service does not have formal and regular mechanisms for assessing user’s needs and measuring levels of user’s satisfaction with its service provision even though the above rationales equally apply to it. In particular, as government funding for the NLS has declined over the years it is becoming increasingly necessary for the Service to determine (and focus resources on) the ‘vital few’ service attributes that are most important to most users. In addition, increased reliance on donor organisations (which is as a result of reduced government subvention) has brought with it, on the whole, the prerequisite of being able to objectively determine and prove to donors the key areas to focus assistance on and the levels of past/current funded program implementation success. Availability of user needs and user satisfaction measurement outputs can facilitate provision of useful information in the above areas.

It is thus evident that localized, comprehensive, and relatively pliable (over time) user needs assessment and user satisfaction measurement instruments can effectively act as ‘management tools’ for the NLS. The Service’s budgeting, priority setting, staff training programs etc. can all be assisted by these ‘management tools’.

3. Research Aims

Against this background, it is the aim of this research to develop:

- ◆ User needs assessment instrument for the National Library Service of Malawi.
- ◆ User satisfaction measurement instrument for the National Library Service of Malawi.

Data for development of these instruments will be obtained by answering the following research questions:

- ◆ What are user’s attachment of importance to the different services/facilities of the National Library Service;
- ◆ What service/facility provision(s) of the National Library Service are users satisfied with;
- ◆ What service/facility provision(s) of the National Library Service are users dissatisfied with;
- ◆ What services/facilities do users most want the National Library Service to provide.

4. A Look at the Literature

4.1 Why Assess Customer Needs? Why Measure Customer Satisfaction?

In their groundbreaking study on service quality, Berry *et.al.* (1992) wrote: “customers are the sole judge of service quality. Customers assess services by comparing the service they receive (perceptions) with the service they desire (expectations)”. Customer needs and, by association, expectations are the basis for determining an organisation’s ability to attract, satisfy, and retain customers. Organisations thus have to assess, analyse, and continually update their understanding of customer needs and expectations. This is particularly important as studies have shown “time after time... large differences between the ways that customers define service and rank the importance of different service activities and the way that suppliers do” (Davidow and Uttal, 1989).

4.2 Customer Needs Assessment and Satisfaction Measurement Frameworks in the Service Sector

Berry *et.al.* (1992) developed a framework (called the ‘Five Dimensions of Service Quality’) that can be used to determine customer needs and expectations, and from which individualised and more comprehensive customer needs and satisfaction measurement instruments can be developed. The framework consists of five measurable areas (Berry *et.al.* 1992);

“Tangibles: the appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication material.

Reliability: the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately.

Responsiveness: the willingness to help customers, to provide prompt service.

Assurance: the knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence.

Empathy: the provision of caring, individualised attention to customers”.

From their framework Berry *et.al.* (1992) developed the Servqual (short for Service Quality) Instrument, a broad and generalized service oriented customer expectation and satisfaction measurement instrument.

Another framework for determining customer needs and satisfaction was developed by Brignall *et.al.* (1993) and consists of twelve ‘quality factors’ which include Access (“convenience of unit location”), Aesthetics/Appearance (“appearance of facilities”), Communication (“clarity of sign-posting”). Not to be outdone, Johnston *et.al.* (cited in Van Ossel, 1998) developed a framework with eighteen ‘determinants of service quality’. They add six factors on top of the twelve developed by Brignall *et.al.* (1993).

4.3 Libraries: Past Research and Studies on User Needs and Satisfaction

In their often cited book on performance measures for academic libraries, McClure *et.al.* (1990) develop and divide their user satisfaction measures –these measures offer insights into user’s needs and expectations and can thus also be used as a base for further inquiry into user’s needs and expectations- into four groups. Measures in the first group delve into user’s ‘general satisfaction’ with library services. The second group of measures concentrates on ‘materials availability and use’. The third group deals with library facilities, whilst the last group consists of measures on library ‘information services’.

Indicators and measures of library performance and library user’s needs contained in the numerous other work surveyed can also be categorised into the above four groups. McClure *et.al.*(1990) categories of user satisfaction measures will thus be used as a guiding framework for delving into the wider literature on library user’s needs and satisfaction.

