

Full Length Research Paper

Challenges of technology mediated approach to counselling in the National Open University of Nigeria

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The main thrust of this paper is to identify impediments militating against the provision of quality guidance and counselling services through technologically mediated approach in the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). The current trend all over the world points on how transformation of counselling from mechanical phases to digital phases, which will enhance quick and quality service delivery. NOUN as University has 63 professionally qualified counselling psychologists with minimum qualification of Master's degree, and also it is the largest single employer of counsellors in Nigeria. Also, the Student Counsellors in NOUN have the obligation of providing support services to distance learners from the first enquiry through to graduation. This paper discussed the concept of open and distance education as it applies to Nigeria, the mission statement of NOUN, the learner support services, guidance and counselling services in NOUN, information and communication technology in education, advantages of using computer and internet facility for counselling an open and distance education, counselling services from first enquiry through graduation of studying in ODE that could be offered through the internet, challenges of guidance service delivery in NOUN made incisive recommendations on how to improve technology mediated guidance service delivery.

Key words: Internet, challenges, technology, counselling, distance education.

INTRODUCTION

Federal Government of Nigeria National Policy on Education defined Open and Distance Education as the mode of teaching in which learners are removed in time and space from the teachers. It went further to state that, Open Distance Education uses a variety of media and technologies to provide and/or improve access to good quality education for large number of learners wherever they may be (Federal Republic of Nigeria 1998, 2004: 44). Based on this philosophy, the Federal Government of Nigeria established the National Open University in 1983 but by 1984, the Military Government of Nigeria who took over power through coup from the democratically elected government that established the University made no budgetary allocation to it. With this action of the Federal Military Government, the University ceased to function. In 2002, the Federal Government of Nigeria revisited the issue and established the present National Open University of Nigeria.

As of February 2010, there were 39 functional study Centres (32 study centres, 4 special study centres, 1 donated study centre and a community donated centre) in 31 States of the country including the Federal capital territory. New centres will soon take off within the next

few months in the 3 remaining states (Zamfara, Delta and Ebonyi), all the 36 States of the Federation would have had at least one study centre. Some local government areas are already offering facilities for the establishment of study centres in their local governments.

MISSION STATEMENT OF THE NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA

The unique feature of National Open University of Nigeria is the single mode of operation as an Open and Distance Education institution which delivers instructions at a distance using a variety of media and technologies with the intention of providing and/or improving access to quality education for large number of learners wherever they may be. The mission statement of the National Open University of Nigeria is therefore to make education accessible, flexible, learner centred, functional cost-effective and provide support services which adds life-long value to quality education for all who seek knowledge. In order to realise the above stated mission, Directorate of Learner Support services was created and

guidance services become the catalyst in meeting the needs of the intended and registered students. Guidance in Open and Distance Learning involves a range of processes aimed at helping individuals become more self-reliant and more able to manage their own personal, educational, and vocational development (Bailey, 1987: 33) Findings have indicated that failure to address unmet needs is likely to lead to unsatisfactory learning experiences, reduced achievements and perhaps attrition (Owen and Renwick, 2004).

GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING IN THE NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA

In National Open University of Nigeria, study centres serve as the first contact point between the students and the University. The study centres functionally coordinates the activities of the University within the local government area or state of abode. All support services including guidance services are rendered to the students at the study centres. The task of a student counsellor in the National Open University of Nigeria is to provide guidance services to distance learners, staff and the general public within 1 h to 7 working days and throughout the session. Every study centre is also involved in complying frequently asked questions which would serve as bases for providing guidance services such as on-line counselling.

The main aim of guidance and counselling in the University is to track a potential student from the point of first inquiry through graduation and often for life time , plan intervention strategies and assist him or her to painlessly over come both academic and socio-psychological obstacles that will militate against his or her successfully completion of his or her studies. Guidance and counselling in the University, is based on individual or group counselling.

