

Analyzing Administrative Service Quality: A Case Study Of A Regional Secretariat

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ABSTRACT

Administrative service delivery remains one of the most visible measures of government performance, yet local bureaucracies in Indonesia continue to struggle with translating formal procedures into consistent, citizen-centered practice. This study examines the quality of administrative services, particularly the handling of incoming and outgoing correspondence, at the Administrative Service Unit (Unit Layanan Administrasi/ULA) of the General Bureau, Regional Secretariat of North Sulawesi Province, and identifies the factors that constrain optimal service delivery. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed, guided by an interactive analytical model of data collection, reduction, display, and conclusion drawing. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews with key informants, direct observation, and documentation review, with credibility established through source and method triangulation. The findings show that consistent application of standard operating procedures, supported by electronic queuing systems and online document-tracking platforms, has meaningfully improved timeliness, accuracy, and transparency. However, service quality remains constrained by uneven staff understanding of procedural detail, ageing infrastructure, unstable internet connectivity, and workload imbalances relative to staff numbers. Courtesy, complaint responsiveness, and physical comfort were found to be strong contributors to public trust, even as budgetary and spatial limitations persist. The study concludes that sustainable improvement in administrative service quality requires an integrated strategy combining continuous staff training, infrastructure renewal, and adaptive procedural review. These findings offer practical implications for regional secretariats seeking to strengthen bureaucratic responsiveness and provide a contextual basis for future research on digital-era public service reform in Indonesia's subnational governments.

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1. Introduction

The accelerating diffusion of information technology across public and private institutions has reshaped the way governments organize, deliver, and account for public services. Technology has become deeply embedded in the operational fabric of modern bureaucracy, shaping how administrative tasks are planned, executed, and evaluated (Batool et al., 2021). Without adequate technological support, government agencies struggle to deliver services with the speed, precision, and efficiency that citizens increasingly expect. This transformation is particularly visible in the shift toward digital government platforms, which several studies describe as central instruments for improving transparency, efficiency, and citizen access to public services (Aminah & Saksono, 2021; Nurlaila et al., 2024; Wagola et al., 2023). Yet the

promise of digitalization is realized only partially when it is not accompanied by parallel investment in human resource capacity, institutional culture, and procedural discipline (Zacharias et al., 2021).

Public service delivery functions as one of the clearest indicators of how citizens perceive the performance of the state, whether that service originates from civil servants or from private providers acting on the government's behalf (Fakhriyah et al., 2022). Public service, in this sense, denotes every activity conducted by government or private actors that produces goods or services intended to satisfy collective needs (Fakhriyah et al., 2022). This framing is broadly consistent with Indonesia's Public Service Act No. 25 of 2009, which remains the subject of ongoing scholarly review regarding its adequacy in guiding contemporary service standards (Oktarina & Israhadi, 2023). More recent theoretical developments have moved beyond the transactional New Public Management paradigm toward a Public Service Logic that positions citizens as co-creators of value rather than passive recipients of standardized output (Andhika, 2025). This shift carries direct implications for how correspondence and records units should be evaluated: not merely by procedural compliance, but by their capacity to generate trust through consistent, responsive interaction with the people they serve.

Public sector organizations occupy a strategic position in Indonesia's governance architecture precisely because the sheer number of government institutions places corresponding pressure on them to demonstrate accountability and responsiveness (Dewi & Suparno, 2022). Good governance principles, transparency, accountability, and public participation, have increasingly been treated as measurable determinants of citizen trust rather than abstract normative ideals (Yuniarta & Purnamawati, 2020), and bibliometric evidence suggests that good governance scholarship in Indonesia has expanded rapidly over the past decade without a corresponding increase in practice-based, sector-specific studies (Fauzan & Jahja, 2021). Public institutions are consequently expected to innovate continuously, streamlining internal processes to achieve productivity, responsiveness, transparency, accountability, and freedom from corruption, collusion, and nepotism (Linelejan, 2021).

Administrative service is an inseparable component of state governance, closely tied to the pursuit of transparency, efficiency, and accountability in public management (Masengi et al., 2023). In the Indonesian context, ensuring that administrative processes run smoothly and in accordance with regulation remains a persistent challenge, one closely linked to the quality of human resources, the maturity of supporting systems, and the availability of enabling infrastructure such as information technology (Gusliana et al., 2026). Empirical evidence drawn from local government audit and financial data likewise indicates that administrative and oversight quality is directly associated with the public service quality that citizens ultimately experience (Furqan et al., 2020), while cross-regional studies show considerable disparity in service quality outcomes between more developed and less developed regions of the country (Aryani et al., 2023).

