



E-Counselling for Learner Support Services in ODL Institutions: A Practical Approach

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Abstract

Like in conventional institutions, students in open education encounter various problems ranging from social, psychological, vocational to academic challenges, which impede their performance and retention. Their case is worsened by the virtual nature of their studies, which demands adequate support in order to engage in meaningful learning and studentship. This paper therefore explains e-counselling as an innovative learner support service necessary to engage students in open education. E-counselling is an online counselling that provides students with the platform to interact with their counsellors using a variety of social media networks. Efforts were made to look at some networks that could be made available for e-counselling in open education such as Facebook, e-mail (g-mail, Google talk, Skype, WhatsApp), twitter, video conferencing, blog, instant messaging and chat among others. These social media networks ensure that students are not isolated as they provide better alternative to face-to-face counselling, which many experts now see as narrow, archaic and selective in the face of the present technological advancement of the entire world. Some fundamental challenges facing the use of this innovative platform include power failure, poverty, illiteracy and attitudinal problems towards the use of computers. Ideally, every open education institution should have a robust learner support services unit with adequate facilities necessary for e-counselling in order to engage students in meaningful virtual academic activities.

Keywords: e-counselling, learner support service, social media networks, open education.

Introduction

In open education, efforts are being made to engage students in mobile and ubiquitous learning through innovations in technology and social media. Similarly, stakeholders in open education engage in various forms of pedagogical innovations and support services to ensure that students learn at optimal level. One of these forms of assistance is through the learner support services where counselling is seen as a critical area and hub of operation (Ukwueze, 2013) in the advent of information technology to enable counsellors interact and communicate with students beyond the traditional face-to-face medium (Okoroegbe, 2013). This stems from the fact that students in open education also encounter various challenges ranging from social, psychological, vocational to academic issues. Specifically, they need counselling through learner support services as a form of intervention on choice of academic programmes, adjustment to family and study life, change of programme and deferment of admissions (Nanka & Ezekannagha, 2013). Tait (2003) is of the opinion that students of open and distance learning institutions need guidance and support to essentially impact on learning for academic success and reinforcement of their sense of confidence, self-esteem and progress. This is expected to also provide avoidable drop out strategies.

The imperative of counselling in open education is monumental and unquantifiable. Ukwueze (2015) asserts that social counselling in tertiary institutions including open education institutions involves explanation of rules and regulations guiding students' conduct, social vices like examination malpractices, cultism and relationship problems while psychological counselling treats issues relating to stress management, examination phobia, test anxiety, family life adjustment and self-image. Academic counselling on the other hand deals with information on course unit system, study habit, time management and information on norms and challenges of tertiary education. Vocational counselling in tertiary education explains criteria for change of course or programme, change of institution, career talks, occupational choice and subject combinations, trends in employment opportunities and job placement for graduating and other students (Ukwueze, 2015).

The need for e-counselling in open and distance education cannot be overemphasized. Experts are of the opinion that the traditional face-to-face counselling in open education is becoming obsolete and ineffective in the face of the prevailing technological revolution in the service delivery of open education. For instance, the present face-to-face counselling is inadequate to meet students' inquiries, complaints, information dissemination, advising and

counselling needs (Okopi, 2010). Besides, the evolution of Internet based technology and its accompanying effects on modern life has changed what students should learn, how learning should happen, where and when learning can happen (Ayiro, 2013), thereby relegating face-to-face academic counselling to the background.

Students in open education seem to be often confused about the progress of their studies and may find it difficult to reach their counsellors for face-to-face interactions thereby increasing their frustration and agitation to drop out. It is important to be reminded that open education is student-centred and most learners who are left to their devices are often helpless and need assistance (Tahir, 2016). Such assistance should be far reaching to cover learners in their diverse locations especially in course registration, registration for examinations, facilitation of courses, missing scores and results, time management, study skills, interpersonal relationships, contact with staff and fellow students and other personal challenges that might affect their studies. This can only be achieved through a robust learner support services using online counselling (Ojo, 2013) to enable counsellors interact with more learners simultaneously at different locations (Okopi, 2010). By implication, counsellors are required to be knowledgeable in e-counselling and virtual interaction in order to provide effective student support. This requires that online counselling facilities are fixed to enable counsellors use them in tackling students' problems; counsellors equally need to explore useful information in order to interact and provide needed solutions to students' problems through Internet connectivity. Such services could assist students who may be thrown off balance by ICT or discouraged by its present situation in the society.