Materials Availability and Use

McClure *et.al.* (1990) state that measures and indicators falling into this group deal with the adequacy and appropriateness/usefulness of library materials, and the ease of access to these materials. Among the user satisfaction measures for this group are: proportion of user searches for library materials that are successful at the time of the users visit, time users must wait for requested material, quality of books and materials offered, the number of books that can be borrowed by a user and for how long, extent of ‘electronic access’, access to materials in other libraries (see Livingston, 1999; McClure *et.al.*, 1990; Pullen, 2001).

Library Facilities

McClure *et.al.* (1990) cite user seating and workstations/computers as examples of ‘library facilities’ and one measure to gauge user’s satisfaction with library facilities as “proportion of time, on average, that a facility is busy”. Other authors include the following user need and/or satisfaction indicators under Library Facilities: provision of such facilities as toilets, phones and a café; access to photocopying and printing facilities at a reasonable price; adequacy of space and seating (see LaTrobe University, 2001; Matthews, 2002; University of Bath, 2001).

Library Information Services

Indicators/measures falling into this group relate the extent to which users are aware of the various services and facilities of their library. Among the areas to develop measures of user perspectives on this indicator are; level of user awareness of services provided by libraries, Library signing and guiding, provision of library web pages with clear and useful information (see Murdoch University, 2004; Town, 1995; Winkworth, 1995).

General Satisfaction

Measures/indicators under general satisfaction look at (1) user accessibility to a library (2) the library environment and its ease of use (3) user’s expectations and perceptions on varied aspects concerning library staff/employees. Among the measures for this indicator are: the number of opening hours a library offers; “where the library is –location, transport routes to it, parking facilities, proximity to home, work or place of study”; how resources within

the library are organised –catalogues, classification systems, signposting etc; “the library environment –how comfortable people find it, the lighting and heating”; the degree to which “services are provided effectively and courteously” to users; the degree to which the number and quality of staff matches with user’s needs; comprehensive noise control (particularly on mobile phones); provision made for disabled users (see Crawford, 1995; Matthews, 2002; Pullen, 2001; University of Bath, 2001; Winkworth, 1993).

A critique of some of the literature is that they endorse library user needs and user satisfaction indicators that are developed not by a prior process of seeking users views but are rather simply based on the perception and experience of the authors. Useful as these indicators maybe, they may not adequately cover the areas that are really key to users. Secondly, the literature contains some user need and satisfaction indicators that are vague and thus open to differing (and even contrary) interpretation. For example, what exactly constitutes a ‘welcoming environment’ for a library?

With respect to the specific area this research is focusing on, it will be noted that most of the studies available in the literature were based on research done in academic libraries. Academic libraries and public libraries have tangible differences: the user base in public libraries is potentially bigger and more diverse; funding of academic libraries is, generally, better than that of public ones etc. In addition, not only is most of the literature based on studies carried out in academic libraries but all the studies were done in developed countries (mainly Australia, United Kingdom, and the United States of America). Clow and Kurtz (1998) note that “the most important factor affecting consumer expectations of a service is a consumer’s past experience”. Needless to say, Malawian library user’s ‘past experience’ is different from that of library users on whom most of the literature is based. This demands a localized library user needs and satisfaction survey for libraries in Malawi and other developing countries.

Finally, studies and research in the literature do not systematically develop user needs assessment and/or user satisfaction measurement instruments. The closest that can be found to a user needs assessment or user satisfaction measurement ‘instrument’ – the Customer Value Model from Deakin University (Livingston, 1999) and the Client Service Charter from Murdoch University (Murdoch University, 2004)- are not as structured or rigorous as ordinary service oriented user need assessment and user satisfaction measurement instruments. As such this research will attempt to develop practical library user needs assessment and user satisfaction measurement instruments based on research at the National Library Service of Malawi.

5. Research Methodology

The study deployed expert interviews in order to obtain insights and ideas on the research topic from experts in the field. Expert views and opinions were also deployed to help generate themes for the focus group sessions and questionnaire that were part of the study. Management and frontline staff of the National Library Service (NLS) and others knowledgeable and experienced in the library field were interviewed. Focus group sessions were held to seek views and identify services of greatest interest and importance to National Library Service users. The results of the focus group sessions fed into development and formulation of the questionnaire. The developed Questionnaire was used to gather relevant broad data from a cross-section of clients of the National Library Service. Findings, insights, conclusions, and outputs of the focus group sessions and questionnaire survey positively fed into development of the User Need and User Satisfaction measuring instruments for the National Library Service.

