

**Incorporating Relationship Marketing as a Learner Support Measure in the Quality Assurance
Policy for Distance Learning At Makerere University, Uganda**

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of an explanatory, descriptive and analytical study undertaken to establish the relationship marketing system in the Department of Distance Education (DE), Makerere University, Uganda and develop proposals for its incorporation into the University policy. The university is currently in the policy formulation process for distance education and during the program evaluation stage, it was established that general student support and care was poor (IEC, 2005). The programs have registered attrition and one of the factors leading to this is the lack of lasting relationships and personal care provided by the university staff to the students (Nakibuuka, 2006). The increased need for distance education and minimizing drop-out rates have led the department to devising ways of effectively managing distance learners and one of the approaches is through adopting a relationship marketing approach and incorporate it into the University policy where it is currently not mentioned at all. Using a questionnaire on a purposively selected sample of tutors and administrators, and focus group discussions on purposively selected students, relationship marketing was found to be a key aspect in controlling attrition and should therefore be incorporated in University policy for Quality Assurance in Distance Education so that each staff member is obliged to implement it. The study recommended that relationship marketing be included in all aspects of student life right from the time of admissions, registration, help-desk to be put in place, and in the teaching and the learning environment.

INTRODUCTION

Distance Education is an excellent method of reaching the adult learner. Because of the competing priorities of work, home, and school, Adult learners desire a high degree of flexibility. The structure of distance learning gives adults the greatest possible control over the time, place and pace of education. However, distance learning has got some problems like loss of student motivation due to lack of constant face to face contact with tutors and peers, family and work demands, cost of the course and a general lack of university or department support. Hillman, Willis and Gunawardena (1994) noted that in distance education, there is strong emphasis on the provision of learner support, which is designed to facilitate interaction and communication between students and academic staff. Support services are required to ensure a complete well-rounded education. Educational institution providing distance education programmes must also provide quality support services to all students (Khoo & Idrus, 2004). Further to this, not many institutions have incorporated relationship marketing aspects in their student support structures and policies.

Makerere University (MAK), a dual mode institution, has been running DE degree programs since 1991 (Aguti, 2000) but without a guiding policy (IEC, 2005). The programs are managed by the Department of Distance Education (DDE) in the Institute of Adult and continuing Education (IACE) in collaboration with the academic faculties. DDE carries out student support activities to students scattered in many parts of Uganda and who only report to the center for a two-week face-to-face session. The university is currently in the policy formulation process for distance education and during the program evaluation stage, it was established that general student support and care was poor (IEC, 2005) hence affecting the quality of service delivery. The programs have registered attrition and one of the factors leading to this is the lack of lasting relationships and personal care provided by the university staff to the students (Nakibuuka, 2006). The increased need for distance education and minimizing drop-out rates have led the department to devising ways of effectively managing distance learners and one of the approaches is through adopting a relationship marketing approach. University policy does not provide for mandatory action towards caring for the students. Formulating a policy will enable the Department of DE to mobilise resources and support which are pertinent for survival (McCarthy & Perreault, 1993).

Relationship marketing refers to all activities directed to establishing, developing and maintaining successful long term relationship with the student and other stake holders Shaik (2005). Gronroos (2000) stated that relationship marketing in institutions is the attitude of mind throughout the institution, when students feel that the staff is interested in addressing their concerns spontaneously in a friendly and professional manner. The emphasis is placed on building long-term relationships with

students rather than on individual transactions. It involves understanding the student's needs as they go through their studies. It emphasizes providing a range of products or services to existing students as they need them. It involves tracking and analysing of each student's preferences, activities, tastes, likes, dislikes, and complaints. Khoo & Idrus (2004) also noted that due to the wide range of technologies used by distance educators, the support must be available and consistent to all students at all times. The support services require constant interactions between instructional designers, counsellors, student support staff, administrators, and technical staff, help support staff, and students.