Conceptual Clarifications

In order to attend to this paper adequately, some key concepts need to be explained and clarified. These concepts are open education, learner support services, counselling and e-counselling.

Open Education: This is a means of securing relative freedom of access and choice of pattern of education. Some experts have described this concept as an education that is not place bound; it occurs in students' environment (Bates, 2015). Badmus and Salawu (2012) see open education as any form of learning in which the providers enable individual learners to exercise choice over any one or more of a number of aspects of learning. It is a form of education that encourages learner autonomy, a situation where learners make

decisions regarding their own learning based on abilities and capabilities. Thus, open education is synonymous with distance education where open learning emphasizes flexibility and unhindered entry into a system by people who are geographically distant. Characteristically, open education is learner focused and learner centred. It is learner focused because of its humanistic perspective in education. Here, the learner is assumed to have a high degree of autonomy. Open education is also learner centred because teaching and learning processes focus on the learners' needs, aspirations, interests and abilities. In addition, open education uses e-tutoring where facilitation is done through the use of Internet services with the learner and the facilitator being located in different environment. Learning is through self-paced effort with support provided using Internet services like videos and e-materials or open education resources (OER).

Learner Support Services: Open education is a concept that is highly learner centred and requires adequate support for meaningful learning to take place. Learner support services include all elements that are capable of responding to a known learner or group of learners, before, during and after the learning process (Thorpe, 2002). Also, Kehrwald (2007) sees learner support as a dynamic institution-student relationship that addresses the needs of learners and empowers them to create learning experiences, which are more personally meaningful, more relevant and more productive thereby adding value for learners. For Ojo (2013), learner support is a unit that must be well organized with competent and qualified personnel for both online and offline counselling that will help in removing the isolation which e-learning students usually face. Thus, learner support services with counselling as its key component provides interactive succor to learners who are deeply involved in open education.

Counselling: Generally, counselling is seen as a help provided by a member of staff (tutor, mentor, etc.) or a peer (student) in relation to education or, more commonly, personal matters (Shukla, 2005). Counselling is a process of assisting individuals with academic or personal problems that interfere with their learning to overcome such problems. It is mostly needed where individuals need help in order to overcome some life challenges in order to maximize their potentials. Counselling can be individualized in a one-on-one interaction process to solve personal problems. It can also be a group affair where people with common problem and interest are assisted to solve such problems either individually or as a group. In open education, counselling could be offline or online (Ojo, 2013) with a view to providing assistance to

learners who might be finding it difficult to sort out problems relating to family life, time management, course registration and examination matters.

E-Counselling: With sporadic or geometric increase in the number of people seeking for knowledge and with the introduction of technology into the teaching-learning process, counselling has gone beyond the traditional face-to-face interactive sessions, which are limited in space and time. Kolog (2014) sees e-counselling as an electronic way of receiving supportive counselling either through an exchange of e-mail, live webcam session over the Internet or via telephone and through digital games. E-counselling could be referred to as online counselling, Internet counselling, computer based counselling, automated counselling or virtual counselling. Whichever way one may wish to address it, e-counselling makes use of ICT facilities to provide assistance to people who are separated geographically and over a period of time especially in open education using web pages on the Internet such as e-mail, video conferencing, web based messaging, twitter and telephone services as its major tools.

