

The Aspect of Assurance of Digital Institutional Repository Service Provision to Postgraduates Students at Selected Universities in Meru County

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Abstract

Theses, dissertations, reports and other research works by university communities are housed in digital institutional repositories in the library department. Postgraduate students are expected to utilize these resources; hence, the nature of services provided therein is critical. The provision of digital institutional repository service in university libraries is expected to be courteous, professional, and credible. Professionalism is demonstrated through politeness, trustworthiness, honesty, friendliness, respectfulness and competence of the institutional repository staff serving users. These attributes usually communicate assurance and heighten customer satisfaction. The feeling of assurance is also reinforced by the experience that a user gets when interacting with the repository website; for example, the friendliness of the webpages. However, incidences of users getting disinterested and losing patience with institutional repositories have continued to be reported. This paper reports part of findings of a large study which aimed to determine how adopting SERVQUAL model can improve digital institutional repository information services to postgraduate students at universities in Meru County. This paper assessed the assurance of digital institutional repository service provision. It employed a descriptive survey research design. The target population constituted library head of sections and post-graduate students. Purposive sampling was employed to get librarians, while simple random sampling, to select students. A sample size of 101 was adopted. Data was collected using questionnaires and interviews. Data quality was achieved by checking construct, content and face validity, while reliability was ascertained using Cronbach alpha. Data was analysed descriptively and thematically. The study found that the level of assurance in digital institutional repositories at universities in Meru County was moderate. Assurance aspects are supported by elements like: knowledgeable staff, customer-centric service, adequate ICT infrastructure, resources and facilities; customer awareness; and adequate funding. The study recommended creation of awareness, staff training and upgrading the repository technology to enhance assurance aspects.

Keywords: *Service assurance, digital institutional repositories, service provision, university libraries, SERVQUAL model*

1.0 Introduction

Digital institutional repository service provision is of great significance to learners in universities as it improves sharing, preservation and dissemination of information (Nayak & Parhi, 2021). This can be achieved by ensuring responsiveness, timeliness, dependability and use of customer centered approaches to information service provision. Institutional repository services comprise of open access services rendered to a research organization or an institution of higher learning by information professionals (Nunda & Elia, 2019). Some services delivered in digital institutional repositories range from acquisition, metadata creation, management, dissemination, preservation, providing access to thesis and dissertations, and stewardship on scholarly outputs (Karanja, 2017; Nunda & Elia, 2019).

Service in digital institutional repositories are evidenced by the presence of training and awareness programs (The Directory of Open Access Repositories [OpenDOAR], 2018; Adam & Kaur, 2019). Other indicators include accessibility, timely and responsive services, improved information find-ability, and statistics showing increase in creative content deposits (The Directory of Open Access Repositories [OpenDOAR], 2018; Adam & Kaur, 2019). Additional critical drivers of satisfactory services comprise the presence of perceived usefulness and ease procedure for depositing the created intellectual output by depositors (Fernández-Ramos & Barrionuevo, 2021). These aspects implore the need to explore the service qualities dimensions in the service quality

model, as well as the marketing strategies for communicating the institutional repositories' value as postulated in this study.

The SERVQUAL model is a service quality measurement tool developed by marketing gurus: Valarie, Parasuraman and Berry, in 1985 (Podbrežnik, 2014). It was aimed to measure the perceptions of the customers being served by meeting their expectations and experiences (Podbrežnik, 2014).

“Digital institutional repository service provision is of great significance to learners in universities as it improves sharing, preservation and dissemination of information”

The model was also meant to measure the tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, communication, credibility, security, competency, courtesy, understanding the customer, and accessibility of services or products (Podbrežnik, 2014; Parasuraman et al., 1988). Later on, the model narrowed down to five major dimensions which were; tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, empathy and assurance. SERVQUAL model has been tested and found applicable in various industries such as retailing, restaurants, banking, telecommunication, airline catering, local government, hotels,

hospitals, and education sectors (Daniel & Berinyuy, 2010; Vencataya et al., 2019). This study adopted this model to determine its applicability in digital institutional repository for information service delivery at universities in Meru County, Kenya.