Since DE students are separated physically from the providers (Venkaiah, 1995). Khoo & Idrus (2004) emphasize that Quality assurance practices adopted by any distance education providers should include elements of Total Quality Management (TQM) namely staff development, strategic planning, work process, team work, prioritise customers and performance evaluation. Other important elements in distance education are the system for sending of learning materials, system for receiving of assignments from students and management of students' records. Shaik (2005) points out that education services constitute core and supporting services. Teaching and learning that occur in the class are examples of core service because they are critical to a successful learning experience. Supporting services to assure quality therefore include real-time information about courses, student advising, online registrations, orientation, student accounts, help-desks, complaint handling, and feedback in a friendly, trustworthy and timely manner. Students regularly come into contact with the staff associated with these services during their stay at the institution. These services create added value to the student and determine the quality of students learning experience and the student will use those as parameters to determine the service quality.

The competitive advantage of an institution lies in its systems, procedures, policies and programmes. It is difficult for any distance education institution to serve the needs of its students efficiently and effectively without any quality assurance measures. Learner support is needed in order to facilitate students' learning. These supports can be in the forms of facilities, administrative, learning materials, reading materials and references, human interaction, advice and moral support. It is important that providers have quality assurance measures to ensure that students receive the support needed to achieve their educational and personal goals (Khoo & Idrus, 2004).

Quality Assurance (QA) is broadly the preventing of quality problems through planned and systematic activities (including documentation). These will include the establishment of a good quality management system and the assessment of its adequacy, the audit of the operation of the system, and the review of the system itself (Oakland, 1993). According to Robinson (1994) QA is the set of activities that an organisation undertakes to ensure that a product or service will satisfy given requirements for quality, in other words, that standards are specified and reached consistently for a product or service. Its goal is the anticipation and avoidance of faults or mistakes. Basically, it involves setting attainable standards for a process, organising work so that they are achieved, documenting the procedures required, communicating them to all concerned, and monitoring and reviewing the attainment of standards. Administrative systems were pointed out as factors that determine the educational quality (Robinson, 1994).

In an academic institution services are quite different from services in the business world. The five major characteristics of services include reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibility. Reliability is the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately. With reliability, a relationship develops very first between the institution and the customer. Responsiveness is the willingness to help the customers (students) and provide prompt service. Assurance is manifested in employees' knowledge and courtesy and their ability to inspire trust and confidence. Empathy involves caring and giving individualized attention to clients (students). Tangibility is the appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and written materials. Distance Education being a service and students being the prime focus, Kotler and Armstrong (2005) also identified intangibility; perishability, inseparability, and heterogeneity as the four major characteristics of services. All these characteristics have to be exhibited by a firm if it is to be rated as a good service provider. Universities being nonprofit organizations, marketing has become pertinent for them as it is for business firms (McCarthy & Perreault, 1993). Khoo & Idrus (2004) point out prioritisation of customers and management of students' records as important factors in ensuring quality in DE.

Phipps *et al.*, (1998) noted that Quality assurance strategies for distance learning tend to be oriented toward institutional assessment activities, and to affirming that the core capacities to assure quality such as faculty credentials and student support services are in place. With a yearning for more student-caring services and a need to reduce student drop-out rates caused by administrative hiccups, it was imperative that a system of relationship marketing be established. The purpose of the study therefore was to study the current relationship marketing system at the Department of Distance Education, Makerere University and develop recommendations to be incorporated in the University policy for Distance Education. This will be useful for creating lasting relationships between students and staff in order to improve service quality and reduce attrition rates. The quality policy of an institution should contain quality mission statement, resource allocation norms, quality review and control programmes through Quality Monitoring Teams (Venkaiah, 1995). The levels of skills and expertise of staff, the amount of resources available, weak or strong leadership, efficiency of its

METHODOLOGY

The research design was explanatory, descriptive and analytical undertaken to establish the relationship marketing system in the Department of Distance Education (DE), Makerere University, Uganda and develop proposals for its incorporation into the University policy. The survey population included distance education tutors and administrators involved in the administration of DE students and DE student. Using purposive sampling, 8 tutors, 22 administrative staff and 20 students were selected. The sources of data were both primary and secondary. Interviews were also carried out with tutors and administrators using a questionnaire and an interview guide for students through focus group discussions. Secondary data was collected through document review of minute, evaluation reports and draft strategic framework documents. The study concentrated more on staff members because they are considered to be the key relationship marketing policy implementers.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Characteristics of respondents

The staff members were of varying age and gender as shown in the table below;

Table 1: Age and gender of the staff members

Age	Gender			
	Male	Percent	Female	Percent
20 - 29	3	21.4	2	12.5
30 - 39	7	50	11	68.8
40 - 49	4	28.6	3	18.8
50 and above	0	0	0	0
Total	14	100	16	100

Source: Primary data

Most of the respondents fell in the age range of 30 – 39 years followed by 40 – 49 years implying that staff are of varying age. The percentage of contribution of each gender to the staffing is 46.7% Male and 53.3% Female. Implying that most of the staff who interact with students regularly by virtual of their positions and office physical location are female.