North Sulawesi Province illustrates these national dynamics at the subnational level. As digital infrastructure expands, provincial government agencies face mounting pressure to modernize administrative processes while continuing to confront familiar constraints: limited numbers of competent personnel, inconsistent internet connectivity, and inadequate supporting facilities (Pane et al., 2020). Within the General Bureau of the Regional Secretariat of North Sulawesi Province, the Administrative Service Unit (Unit Layanan Administrasi/ULA) is tasked with managing personnel, finance, general administration, records, and official vehicles. Earlier studies conducted within this same institutional setting examined the effectiveness of data management within the unit (Pane et al., 2020) and the implementation of e-office-based administrative policy across the provincial government (Linelejan, 2021); both reported that human resource limitations and infrastructural gaps continued to undermine otherwise well-

intentioned procedural reforms. Complementary evidence from a neighboring administrative unit in Manado further shows that archival and document-handling practice remains a persistent weak point in local bureaucratic performance (Mandulangi et al., 2024), while nationwide studies on civil servant competency consistently identify training gaps as a root cause of uneven service quality (Tamsah et al., 2020; Zacharias et al., 2021).

Despite this accumulating body of evidence, three gaps remain unaddressed. First, most prior assessments of ULA-related services in North Sulawesi relied on generic effectiveness indicators or single-dimension policy evaluation, without situating findings within an integrated service-quality framework capable of capturing both procedural and relational dimensions of delivery (Linelejan, 2021; Pane et al., 2020). Second, the theoretical lenses used in earlier local studies, frequently derived from generic, decades-old service-industry quality typologies, have rarely been cross-validated against more recent, empirically grounded frameworks such as the modified SERVQUAL model (Shetty et al., 2022) or Public Service Logic (Andhika, 2025), both of which offer sharper analytical distinctions between reliability, responsiveness, assurance, tangibility, and empathy in bureaucratic settings. Third, few studies have specifically isolated the correspondence-handling function (*surat-menyurat*) as a unit of analysis, even though incoming and outgoing correspondence functions as the connective tissue of nearly every downstream administrative process within a regional secretariat.

This study addresses these gaps by examining administrative service quality in the correspondence function of the ULA through a qualitative lens that integrates procedural indicators, effectiveness and efficiency, consistency, standards, and systematization, with a discussion grounded in contemporary SERVQUAL and Public Service Logic scholarship. Its novelty lies in combining fine-grained interview evidence from frontline officials and service users with a theoretical discussion connecting procedural compliance to wider debates on civil servant competency, digital infrastructure, and citizen trust, an integration that earlier single-lens studies of the same institution have not attempted. Addressing this gap is urgent: unresolved inconsistencies between formal procedure and everyday practice risk eroding public trust precisely as North Sulawesi's provincial government invests heavily in digital transformation. Accordingly, this study aims to analyze strategies for improving the quality of administrative services at the ULA, to identify the factors that inhibit optimal service delivery, and to formulate recommendations that support more responsive, accountable, and citizen-oriented public administration.

2. Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach intended to produce a comprehensive, contextually grounded picture of administrative service practice rather than a statistically generalizable measurement of it. Consistent with the interpretive tradition in public administration research, the approach prioritizes depth of meaning over breadth of sample, allowing the researchers to trace how formal procedures are interpreted and enacted by different actors within the same institutional setting. The research was conducted at the Administrative Service Unit (ULA) of the General Bureau, Regional Secretariat of North Sulawesi Province, with an explicit focus on the handling of incoming and outgoing correspondence. Four indicators guided the inquiry: effectiveness and efficiency, consistency, adherence to standards, and systematization of service delivery. Key informants included the Head of the General Bureau, the Head of the General Affairs Division, the Head of the Finance Division, the Head of the Leadership Administration Sub-Division, members of the unit's information-technology team, and two service users, a member of the general public and a civil servant from another agency, selected purposively for their direct involvement in or experience of the correspondence service.

Data were collected using a triangulated combination of direct observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation review. Observation allowed the researchers to verify informants' accounts against the actual flow of service delivery, including queuing practice, document handling, and staff-citizen interaction at the service counter. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each informant using a guide organized around the four service indicators, with follow-up questions used to probe unanticipated themes as they emerged. Documentation review covered internal SOP manuals, service standard charters, and archival records related to correspondence handling, which served both as a source of contextual data and as a means of cross-checking informants' statements. This triangulated design was chosen to compensate for the limitations inherent in any single method and to strengthen the credibility of the resulting interpretation.