The provision of guidance services in NOUN is done by 63 profession student counsellors at 39 study centres across Nigeria. The student counsellors provide regular guidance and counselling to the students with respect to several aspects of their studies including enrolment, choice of programmes and courses, when and how to study, and when to seek for special clinics for academic guidance (NOUN, 2007).

The counsellors have the responsibility of keeping in constant touch with distance learners and providing any early warning signals regarding difficulty with studies in order to provide prompt remedial actions In NOUN, Counsellors are expected to deal with learners' issues or questions in a timely and constructive manner. Contact with learners should be regular and supportive so that learners feel able to raise questions and issues that they may otherwise feel that they are not important enough to present to their counsellor. Essentially, any contact of a counsellor has with a distance learner helps to build confidence and motivation and it will regularly reassure them that they are heading towards the right direction or

achieving their objectives. According to McNickle (2004), Bailey (1985), Brown (1987) and Somayajulu and Ramakrishna (2008), counsellors in ODL are expected to provide induction/orientation activities, academic counselling, informing and advising, career and personal counselling (exploring problems and suggesting directions) making referral to the appropriate professionals, assessment: giving feedback to the individual on non-academic, aptitude and skills, advocacy: making out a case for not supplying study material registered and paid for, writing a reference and; promoting changes within the institution to benefit students, administration (NOUN, 2007).

NOUN is aggressively pursuing a technologically driven service delivery in most of its activities. The efforts that are already in place include filling of admission form online, online registration, e-payment of fees, information dissemination, student records and data, and major publication; for instance, 399 course materials are uploaded on the web for students to download, video conferencing, 196 course materials on CD ROM, cassette and as from December, this year, on demand examination and e-examination on Maple platform will be online. From the frequently asked questions, the directorate is sure the counsellors are very much aware of the needs which distance learners expressed. With the rate at which the National Open University of Nigeria is going technologically, Student counsellors must rise to the occasion in order to remain relevant. Interestingly, all the student counsellors have laptop computers courtesy of the arrangement made by the university with an indigenous computer com-pany. In congruence therefore, the counsellor is expected to ensure that in all cases and at all times, the last man/woman on the queue is served. With tremendous increase in student population (3338 students admitted in the year 2009 only) and with the registered 302 disabled population, it has become crucial for the student counsellor to be IT compliant in all ramifications.

As of now, the most commonly used media for counselling with learners are; face to face individual/group counselling, telephone (one to one) counselling by letters and handbook. None of the student counsellor had commenced telephone conferencing (one too many), counselling through e-mail and computer conferencing (posters, mailing, e-mailing e-chat) or even video-conferencing. With the large population of students in need of guidance services, the present media of counselling being used by the student counsellors in NOUN seem to be inadequate and ineffective in meeting the need to respond quickly and timely to students' inquiries, complaints, information dissemination, advising and counselling needs of the students.

ADVANTAGES OF USING COMPUTER AND INTERNET FACILITY FOR COUNSELLING IN OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

At this juncture, it is pertinent to identify some enormous

advantages of "Counselling by internet" in Open and Distance Education. The use of internet for counselling demands access to computers and telecommunication equipment. On-line discussion or dial-up telephone can be conducted through the computer networks. The counsellor interacts with more learners simultaneously at different terminals. The counsellor announces the contact time in cyberspace and distance learners log-in to discuss the issues. It is known as bulletin board system as the chat room or talk room which holds one-to-one or to many conversations, respectively. "E-mail" is another internet facility commonly used for counselling by internet.

For example, instead of writing letters and waiting for several days to get the reply by post, counsellors can post assignments, announcements, supplemental materials, as well as give feedback or responses to distance learners' individually or in a group. "World Wide Web" is another way that can be used by the counsellor of reaching out in a one-to-many way. In this way the counsellor can see the distance learner and the learners can see the counsellor. The internet counselling is suitable for informing, advising and counselling the distance learners. As of now, 16 of its study centres have linked up with the Nigerian satellite for the provision of internet connectivity.