The students' gender and age was as follows;

Table 2: Age and gender of students

Age Bracket	Gender			
	Male		Female	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
20 – 29	10	71.4	5	83.3
30 – 39	4	28.6	1	16.7
Total	14	100	6	100

Source: Primary data

Most of students fell in the age range of 20 – 29 years followed by 30 – 39 years. Most of the students interviewed were male.

Positions held by staff members

Staff who participated in the study were purposively selected depending on the office occupied as shown in the table below:

Table 3: Positions held by staff members

Position Held	Frequency	Percent
Clerical Officer	6	20.0
Assistant Lecturer	4	13.3
Accounts Assitant	1	3.3
Teaching Assistant	3	10.0
Librarian	1	3.3
Records clerk	2	6.7
ICT Technician	2	6.7
Administrative Assistant	3	10.0
Secretary	2	6.7
Sen. Administrative Assistant	1	3.3
Lecturer	1	3.3
Did not State	3	10.0
Receptionist	1	3.3
Total	30	100

Source: Primary data

The above table shows the positions of the member who participated in the study. They belonged to several sections including Tutoring (33.3%), Accounts (3.3%), Information and Communications Technology (10.0%), Materials development including book bank (23.3%), Clerical (3.3%), Administration and management (20%), and Student support (3.3%). However, one (1) member of staff did not know the section to which he belonged which indicated a need for more staff orientation. Of these staff, 96.6% said that they interacted with students daily while 3.3% said they did this occasionally. This shows that the staff members who participated in the study interacted with students regularly. Khoo and Idrus (2004) point out that staff of an institution plays an important role in quality assurance. Lecturers, besides involving in administration and management, play important role in the academic development of the students. This explains the higher means recorded by lecturers in the dimension of Staff Development. This is so because not all lecturers are involved directly in the administration and management of distance education, especially in the dimension of sending materials to students, receiving of assignments from students, and maintenance of students' records. Both groups have different job description.

The State Of Relationship Marketing In The Department

Several staff members and students were interviewed to establish the state of relationship marketing which is an indicator of quality. In his blog, Mishra (2007) says quality in open and distance learning has been a matter of concern from the beginning. He considers process quality as a means of assuring quality.

Respondents were asked whether they have had training in relationship marketing and only 30% had ever got such training, the others had not. This implies that knowledge of relationship marketing is low which may lead to poor relationship with students.

Knowledge of the nature of students being served is good for proper relationship marketing. Only 6.7% of the respondent said they were aware of the student's preferences, 23.3% of the respondents were not sure while 70% said they were not aware of students' preferences. This implies a poor state of relationship marketing because it is difficult to serve clients whose preferences are unknown. However, 96% of the respondents agreed that they always attempted to establish a student's needs during interaction. As regards knowledge of student's activities, 70% of the respondents said were not aware while, 23.3% said they were not sure if they knew or not while 6.7% said they knew. To further the lack of knowledge, 70% of the respondents said that they never knew the students' tastes and preferences, 16.7% were not sure if they knew while 13.3% said that they knew. This implies that there is no knowledge of information pertaining to the students' lives. Which reduces service, and affects the service profit chain (Kotler & Armstrong, 2005).

Student advisory service is one of the indicators that there is care for the students. 53.3% of the respondent said that they did not keep record of the students' complaints, 43.3% agreed that they did while 3.4% were not sure if they kept such records. This implies that follow-up is difficult. However, 73.4% agreed that they provide information about courses to anybody who needs it in time while 13.3% said they did not provide it. Further, 83.3% said they advised students on all their queries as they came in while 16.7% said that they did not. 73.3% of the respondents agreed that they respond to students' complaints in time, 13.3% said they were not sure while 13.4% disagreed. Those who disagreed said that by nature of their offices, they needed to consult widely before handling a student's complaint. These findings generally imply that staff are willing and able to advise students which is a good indicator of relationship marketing.