Data analysis followed an interactive model comprising data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Masengi et al., 2023). Data reduction involved coding interview transcripts and field notes according to the four service indicators and emerging sub-themes such as infrastructure, staff competency, and citizen experience. Reduced data were organized into thematic displays that allowed patterns and contradictions across informant groups, officials as against service users, to be compared systematically. Conclusions were drawn iteratively throughout the fieldwork period rather than only at its end, and were continuously verified against new data as they were collected. Trustworthiness was addressed through source triangulation, comparing accounts from officials, technical staff, and service users, and through method triangulation, cross-checking interview data against observation and documentary evidence; discrepancies between sources were treated as analytically meaningful rather than discarded as noise.

3. Result and Discussion

Fieldwork at the ULA generated a rich body of interview, observation, and documentary evidence, organized below around the four indicators that framed the inquiry, timeliness and efficiency, consistency, standards, and systematization, and interpreted throughout through the combined lens of the modified SERVQUAL model, which foregrounds reliability, responsiveness, assurance, tangibility, and empathy (Shetty et al., 2022), and Public Service Logic, which reframes citizens as active participants in the co-creation of service value rather than passive recipients of standardized output (Andhika, 2025).

Timeliness and Efficiency Strengthen Reliability at the Service Counter

Informants across ranks converged on a single point: the consistent application of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) is what keeps the correspondence service moving. As the Head of the General Bureau put it, every obstacle is treated as an opportunity to innovate, and a clearly written SOP is what allows the unit to keep its service consistent and professional. That conviction is visible in concrete measures already in place: an electronic queuing system, an online consultation channel, and recurring staff-competency training, all of which have shortened waiting times, reduced friction, and made the process more transparent. The Head of the General Affairs Division framed the underlying philosophy in similarly direct terms, arguing that good service should be reachable anytime and anywhere, and that technology is the backbone of efficiency. Innovations such as a digital service portal and an online document-tracking system have made the unit noticeably more responsive to citizens' needs. From the vantage point of service users, this responsiveness is tangible. GR, a member of the public, described feeling respected because staff consistently verified that documents met requirements and remained courteous even close to closing time. MO, a civil servant from another agency, likewise praised the professionalism shown by staff even under time pressure.

These gains map directly onto the reliability and responsiveness dimensions that dominate recent SERVQUAL-informed public sector research (Shetty et al., 2022); electronic queuing, online tracking, and structured consultation channels have visibly shortened waiting times and improved the accuracy of document handling, consistent with evidence that digitally integrated service-quality frameworks measurably improve institutional responsiveness and efficiency in similarly resource-constrained public organizations (Utami et al., 2026). Yet timeliness and efficiency have not been fully achieved without friction. The Head of the General Affairs Division acknowledged that some newer staff still struggle to internalize SOP details, describing procedural understanding as a foundation that has not yet spread evenly across the workforce. The unit's IT team pointed to a parallel constraint: outdated devices and unstable internet connections that periodically undermine the smooth operation of online systems, a problem compounded by a workload that has grown faster than staffing levels, as the Head of the General Bureau also confirmed. Service users, for their part, raised concerns about long queues during peak hours and insufficiently clear information about administrative requirements, which GR said often forces the public to ask the same questions repeatedly.

This persistence of workload imbalance, ageing hardware, and connectivity gaps illustrates a pattern documented across Indonesian local governments more broadly, where administrative and oversight quality correlates directly with the service quality citizens actually receive (Furqan et al., 2020), and where measurable disparities between well-resourced and under-resourced regions continue to constrain reliability even where procedures themselves are sound (Aryani et al., 2023). Critical success factor research on public service modernization similarly finds that technology adoption alone rarely resolves reliability gaps unless paired with sustained investment in staffing and infrastructure renewal (Karampotsis et al., 2024), a conclusion this study's evidence strongly corroborates. Taken together, these accounts suggest that consistent SOP implementation paired with targeted technology adoption has produced genuine, measurable progress, even as resource and infrastructure constraints continue to cap how far that progress can go. As the Head of the Finance Division observed, every rupiah allocated to facility improvement functions as an investment in public trust, a sentiment that captures the unit's broader ambition to evolve into a more responsive and professional model of modern local bureaucracy.