The study was conducted at the NLS branches (8 branches in total) based in the capital city of Lilongwe. The Lilongwe branches were selected as a basis of the study because they include the largest branch (NLS Headquarters branch), they generally have a complete offering of the available services of the National Library Service, and they have a large and diverse client base. Being public libraries, the National Library Service branches offer, essentially, their services and facilities to everybody- residents of the city of Lilongwe; national and international visitors/tourists to Lilongwe; people of varied age groups, occupation, education etc. All these categories of people can attain membership of, or simply frequent, the NLS library. In order to have a manageable and meaningful target population, therefore, the research sample frame was limited to everybody visiting the NLS Lilongwe branches during the researches data collection period.

6. Results and Discussion

6.1 Output of the Focus Group Sessions and Questionnaire

Analysis of outputs of the focus group sessions and questionnaire survey has the following as the important factors and issues on each of the four research questions:

User's Attachment of Importance to Current Services/Facilities of the National Library Service

The following are the important current services/facilities of the National Library Service according to the sampled users;

- ◆ Quiet environment; Clean and orderly environment; Seating facility provision; Internal library signage; Air-conditioning and heating facility provision; Availability of relevant academic, reference, and 'leisure' books; Availability of newspapers and magazines; Publicity/promotion of library services and material; Library use training/education provision; Availability of professional staff with a positive attitude towards users.

Services/Facilities of the National Library Service Users Are Satisfied With

Though unanimous agreement was rare, feedback from sampled users has the following as service/facility provisions of the National Library Service that they are satisfied with;

- ◆ Library closing time; Library cleanliness; Comfortability of library chairs; Collection of books on Malawi or by Malawians; Positive staff attitude; Quiet environment.

Services/Facilities of the National Library Service Users Are Dissatisfied With

Current service/facility provisions of the National Library Service sampled users are dissatisfied with are;

- ◆ Security of library and user's material; Access to toilet facilities; Library opening time; Space inadequacy in the library; Noisy atmosphere in the library; Identification of, and access to, library staff/employees; Mechanism for locating and accessing library material; Materials booking and renewal process; Inadequacy and lack of relevance of books; Inadequacy and lack of relevance of newspapers/magazines.

Services/Facilities Participants Want

Findings from the research come up with the following as the services/facilities sampled users most want the National Library Service branches to provide. Note: these services/facilities include some that are currently offered and some that are not.

- ◆ Free access to toilet facilities; Enhanced security of library and user's material; Noise free environment; Earlier opening time; Adequate and quality signage in the library; Photocopying service; Computers with internet facility; Adequate seating facilities; Adequate space; Adequate staff that can, in addition, be easily identified and accessed; Staff with a positive attitude towards users; Publicity of library services/facilities including new material; Publicity of library rules, regulations, and procedures to users; Mechanism(s) for collecting, and adopting/implementing, user's suggestions and opinions; A broadening in the variety of newspapers and magazines; An increase in the number of copies of the principal newspapers; More –and newer- books; More effective materials booking and renewal process.

Over 50 percent of the users of the National Library Service are students (at primary, secondary or tertiary level) and this is reflected in survey participant's high level of importance attributed to factors such as a quiet environment in the library, availability of books on or about Malawi (principally Malawi school text or academic books). Another sizable portion of users of the National Library Service are the unemployed and they display a high level of importance to adequate provision of, and ease of access to, newspapers (to read for leisure and to look for job advertisements). The high level of importance to availability of computers with Internet facility, provision of photocopying facilities underlies the fact that the impact and pull of basic modern technology has also influenced users of the National Library Service. In line with the observation from the literature users of the NLS also have high demand for staff/employee adequacy and staff professionalism.

A notable difference between the literature and findings of the research are on issues of remote electronic access to library material and ease of use of library catalogue. These are particularly important to users in the literature whilst they are either not picked on at all (remote electronic access) or are of lesser importance (ease of use of library catalogue) to users of the NLS. This key difference is due to the fact that most of the studies in the literature are based on academic libraries (where ease of use of library catalogue is vital) and also because the studies in the literature were mostly conducted in developed countries where availability, knowledge (by library users) of, and

demand for advanced electronic medium is higher than in a developing country like Malawi. In addition, whereas respondents to the questionnaire want the library to open earlier but do not display a strong need for the library to extend its closing time (nor to open on Sundays or public holidays), the literature increasingly cites as a key need of users the provision of 24 hours library access. Off-course, the need for 24 hours library opening reflects the fact that most studies in the literature are based on academic libraries. Concerns by NLS users with factors like access to free toilet facilities and security of library and user's material (which are not raised in the literature) reflect the fact that the NLS is a public library in a developing country whilst most of the literature is based on studies in developed countries.