As regards student services, which are important in service marketing (Kotler & Armstrong, 2005), staff confirmed that there is no online registration system in place. Students have to report physically to the main campus to be registered. This is an inconvenience to them. When students report, there is orientation where students are briefed on the nature of the program they are joining, meet administrators and are introduced to the various courses by the tutors. They also get study materials from the book-bank which they read and return. However, beginning academic year 2007/2008, students on the Bachelor of Education External program are slated to be given materials to be taken for keeps. This will go along way to improve the state of relationship marketing. Menon (2007) asserts that Quality assurance (QA) is the set of activities that an organisation undertakes to ensure that standards are specified and reached consistently for a product or service. It involves proactive measures taken to avoid faults while quality control (QC) involves reactive measures taken to remove faults *and* assessment of quality systems includes the monitoring, evaluation, and audit of procedures. He points out learner support and learner centeredness as one of the important factors.

In order to practice relationship marketing well, the department must have a database containing all information about each student. Students being the primary customers, it is pertinent that their needs are known so that they are satisfied as McCarthy and Perreault (1993) pointed out. 56.7% of the respondents said that this did not exist, 20% were not sure while 23.3% said it existed. The data available about a student is the basic bio-data that is captured as a student register for the first time. This data is captured in a software program called the Academic Registrar's Information System (ARIS). The other information about students is scattered in several offices depending on what those particular offices handle. There is therefore not one centralised database. This implies that information about a student is not easily accessible. Coupled with this is the lack of a formal helpdesk which responds to all students' queries. There is however a reception where students can ask as they

visit or call in. However, this desk is at times not fed with appropriate information such that students have to be redirected to other offices even for questions that are seemingly easy like the venue where lectures are taking place. Information has to be gathered from several offices which may delay service provision. This is an indication of poor relationship marketing and ultimately affects corporate image of the department and the university as a whole.

All staff members agreed that they are friendly to the students who come to them for services. However, some students pointed out that some staff members are not friendly. This is mainly when those particular staff they referred to are leaving for lunch or signing off. At times they do not give students the attention they desire. Students said that they were however satisfied with their relationship with staff members. When staff members were asked their view on the state of the relationship between the department and students, 20% said it was satisfactory, 36.7% said they were not sure of the status quo while 43.3% said it was not satisfactory. This shows a lack of confidence in service provision which is an indication of poor relationship marketing. Besides, no survey has yet been undertaken involving all students to establish what their attitude towards the services of the department is.

Existence of a Relationship Marketing Policy for Distance Education in Makerere University

Currently, there is no known express relationship marketing policy for distance education in the university. Further to this the University does not have a policy for distance education as a whole. Most of the customer care given to students has been due to frequent on-job training and briefing from senior staff members who has practiced distance education for long. However, staff are not under obligation to carry out relationship marketing activities. 40% of the staff agreed that there is no known policy regarding advising DE students that they are required to follow, 26.7% were not sure whether it existed while 33.3% said they were aware about it. The few who agreed that they were aware about it said that by virtue of serving students, they were require to practice it even if it is not written policy. The success of quality assurance in an organisation depends on the total commitment of the management. The quality assurance in an educational institution is possible when every member of the organisation contributed his might to the quality process

As regards student orientation, 13.3% of the staff said that the university does not have policy on DE student orientation, 40% did not know if it existed while 34.7% said that it existed. Those who said it existed said that they are required to give students information if they reported just like other departments do. They however said that there is no known policy governing it and the way it should be done especially for DE students. Further to this, the university is silent about establishing help desks for DE students at the key places they visit like their mother department, collaborating departments and libraries both at the headquarters and regional center.

Because of their uniqueness, DE students need a policy that stipulates the procedures of handling their complaint systematically so that they are guided as and when they require and that any staff member whose services they desire be available for them. 40% of the staff members said that there is no such policy, 30% were not sure while 30% said there was a policy. This is because the Academic Registrar, at the beginning of the academic year provides a program in which freshmen and women would meet their administrators. However this program is not faculty specific. There is no known mechanism of following up whether, apart from that procedure, departments offer any other guidance to new students and whether there is consistence. The reporting time of DE students is at times different from that of other students hence a need for special mandatory guidelines for their orientation and this should extend to all units of the university.