Consistency and Assurance Shape the Human Side of Frontline Service

Beyond day-to-day efficiency, informants emphasized SOPs as the backbone of consistency over time. The Head of the General Bureau described the SOP as a roadmap that guides every step of service delivery, allowing the unit to maintain quality without compromise even as demand and technology evolve. Digital tools such as the electronic queuing and document-tracking systems were explicitly designed to reinforce, rather than replace, this procedural backbone, easing staff workloads while making the process more legible to the public. The Head of the General Affairs Division reinforced this point, describing the SOP as a living document that must be continually adapted to field conditions if it is to remain both consistent and relevant. Continued investment in staff competency was identified as essential to sustaining this consistency. The Head of the Leadership Administration Sub-Division stressed that employees must understand the SOP not as a mere rulebook but as a tangible expression of the institution's commitment to quality service.

The courtesy, accountability, and thoroughness that service users repeatedly praised correspond closely to the assurance dimension of service quality, understood as the confidence citizens place in staff competence and conduct (Shetty et al., 2022). That this assurance persists even amid heavy workloads suggests a degree of institutional culture and professional commitment that aligns with findings on how organizational culture and workplace environment shape frontline employee performance in Indonesian public agencies (Zacharias et al., 2021).

Even so, informants candidly acknowledged limits to this consistency. The Head of the General Bureau noted that a procedure not properly understood functions as little more than text on paper, and that newer staff in particular require closer guidance. Under time pressure, some procedural steps are occasionally skipped altogether, a pattern the Head of the Finance Division linked directly to infrastructural shortfalls: without adequate supporting systems, SOPs are difficult to implement in full. Service users experienced this tension from the other side of the counter. MO, a civil servant, observed that SOPs sometimes feel too rigid to accommodate situations that call for a faster, more flexible response.

This observation echoes the Head of the Leadership Administration Sub-Division's own framing: a good SOP should make service easier, not more restrictive, an ambition the unit continues to pursue through ongoing evaluation and revision of its procedures in dialogue with both staff and the public it serves. This uneven grasp of SOP detail among newer staff, repeatedly flagged by supervisors themselves, echoes a well-documented pattern in the Indonesian civil service literature: training and knowledge-sharing mechanisms remain the single most consistent predictor of service quality and work-life quality among civil servants (Tamsah et al., 2020), and competency gaps of exactly this kind persist nationally despite formal mandates for continuous professional development. Addressing this gap through structured, recurring training rather than one-off orientation sessions would directly strengthen the assurance dimension identified in this study's findings.

Standards and Digital Access Reveal the Limits of Infrastructure

A third theme concerned how well staff understand and apply the service standards embedded in the SOP. The Head of the General Bureau described the SOP as a promise to the public that every service will be carried out with professionalism and accuracy, framing procedural discipline as an institutional commitment rather than a bureaucratic formality. Digital tools, again, were positioned as enablers of this standard: the Head of the General Affairs Division explained that the electronic queuing and tracking systems give staff a structured way to ensure every process unfolds systematically, which in turn builds public confidence. Continuous training was repeatedly cited as the mechanism through which abstract standards become everyday practice. The Head of the Leadership Administration Sub-Division described a deliberate effort to translate SOP theory into daily routine so that the document functions as a living guide rather than an inert reference. From the service-user side, GR reported a distinctly positive experience, noting that the clarity of process and staff members' evident command of procedure left little room for confusion.

This orientation toward structured, technology-enabled service reflects a broader shift toward Public Service Logic, in which citizens are treated as co-producers of value through participatory interaction rather than passive recipients of a fixed procedural output (Andhika, 2025), and is consistent with national evidence that digital transformation initiatives improve efficiency, transparency, and accountability in Indonesian public services, provided they are matched by adequate social, political, and organizational readiness (Aminah & Saksono, 2021; Wagola et al., 2023). Nonetheless, gaps in standard implementation persisted, particularly among newly recruited staff. The Head of the General Bureau conceded that a standard is only as effective as its shared understanding, and that some employees had not yet fully internalized procedural detail. The Head of the Finance Division added that under deadline pressure, certain steps are sometimes bypassed altogether. Technical disruptions compounded this problem: MO described how digital-system outages occasionally force the unit back onto slower manual methods, while some members of the public reported insufficient clarity about the standards governing their specific requests, a gap that can breed confusion among those less familiar with contemporary administrative procedure.

This recurring reversion to manual processes whenever systems fail underscores a persistent access and innovation gap: digital tools widen the door to service only as far as the underlying infrastructure allows. The finding parallels evidence from a neighboring administrative unit in Manado, where document and archival handling remained a structurally weak point despite broader digitalization efforts (Mandulangi et al., 2024), suggesting that infrastructure and records-management capacity, not merely front-end digital interfaces, deserve closer institutional attention going forward.