6.2 *The Instruments* (see Attachments 1 and 2)

Analysis of the feedback from the sampled users directly fed into development of the structure and contents of the User Needs and User Satisfaction measuring instruments. The developed instruments are built on some aspects of the Servqual Instrument and the 'Five Dimensions of Service Quality' framework. The statements in both instruments (it will be noted- and as is the case with the Servqual Instrument- that the statements are a reflection of each other: one measures the strength of a need/expectation, the other measures user perception of library performance on provision of the specific need) not only reflect the findings of the research but can also be divided into Berry *et.al.* (1992) 'Five Dimensions of Service Quality' i.e. Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, Empathy.

Tangibles

Statements 5, 6, 7 and 8 (in both Instruments) fall into the Tangibles dimension.

Reliability

Statements 1, 2, 3 and 4 (in both Instruments) fall into the Reliability dimension.

Responsiveness

Statements 9, 10 and 11 (in both Instruments) fall into the Responsiveness dimension.

Empathy

Statements 12, 13, 14 and 19 (in both Instruments) fall into the Empathy dimension.

Assurance

Statements 16, 17 and 18 (in both Instruments) fall into the Assurance dimension.

Division of the questionnaire into the above five dimensions will facilitate ease of analysis and evaluation of survey results, and improve the library's ability to effectively focus on the necessary organisational changes required to help meet user's needs and expectations: as Clow and Kurtz (1998) observe "if customers consistently give ... low scores for one dimension, such as reliability, then ... management can take steps to improve that particular dimension of their service offering".

6.3 *Recommendations*

For effective use and application of the developed user survey instruments it is necessary that;

- ◆ User surveys using the developed instruments be carried out at each branch (in the immediate future the surveys should be restricted to branch libraries. Only after adequate and effective application should their use be extended to the other two channels used by the NLS- Rural Community Information Centers, and Library Centers). This will facilitate comparison of performance of different branches, and analysis of differences in user's needs unique to user location. Summation of branch survey responses will produce the aggregate measurement for the whole National Library Service.
- ◆ The instruments should (preferably) be deployed twice a year in-order to facilitate continuous measurement of user's needs and library performance. In addition, as the instruments are dynamic and meant to be adaptable detailed focus group sessions and broader questionnaire surveys will need to be carried out from time to time in order to effectively update the statements contained in the instruments- this should be done every two or three years.

- ◆ Respondents to the user surveys should be appropriately categorized- a key basis for any categorization should be user occupation. Possible group categories are: primary school students, secondary school students, working respondents, respondents who are working and studying part time, unemployed respondents, retired respondents. If possible, the respondents should also be subdivided into frequent and non-frequent library users.
- ◆ Respondents to the surveys should fill both the needs assessment and satisfaction measurement instruments, as the two are complementary- Clow and Kurtz (1998) point out: “the level of service quality is determined by subtracting the perceived service score (responses to the user satisfaction measurement instrument) from the customer’s expectation score (responses to the user needs assessment instrument) for each of the questions”. In order to reduce the effect of responses to one instrument biasing responses to the other, the two instruments should be answered separately of each other.
- ◆ Frontline library staff should also fill the two instruments on occasion of the surveys- the staff should fill the instruments based on their perception of the needs and satisfaction levels of users. Similar to the study at Deakin University (cited in Livingston, 1999), such a procedure will enable the analysis of differences in perception -of user’s key needs and satisfaction levels- between users and library staff.
- ◆ As has been done with the instruments developed in this paper, statements contained within any future instruments should be categorized into the ‘five dimensions of service quality’.