As regards friendly services and being trustworthy while serving DE students, 56.7% of the staff said that they were under obligation to be friendly to students, 16.7% said that they were not sure, while 36.7% said that there is no policy requiring them to be friendly to DE students. This supports what students said that in some offices, some staff members are not friendly while serving them which reduces their motivation. As regards the existence of a policy that requires staff to be trustworthy to students, 23.3% said that there is no such policy, 73.3% said they did not know if it existed while only 3.4% agreed that there is a policy. This again creates complacency on part of staff members hence reducing the quality of relationship marketing.

Staff were asked as to whether knowledge of relationship marketing will improve quality of services delivered to DE students, 90% agreed while 10% were not sure. Those that were not sure were sceptical because there was no policy to induce them to apply it. And as a consequence, 93.3% agreed that formulation of a relationship marketing policy in MAK will improve quality of service to DE students. In order for Makerere University to build competitive advantage based on collaborative involvement with the DE students and other departments, it has to develop a clear strategy based on the policy that will be set which is in line with the findings by Sheth and Parvatiyar (2000). McIlroy and Walker (1993) note that effective staff development and involvement of staff in planning are important elements of quality assurance. Staff of an institution will be able to analyse their operations and modify them to optimise the use of resources.

Students have to report physically and register with the university since there is no online registration in place. When they report, there is orientation where students are briefed on the nature of the program they are joining, meet administrators and are introduced to the various courses by the tutors. They also get materials from the book-bank which they read and return. Students also noted that staff members are friendly to them. However, some students pointed out that some staff members are not friendly. This is mainly when those particular staff they referred to are leaving for lunch or signing off which is an indicator of poor relationship marketing.

CONCLUSIONS

From the above findings the following conclusions can be made

- Most of the staff who interact with students regularly by virtual of their positions and office physical location are female. This shows that the staff members who participated in the study interacted with students.
- Knowledge of relationship marketing is low.
- There is no system of tracking and analysing information pertaining to the students' lives including their preferences, interests, likes and dislikes. Staff are however willing and able to advise students.
- Students have to report physically and register with the university since there is no online registration in place. When they report, there is orientation where students are briefed on the nature of the program they are joining, meet administrators and are introduced to the various courses by the tutors. They also get materials from the book-bank which they read and return.
- There is no one centralised database where all information about a student can be obtained. Rather, it has to be gathered from different offices. This implies that information about a student is not easily accessible.
- Lack of a formal helpdesk which responds to all students' queries. There is a reception at the entrance of the building where students ask questions but this desk is at times not equipped with all the necessary information that students need.
- Staff members are friendly to the students who come to them for services. However, some students pointed out that some staff members are not friendly. This is mainly when those particular staff they referred to are leaving for lunch or signing off which is an indicator of poor relationship marketing.
- Currently, there is no known express relationship marketing policy for distance education in the university. This explains partly why services are wanting. The result is that quality in student support is poor which affects the quality of the DE program.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

- A policy involving requiring special attention to DE students be formulated.
- Relationship marketing be included in all aspects of student life right from the time of admissions, registration, help-desk to be put in place, and in the teaching and the learning environment.
- A draft policy statement be made and proposed to the university administration regarding initiating and maintaining good student relations.
- A fraction of the budget be set aside to allow more research into students' needs, preferences, likes and dislikes.

- A database be set up to be a repository of most if not all information pertaining each students and that this should be updated regularly. This will enable tracking a student's progress.
- All units of the university be obliged to handle DE students and fairly and they handle students on the regular programs that belong to other units.
- Staff also suggested the following to be put in place in order them improve their relationship marketing activities: training them in skills in distance education, providing them detailed appointment letters, clearly explaining the reward systems, revitalising the distance education Newsletter, deploying them to perform duties they are qualified for, increasing staffing, frequent meetings between staff and students and among staff, measures to improve job satisfaction and online feedback systems. To them, these should be included in the policy statements.

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