Globally, digital institutional repository service provision has been ensured through staff professional development, financial allocation to libraries, data interchange standards, provision of current metadata, repository policies, adopting quality and best curating software, open access initiatives, good practices and prioritizing customers experiences (Luther, 2018; Bandyopadhyay & Boyd-Byrnes, 2016). Other features observed in university institutional repositories in USA include user friendly links with directive guidelines and friendly interfaces (Saini, 2018). Fulfilling these roles require the assurance of modern technology, knowledgeable staff and student awareness on the resources offered in repositories. This requires that service efficiency dimensions such as tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, empathy and assurance of repository information service provision be ascertained.

In the developed nations such as Botswana, Nigeria, Zimbabwe and South Africa, digital institutional repository service provision has been reported to be unsatisfactory (Okoroma, 2018; Oguche, 2018; Ejikeme & Ezema, 2019). Nevertheless, nations in Africa greatly appreciate the benefits, the productivity and contributions of digital institutional repository services in institutions of higher learning (Oguche, 2018). Irrespective of the aforementioned efforts, most established

institutional repositories are contending with difficulties and inefficiencies in service delivery (Okoroma, 2018). Aspects of remedy that have been put in place to improve digital institutional repository service delivery include the enactment of open access policies, adopting creative common licenses, creating awareness, alleviating customer' negative perceptions, and using grant funding and intellectual property rights (Posigha & Eseivo, 2022).

In Kenya, the Constitution of Kenya and the policies informing open access matters, copyright issues, depositor's agreements, open source software, investment in ICT technologies and accessibility of deposited objects have been implemented to improve access to information; hence, service provision (Ratanya & Muthee, 2018). Campaigns and awareness programs, staff training, and financial allotment have also been provided by universities to develop a visual image of the services offered in repositories (Karanja, 2017).

Moreover, improving service provision has put librarians, repository staff, ICT staff and librarians at the forefront in ensuring satisfaction of customer needs. However, service delivery in repositories is unsatisfactory (Kakai, 2018; Mwit, 2017). The criticism have been linked to lack of adequate managerial support, staff competencies, limited awareness, and insufficient rendering of budget to support repository services (Ratanya, 2017; Ratanya & Muthee, 2018). Others include inadequate training and awareness programs to library patrons on how to access digital repository services (Kahavizakiriza et al., 2015). In this

view, the study applied the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman and Berry, 1988) to establish how assurance can be adopted to improve institutional repository services offered to post-graduate students at Kenya Methodist University and Meru University of Science and Technology.

Statement of the Problem

Theses, dissertations, reports and other research works by university community are housed in digital institutional repositories in the library department. The postgraduate students are expected to utilize these resources. Therefore, it is crucial to establish the nature of services provided in digital institutional repositories. The provisioning of digital institutional repository service in university libraries is therefore expected to be courteous, professional, and credible. This is demonstrated when the staff serving users remain polite, trustworthy, honest, friendly, respectful, and competent. These attributes usually communicate assurance and heighten satisfaction.

The feeling of assurance is also reinforced by the experience that a user gets when interacting with the digital institutional repository website, such as the friendliness of the webpages. However, incidences of users getting disinterested and losing patience with institutional repositories have continued to be reported (Saulus et al., 2017; Mwiti, 2017; Ogenga, 2015). Failure to assure repository users leads to underutilization of information services, hence dissatisfaction of their needs. It also denies the university a chance to grow research wise and find value in the investments channeled towards making repositories operational. Existing studies

including Mwiti (2017), Ogenga (2015) and Kakai (2018) attempted to correlate fear of plagiarism and dwarf knowledge on multiple advocacy strategies to unsatisfactory service provision.

Research Objectives

To assess the assurance of digital institutional repository service provision at selected universities in Meru County, Kenya.

Research Question

What is the level of assurance of digital institutional repository services offered at selected universities in Meru County, Kenya?

Literature Review

Assurance is explained when a staff combines skills and ethical codes, such as courtesy, professionalism, competencies, security and credibility, to serve a customer (Saulus, 2017). In information service delivery, assurance is the ability of a competent and skilled specialist to handle customers politely and meet their needs satisfactorily (Frahm-Arp et al., 2020). The study was underpinned by the SERVQUAL model by Valarie, Parasuraman and Berry (Podbrežnik, 2015).

The choice of the model is attributed to the fact that improved service among organizations is dimensionally influenced by the nature of the goods, products or service' tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, empathy and assurance dimensions. Assurance is about commanding trust to the client requiring a service from an organization. This is achieved when the staff are reliable, responsive, competent,

communicate effectively, assure customers, and adopt necessary technological infrastructure for information dissemination. This explains the applicability of SERVQUAL model to improve digital institutional repository service provision at universities in Meru County.