Counselling by computer or interactive video-disc is a growing phenomenon especially with the advent of relatively cheap micro-computers. The relatively interactive and non-threatening nature of computer counselling makes many learners appear to enjoy it and find it useful. The process of counselling through computer is mostly used for developmental and career counselling. It is suitable for providing advisory and information services to the distance learners. However, if learners are using a computer technology for the first time, it is better to provide instructions in print so that they are not left without any means of communication (IGNOU, 2001: 15).

COUNSELLING SERVICES FROM FIRST INQUIRY THROUGH TO GRADUATION STAGE OF STUDYING IN OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION THAT COULD BE OFFERED THROUGH THE INTERNET

Counselling services in NOUN could be categorised under the following three stages: Pre-enrolment, enrolment and graduating stages.

Pre-enrolment stage

In NOUN most of the learners came from a conventional system which its mode of instructional delivery is quite different from the single ODL system. At the pre-enrolment stage, many of the learners are oblivious of the unique feature of ODL and their responsibilities as ODL students. This makes counselling imperative before enrolment and every stage of their studies. At the pre-

enrolment stage, advising, informing and counselling approaches seem to be more appropriate in order to woo the learners and also to timely response to the learners. It also provides with the opportunity to clarify issues, creates a sense of belonging and provide contact persons whom they will be interacting with over the period they are enrolled, and prospective learner requires advising, information and counselling about:

- (i) Access to a full range of support services available at the study centres.
- (ii) About academic programmes in order to select the best courses for their needs and to ensure they have a through understanding of what employment opportunities and skills they will have on completion.
- (iii) The programme entails and the expectations are of them as learners.
- (iv) Prospective learners who desire to pursue their studies through distance mode.
- (v) To vide information about admission procedures and schedules,
- (vi) About DL system and methodology including counselling and assignment schedules, induction, library, tele-interactive sessions, despatch of course materials and examination system.
- (vii) Miscellaneous information about fees, scholarships, financial assistance and recognition of prior learning
- (viii) How can the access application forms for academic programmes at various places.
- (ix) Information in respect of these programmes should be provided by various means such as posters, mailing, e-mailing and media.
- (x) These documents should be made available to the learners at affordable prices.

These main areas of concern were expressed by the National Open University students through their frequently asked questions. These issues could be quickly and time addressed through telephone, computer conferencing (posters, mailing, e-mailing, bulletin, e-chat).

Post admission stage

At the enrolment stage the registered students expect a comprehensive and robust induction/orientation programme. As learners transit into the enrolling stage they need considerable guidance and an opportunity to clarify issues (McNickle, 2004) The most important areas of concern expressed by NOUN students in their "frequently asked questions" is how to be in constant touch with their facilitators/ counsellors, how to get prompt response to their needs and complaints, quick and quality feedback on their academic work and knowing their responsibilities and duties as ODL students.

The student counsellors are expected to devise,

develop and manage student database and constantly monitor all counselling needs of every student, identify students who are at the risk of dropping out of their programmes and for the purpose of providing effective guidance and counselling services. These services can be delivered more quickly and effectively through information and communication technologies. It is important and absolute necessary for distance learners to have frequent contact with the counsellor especially in the initial stages of their learning. This could be done through exchanging of mails via an e-mail. This contact has many benefits including maintaining motivation, reducing frustration and clarifying issues and queries (McNickle, 2004).

Graduating learners

Graduating learners need information on career destination, need to acquire job search skills, resume development interview skills and agency links. These services could be provided by providing relevant information on the internet for the students to read or through an organised workshop, seminar and clinics by the counsellor. This can compliment the information posted on the net for the students.