Systematization Shapes the Everyday Experience of Service

The final theme concerned the systematic character of daily administrative work. The Head of the General Bureau likened the SOP to a compass, arguing that its presence keeps every process orderly and prevents steps from being skipped or rushed. The Head of the General Affairs Division extended this metaphor to leadership, arguing that supervisors must themselves model correct SOP application if staff are to follow procedure with confidence rather than mere compliance. Digital systems again played a supporting role: the unit's IT team described integrated tracking tools as the backbone that keeps every stage of the process visible and easier to monitor and follow. For service users, this systematization translated into a tangible sense of order. GR observed that the entire process felt well organized, with staff who clearly knew their responsibilities, leaving little sense of wasted time.

This everyday sense of order, cleanliness, and accessibility functioned as a quieter but no less consequential determinant of citizen trust, corresponding to the tangibles and empathy dimensions of service quality (Shetty et al., 2022). The finding resonates with governance research showing that transparency and physical accessibility function together as key elements shaping how citizens judge the legitimacy of local government institutions (Yuniarta & Purnamawati, 2020), and with bibliometric evidence indicating that good governance scholarship in Indonesia has increasingly linked procedural transparency to tangible, experiential dimensions of service delivery rather than treating them as separate concerns (Fauzan & Jahja, 2021). Challenges nonetheless surfaced. The Head of the Leadership Administration Sub-Division noted that newer employees still require close mentoring to follow procedural steps correctly, while the Head of the Finance Division pointed to high workload volumes as a recurring source of skipped steps and minor, avoidable errors. Infrastructure again emerged as a constraint: the IT team described how ageing hardware and unstable connectivity periodically force a reversion to slower, more error-prone manual methods.

On the public-facing side, MO noted that information about required steps is not always communicated clearly, leading citizens to make repeated inquiries before understanding what is expected of them. The persistence of these capacity constraints, despite the unit's genuine efforts at improvement, suggests that budgetary allocation for tangible service infrastructure remains as important to public trust as procedural or digital reform, a conclusion consistent with public service management scholarship emphasizing that citizen-perceived value emerges from the interaction of procedural, relational, and physical service elements together, not from any single dimension in isolation (Andhika, 2025).

4. Conclusion

This study set out to analyze strategies for improving the quality of administrative services at the Administrative Service Unit of the Regional Secretariat of North Sulawesi Province, to identify the factors inhibiting optimal service delivery, and to formulate recommendations for a more responsive, accountable, and citizen-oriented public administration. The findings show that consistent SOP implementation, reinforced by targeted digital tools such as electronic queuing and document-tracking systems, has produced measurable gains in timeliness, consistency, and procedural clarity. Read through the combined lens of SERVQUAL and Public

Service Logic, these gains correspond most clearly to improvements in the reliability, responsiveness, and assurance dimensions of service quality. At the same time, uneven staff understanding of procedural detail, workload imbalance, ageing infrastructure, and unstable connectivity continue to constrain the unit's capacity to translate well-designed procedures into fully consistent practice, particularly in the tangibles and access dimensions of service delivery.

These findings carry practical implications for the Regional Secretariat and comparable local government units elsewhere in Indonesia. Structured, recurring competency training, rather than sporadic orientation, would directly address the assurance and reliability gaps identified among newer staff. Continued investment in hardware renewal and network stability would reduce the unit's dependence on error-prone manual fallback procedures, while periodic, participatory review of the SOP itself, involving both staff and service users, would help keep the document a living guide rather than a static compliance artifact. More broadly, the study suggests that digital transformation efforts in subnational government are unlikely to yield their full benefit unless pursued alongside parallel investment in human resource capacity and physical service infrastructure.

This study is not without limitations. Its qualitative, single-site design privileges depth of understanding over statistical generalizability, and its relatively small number of informants, while appropriate for the purposive, meaning-oriented aims of the inquiry, means that the findings should be read as analytically rather than statistically representative of administrative service units elsewhere in Indonesia. Future research would benefit from complementing this qualitative account with quantitative service-quality instruments, such as a modified SERVQUAL survey administered across a larger sample of service users, and from comparative case studies across multiple regional secretariats to test whether the patterns identified here, particularly the tension between procedural design and infrastructural capacity, hold more broadly across Indonesia's decentralized public administration.

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