Assurance is demonstrated by Librarians' behavior and mannerism, customer perception of safety, staff cautiousness, and employee knowledge ability. In digital repositories, assurance may be indicated by the ability of the database to retrieve and download searched materials, provide spelling suggestions and alternative searches, security features of the systems and also perceived user trust of the web pages (Saulus, 2017). Studies by Digby (2021) and Asadi et al. (2019) indicated that assuring customer is paramount as it improves customer experience, and wins clientele trust and loyalty.

However, despite these benefits, Fraser-Arnott (2016), Asadi et al. (2019) and Omosekejimi et al. (2019) have noted that, deficiency of technical skills, communication skills, etiquette, staff grooming, knowledge and technological infrastructure limit the assurance of repositories. In studies conducted by Kakai (2018), Asadu (2018) and Trivedi and Bhatt (2020), the causes of unsatisfactory service provision in digital institutional repositories include weak staff capacities, low awareness on institutional repository services, and ignorance on the benefits of utilizing scholarly works.

2.0 Materials and methods

The research was carried out in Meru County. It embraced a descriptive survey research design and mixed methods approach. The study encompassed a target population of 900 post-graduate students and 10 library heads of section at KeMU and MUST. Library heads of sections were purposively sampled, while simple random technique was used to obtain the post-graduate students. This led to a sample size of 101 participants, comprising of 91 post-graduate students and 10 library heads of sections.

The tools used were questionnaires and an interview guide. The tools' reliability was ascertained through computing Cronbach alpha value from the pre-test data. Questionnaire data was analyzed using SPSS, where descriptive statistics were computed and presented using tables and figures. Qualitative data from open ended questions and the interviews was thematically analyzed, and respective themes were developed to present the obtained results. Quantitative data was presented using tables and figures, while qualitative data was presented in themes, and short descriptive excerpts.

3.0 Results and discussion

The study had intended to administer 91 questionnaires to post-graduate students, and interview 10 library head of sections. In the field, 9 (90%) librarians were interviewed, while the response rate for the students was 67(73.0%). The study therefore, had an overall response rate of 75.2%, which was good. The good response rate was due to cooperation of library heads of sections and

post-graduate students who were given questionnaires.

Background Information of Respondents

Some of the key information gathered pertaining the characteristics of respondents included their gender, highest educational qualification and length of service. The findings indicated that there were more female 34 (50.7%) than male 33 (49.3%) post-graduate students at universities in Meru County. Despite the slight difference, this shows gender impartiality among post-graduate students enrolled in universities in Meru County.

The demographic findings concur with the observation made by Saulus (2017) that in the University of Swaziland, the population of post-graduate students was dominated by the female gender. Furthermore, the study revealed that most of the students, 48(71.6%) were pursuing their masters degrees; 10(14.9%) were doing post-graduate diploma, while only 9(13.4%) were pursuing doctorate degrees. The head of section librarians had worked between 5 and 10 years, 3(33.3%) 10 years and above, while 2 (22.2%) had served between 1 and 5 years. This means that, majority of the head of section librarians who took part in the interview had adequate experience on service provision in digital institutional repositories. Adequate working experience was needful in providing credible information on awareness, practices and techniques for post-graduate service provision. Working experience ranging from three years and above was reported by Haylenchale (2020) to be adequate time which ensured respondents had interacted and identified the practices,

challenges and what works for an organization.

Results on Digital Institutional Repository Service Delivery Provision

Regarding digital institutional repository service provision, 10 statements were posed to post-graduate students where they were required to indicate their opinions in a 5-level Likert rating scale. The statements posed were based on service provision indicators like reliability, responsiveness, tangibility, empathy, assurance, infrastructure and facility adequacy, librarian's etiquette, accessibility of services and timeliness in service provision. A summary of the responses is presented in Table 1.

The findings presented in Table 1 show that all aspects were essential in influencing post-graduate institutional repository services at university libraries. The factors that were considered most essential in influencing post-graduate institutional repository services at university libraries were reliability, etiquette, politeness and courtesy, assurance, empathy, responsiveness, tangibility, promptness and timeliness.