CHALLENGES FACING TECHNOLOGICALLY DRIVEN COUNSELLING SERVICES IN NOUN

The main challenges of the various channels of counselling these days is the selection of appropriate channel of communication which delivers clearly, accurate and quality information to the students as desired by the counsellors without any distortion. The effectiveness of each component contributes to the overall effectiveness of the counselling process. Barriers to effective technologically driven counselling in NOUN include:

(i) The fact that the use of computers and the internet is still in its infancy in developing countries such as Nigeria, and when these are used at all, due to limited infrastructure and the attendant high costs of access (COL, 2008), it will be very costly to bear by individual and the University.

(ii) Inability of most learners in National Open University of Nigeria to use computer and internet facilities etc. proficiently militates against efficient guidance service delivery through these means and also most of learners cannot afford personal computers. Poor communication between the senders and receivers especially when using phone or face –to-face counselling media.

(iii) Problem necessitated by external factors such as lack of or accessibility to information and communication facilities like computer and internet, constant electricity supply, telephone service etc, in most of the NOUN study centres hamper efficient delivery of guidance's through

computer and internet.

(iv) Another factor that makes access to guidance services difficult in NOUN is the cost structure of telephoning or teleconferencing or online counselling per unit cost, per counselee and per counselling session is extremely expensive in terms of staff, time and could also be inaccessible to distance learners.

ORGANISATIONAL ISSUES

What are the organisational requirements and the barriers to be removed before counselling media can be used successfully?

(i) Most of the NOUN study centres lack appropriate channels of counselling (Phones, video and audio cassettes, computer and internet facilities, radio and television etc) which delivery clearly, accurate and quality information to the students as desired by the source (the counsellor or education institution) without any distortion

(ii) Novelty: The use of technologies like phone, computer and internet, radio, television, video and audio cassettes for guidance and counselling is new in Nigeria educational system. Because of the novelty of these technologies and their cost implications NOUN is unable to provide them in most of its study centres for guidance and counselling.

(iii) Abysmal network services from Global Service Mobile provide professional counselling purposes through phone facility are expensive in developing economy.

(iv) In NOUN media selection is left to the discretion of individual counsellors and availability of the media. There is no policy or bench mark to determine the minimum media of counselling that should be provided for a counsellor at the study centres.

(v) Abysmal postal service in Nigeria is another bottle-neck in the deliverance of guidance services in NOUN. It takes weeks for letters to reach its destination, whereby create a big communication gap between the sender and receiver.

RECOMMENDATIONS

(i) Study centres should be created and equip with modern information and communication facilities and equipment. This is because to get in touch with a learner at a distance involves the use of other communication technologies apart from face to face means.

(ii) Fund should be specially allocated to answer phone SMS and provide other services at all the centres.

(iii) Since ODL is information and communication media driven, minimum standard or bench mark should be set in the provision of media facilities, laboratories and computer centres in the available study centres.

(iv) Study centre managers, counsellors and facilitators should undergo regular computer literacy training

programmes.

(v) The availability and process of media selection must be considered in designing guidance services. In selecting media of counselling, consideration must be given to the media that are capable of presenting all the intended information to the counselee in clear and unambiguous manner.

(vi) The chosen medium of counselling should enable the counselee to take active part in the counselling process.

(vii) The chosen technology should be accessible to all counselees wherever they may be.

(viii) The chosen technology should be flexible to the needs of the target group.

(ix) Cost structure of each technology chosen and the unit cost per counselee must be assessed and be within the affordable level of the counselees.

(x) The chosen medium should be capable of meeting counselling strategy, needs of every student, enable interactivity easy to use and be used friendly.

CONCLUSION

Apparently, counsellors in NOUN in particular and in Nigeria as a whole, you must ensure that, they are not left behind in the attempt to acquire ICT skills that will make their work compliant with the modern day technologically driven services provision. They should not remain off line while the National Open University is online. They need to improve their computer literacy, ability to use the internet and completely familiarise themselves with NOUN Portals.

The writer has highlighted the principles and philosophy of ODL, support services, guidance services, media, and challenges in providing quality technology mediated guidance services, recommendations and conclusions.

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