7. Conclusion

The study has gathered from a sample of users of the National Library Service views on their expectation and perception of the service provision of the NLS. Some of the areas of importance cited by NLS users diverge from the findings in the literature. From the feedback from the users, user needs assessment and user satisfaction measuring instruments have been developed for the National Library Service. These instruments if properly and regularly used could act as crucial management tools for the NLS and help give direction in decision making, resource allocation, employee recruitment and training. Positive use of the instruments will not only improve service delivery at the NLS and enhance and deepen the NLS’ relationship with its users but it could also enable the NLS to become a role model –among libraries and other public sector organisations- in Malawi and the region in development and application of management tools that help to make service provision more effective and responsive.

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Attachment 1

NATIONAL LIBRARY SERVICE

USER NEEDS SURVEY

Instructions: This survey deals with your opinions of the National Library Service, X Branch. Please indicate your opinions on the following statements that relate to your expectations of the National Library Service, X Branch. Do this by ticking the appropriate number below each statement.

Rating

1= Strongly Agree 2= Agree 3= Neither Agree nor Disagree
4= Disagree 5= Strongly Disagree

1. The library should have up-to-date material.

1 2 3 4 5

2. Users should expect the library to provide adequate material.
 1 2 3 4 5
3. The library should not be expected to ensure a noise free environment.
 1 2 3 4 5
4. It is okay for delays to occur in provision of material requested by a user.
 1 2 3 4 5
5. The library environment should be clean and visually appealing.
 1 2 3 4 5
6. Ease of use of the library and easy access to material is essential.
 1 2 3 4 5
7. The library is expected to provide electronic information mediums.
 1 2 3 4 5
8. All users should have access to spacious seating.
 1 2 3 4 5
9. Users should not expect the library to have operating hours based on their requirements.
 1 2 3 4 5
10. Users should be continually updated on library services and new material.
 1 2 3 4 5
11. The library is expected to provide training on effective library use to users.
 1 2 3 4 5
12. The library should encourage users to air their opinions, grievances, and needs.
 1 2 3 4 5
13. It is unrealistic to expect the library to make changes based on suggestions from users.
 1 2 3 4 5
14. Library staff do not need to be easily identifiable or approachable.
 1 2 3 4 5
15. Users shouldn't expect all library services to be free.
 1 2 3 4 5
16. Users should be able to feel rest assured for the safety and security of their material whilst in the library.
 1 2 3 4 5
17. Users need to be continually informed of library rules and regulations.
 1 2 3 4 5
18. Library staff should be friendly and polite.
 1 2 3 4 5
19. The library is expected to give users individual attention.
 1 2 3 4 5

Attachment 2

NATIONAL LIBRARY SERVICE

USER SATISFACTION SURVEY

Instructions: The following statements relate to your perceptions of the National Library Service, X branch. For each statement, please show the extent to which you believe the X branch library has the feature described by the statement.

Rating

1= Strongly Agree 2= Agree 3= Neither Agree nor Disagree

4= Disagree 5= Strongly Disagree

-
1. The X branch library has up-to-date material.
 1 2 3 4 5
 2. The X branch library provides adequate material.
 1 2 3 4 5
 3. A noise free environment is not ensured at the X branch library.
 1 2 3 4 5
 4. Unreasonable delays occur in provision of material requested by users at the X branch library.
 1 2 3 4 5
 5. The X branch library environment is clean and visually appealing.
 1 2 3 4 5
 6. The X branch library is easy to use and material is easy to access.
 1 2 3 4 5
 7. The X branch library provides adequate and relevant electronic information mediums.
 1 2 3 4 5
 8. All users in the X branch library have access to spacious seating.
 1 2 3 4 5
 9. The X branch library does not have operating hours meeting user's requirements.
 1 2 3 4 5
 10. The X branch library effectively updates users on its services and new material.
 1 2 3 4 5
 11. The X branch library adequately provides training on effective library use to users.
 1 2 3 4 5
 12. The X branch library encourages users to air their opinions, grievances, and needs.
 1 2 3 4 5
 13. The X branch library does not make changes based on suggestions from users.
 1 2 3 4 5
 14. X branch Library staff are neither easily identifiable nor approachable.
 1 2 3 4 5
 15. The charging policy at X branch library is reasonable.
 1 2 3 4 5

16. Whilst in the X branch library, users feel rest assured for the safety and security of their material.

1 2 3 4 5

17. The X branch library continually and effectively informs users of its rules and regulations.

1 2 3 4 5

18. X branch Library staff are friendly and polite.

1 2 3 4 5

19. The X branch library gives users individual attention.

1 2 3 4 5

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