In agreement, Bandara et al. (2021) noted that satisfactory service delivery among library institutional repositories depended on the caring nature of the staff, their competencies, skills, responsiveness, and reliability, adequacy of resources and tangibility of the library resources, services and facilities. Notably the interview conducted on the head of section librarians required them to state the main drawbacks to achieving effective digital institutional repository service provision at Universities in Meru County. Some of the

noted challenges were slow growth of repository collections, lack of enough financial allocation, inadequate modern technology, limited sensitization and awareness, digital illiteracy among repository

managers, open access issues, publishing of articles abstract other than full texts documents and limited literacy on customer handling.

Table 1

Digital institutional repository service provision

Statement on service delivery in institutional repositories (N=67)	VSE(1)	SE(2)	ME(3)	LE(4)	VLE(5)	Mean	Std. Deviation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reliability aspects of the institutional repository services increase user satisfaction in our institution 	1(1.5%)	1(1.5%)	9(13.45)	33(49.3%)	23(34.3)	4.13	.815
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Responsiveness of institutional repository service increase satisfaction in our institution 	0	5(7.5%)	10(14.9%)	31(46.3%)	21(31.3%)	4.01	.879
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tangibility of institutional repository services increase user satisfaction in our institution 	1(1.5%)	4(6.0%)	13(19.4%)	25(37.3%)	24(35.8%)	4.00	.969
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Empathy of institutional repository service increase user satisfaction in our institution 	1(1.5%)	4(6.0%)	12(17.9%)	25(37.3%)	25(37.3%)	4.03	.969
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assurance of institutional repository service increase 	0	3(4.5%)	13(19.4%)	28(41.8%)	23(34.3%)	4.06	.851

user satisfaction
in our institution

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There are adequate infrastructures, facilities and reading areas in of institutional repository service in our institution 	4(6.0%)	31(46.3%)	20(29.9%)	8(11.9%)	4(6.0%)	2.66	.978
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The institutional repository staff are polite, courteous and respectful 	1(1.5%)	4(6.0%)	9(13.4%)	25(37.3%)	28(41.8%)	4.12	.962
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The institutional repository services are accessible at all times 	1(1.5%)	6(9.0%)	36(53.7%)	15(22.4%)	9(13.4%)	3.37	.885
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Institutional repository services are essential in promoting research and development 	0	3(4.5%)	10(14.9%)	30(44.8%)	24(35.8%)	4.12	.826
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is no sluggishness in service delivery at institutional repository in our institution 	0	6(9.0%)	26(38.8%)	25(37.3%)	10(14.9%)	3.58	.855

In support of these findings, Trivedi and Bhatt (2019) also noted repositories in western countries were facing challenges related to apprehension over infringement of publisher copyrights, limited awareness, gaps between customer's specifications and

expectations, limited responsiveness and limited customer assurance.

Results on Assurance of Digital Institutional Repository Service Provision

To obtain the findings on assurance, opinions were gathered from the post-graduate students and the head of section librarians at universities in Meru County, Kenya. Post graduate students responded through the

issued questionnaires, while the librarians were interviewed.

Post-graduate students were expected to respond to the developed statements by choosing their best opinions in a 5-level Likert rating scale. The findings were presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Descriptive Results on Assurance

Statement on assurance(N=67)	VSE(1)	SE(2)	ME(3)	LE(4)	VLE(5)	Mean	Std. Deviation
• The employee in the repository section is courteous with customers	1(1.5%)	1(1.5%)	10(14.9%)	30(44.8%)	25(37.3%)	4.15	.839
• The employee in charge of institutional repository is very rich in knowledge	0	1(1.5%)	29(43.3%)	24(35.8%)	13(19.4%)	3.73	.790
• The institutional repository has adequate security features	0	7(10.4%)	26(38.8%)	27(40.3%)	7(10.4%)	3.51	.823
• In the institutional repository, (plagiarism) academic integrity is complied with	3(4.5%)	3(4.5%)	10(14.9%)	21(31.3%)	30(44.8%)	4.07	1.091
• In the institutional	4(6.0%)	6(9.0%)	15(22.4%)	22(32.8%)	20(29.9%)	3.72	1.165

repository, creative common licenses are complied with							
• The repository web-site has spelling suggestion to assure the retrieval of accurate information	8(11.9%)	22(32.8%)	19(28.4%)	12(17.9%)	6(9.0%)	2.79	1.149
• The repository managers is versed with wide range of knowledge, skills and competencies	0	4(6.0%)	34(50.7%)	16(23.9%)	13(19.4%)	3.57	.874
• I have a lot of confidence in the information services rendered in the institutional repository	1(1.5%)	5(7.5%)	24(35.8%)	24(35.8%)	13(19.4%)	3.64	.933
• The repository website is user friendly	3(4.5%)	7(10.4%)	23(34.3%)	24(35.8%)	10(14.9%)	3.46	1.020
• The information I retrieve from the repository satisfies my information needs	3(4.5%)	11(16.4%)	23(34.3%)	18(26.9%)	12(17.9%)	3.37	1.099

Table 2 reveals high agreement with most sentiments regarding assurance. The aspects that had the highest levels of agreement were

courteous nature of repository staff (mean = 4.15), compliance to academic integrity/plagiarism (mean = 4.07),

knowledge and professionalism of repository manager (mean = 3.73), repository website always bringing relevant answers to search terms (mean= 3.75), the repository website returning feedback results immediately after executing a search (mean =3.73), compliance to intellectual property rights (creative common licenses), (mean = 3.72), and a sense of confidence with the hosted resources(mean= 3.64).

The results agreed with the opinions of Frahm-Arp et al. (2020) who reported that assurance is demonstrated through a number of dimensions which include employee etiquette, ethics and conduct, customer security, and employee competencies. Open-ended questions posed to students indicated that assurance was curtailed by lack of modern information retrieval features such as spelling suggestions, and aesthetic discoverable tools/features for up scaling digital repository service provision.

In the interview conducted to the head of section librarians, a question was posed which required them to explain how they assured institutional repository services. The responses given included user awareness, staff training and upgrading repository technology. In concurrence, Nakitare et al. (2020) reiterated the role of funding, professional development, and advancement of technologies as strong remedies to utilization of repositories in university libraries. Mwiti (2017) also noted the contribution of user awareness to information services at their disposal among institutional repositories in Kenya. The study noted that the level of assurance in digital institutional repositories at universities in Meru County was moderate.

Testing the Overall Applicability of SERVQUAL Model in Institutional Repositories

Table 3

Model summary results

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.816 ^a	.666	.638	.38439

a. Predictors: (Constant), X5, X1, X3, X4, X2

b. Dependent Variable: Y

The findings of multiple linear regression show that reliability, responsiveness, tangibility, empathy and assurance comprised a statistically significant model for explaining the influence of digital

institutional repository service provision at universities in Meru County, Kenya. This indicates that the five predictor variables explain 66.6% of the variation in the digital institutional repository service provision

Table 4

Regression Weights Results of the Model

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta				Tolerance	VIF
1 (Constant)	.599	.329			1.822	.073		
X1	.180	.127	.201		1.419	.111	.273	3.669
X2	-.047	.140	-.051		-.335	.739	.237	4.219
X3	.242	.150	.198		1.618	.161	.366	2.733
X4	.134	.129	.136		1.040	.302	.322	3.105
X5	.394	.131	.429		3.015	.004	.271	3.689

Although the paper reports on assurance, it was necessary to regress the other four aspects in the larger study since the study adopted SERVQUAL model to improve digital institutional repository information services to postgraduate students at universities in Meru County, Kenya.

The results of regression weights indicate that although the five predictor variables were jointly statistically significant in a combined model, it is assurance which exerts more influence on institutional repository service provision as compared to reliability, tangibility, empathy and responsiveness respectively, at universities in Meru County, Kenya. These were in agreement with conclusions made by Trivedi and Bhatt (2019) and Bandara et al. (2021) who reported the applicability of SERVQUSL model in libraries.

4.0 Conclusion

The findings led to the conclusion that, assurance level among institutional

repositories at university libraries in Meru County was moderate. Assurance in repositories is enhanced through integrity standards, timely feedback, intellectual property rights, and information retrieval features such as spelling suggestions and aesthetic discoverable tools/features.

5.0 Recommendations

University librarians should, support internal capacities of repository staff through regular training and professional development. ICT managers and University librarians should establish guidelines and financial policies that influence upgrading and management of repository technology and infrastructure. The results have an implication on institutional repository policies related to staff retooling, staff code of conduct, and students awareness. The results further implicates the university management body to increase fund allocation to libraries to cater for infrastructure, technology, facilities and other resources.

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