Current Counselling Practices in Open Education: The NOUN Experience

The National Open University of Nigeria was statutorily established to provide open and distance education in Nigeria (NOUN) with a view to ensuring that a vast majority of Nigerians who were hitherto denied higher education for one reason or the other acquire qualitative education at affordable cost. Counselling is a useful educational service described as the hub of learner support services in open and distance education (Ukwueze, 2013). In realization of this, counselling has become one of the critical learner support services available to students of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) at the study centres across the country as it is in other open and distance education institutions in the world (Okoroegbe, 2013). In NOUN, student counsellors at the study centres interact with students regularly with respect to enrolment, choice of programme and courses, when and how to study and when to seek for special clinic for academic guidance and other issues (Okoroegbe, 2013). In most cases, prospective students denied admissions besiege admission officers of each faculty at the University headquarters to sort out their problems instead of going through student counsellors at the study centres. This is because the university trained some lecturers who are not trained counsellors as admission officers of their faculties. Some of such admission officers often display aggressive, unfriendly and unprofessional behaviours and attitudes to such applicants,

which can scare them away and deny them the opportunity to have access to education.

Similarly, several students with problems in connection to their results and other academic matters are often seen being treated shabbily by the receptionists or examination officers of their faculties. Furthermore, Student counsellors at various study centres are saddled with administrative duties, which prevent them from providing counselling services to students. They only provide guidance services to students on issues relating to course registration, examinations, missing scores, change of programmes and study centres. In most cases, some students make use of only phone calls and e-mail platforms to contact their counsellors or project supervisors to book appointment with them.

E-Counselling Platforms in Open Education

In every human activity designed to achieve a set objective, there are usually plans designed and laid down to that effect. Similarly, in e-counselling, there are laid down plans or strategies for using computer mediated skills to achieve counselling objectives in open education. In this regard, counsellors are expected to be patient, empathic, tolerant, creative and eager or willing to talk to students at all times. In the same vein, different learners in open education may possess different counselling needs that may require different counselling approaches. Besides, due to digital revolution, different counselling strategies have also emerged using different communication platforms. Zamani (2009) and Shiller (2009) identified five of such e-counselling tools as e-mail, chat, web based messaging, video conferencing and short message system (SMS). Okoroegbe (2013) also identified social media sites like face book, e-mail, g-mail, google talk, twitter, skype and blogs as major strategies used in disseminating information to and interacting with students during e-counselling in open education. These platforms are discussed briefly to demonstrate their usage and usefulness in e-counselling.

E-mail: This is called electronic mail, which is a fast form of communicating or transmitting information electronically using computers (Kolog, 2014). It is an ideal platform for e-counselling as it is fast, free, convenient and capable of reaching remote and distant students within seconds provided there are Internet services or network and that the students too have e-mail account. Zamani (2009) posits that e-mail is an ideal platform for counselling people with different time schedules, stating further that it provides an opportunity for introspective response and allows students to provide information through text without any undue pressure. In using this platform, a

learner can have access to his/her e-mail account at his/her convenience and read and reply to any inbox message at will (Okoroegbe, 2013). Other e-mail related means of disseminating information which could be useful during e-counselling include g-mail, Google talk, Instagram, Skype and WhatsApp.

Facebook: This is yet another tool for e-counselling in open education where learners, irrespective of their geographical location can easily reach their counsellors and fellow learners through posting of information to the web site. Counsellors can post information that can immediately be accessed by students and use it as an interactive chat to connect to students and answer their questions on time (Okoroegbe, 2013). Facebook is widely used by friends, peers, colleagues, families and instructors to reach each other in order to exchange information and ideas among themselves.

Web-based messaging: In e-counselling, web-based messaging is an emerging platform where web technologies allow counsellors and their clients to interact in a secure, web-based environment using a third-party host (Zamani, 2009). This encourages peer counselling where students assist themselves by exploring and resolving personal concerns especially academic work (Kolog, 2014). Web technologies are available on the Internet and could be used in open education as an alternative to face-to-face counselling.

Video conferencing: This is a method of e-counselling which involves people in two or more locations and are linked through sound and vision transmitted and received by them. Kolog (2014) asserts that video conferencing involves transmission of image and voice of the participants over a long distance with simultaneous interactive communication among the users. Video conferencing is a synchronous or real-time platform that provides multiple sensory cues like visual appearance, body language and vocal expression that can ensure valuable information for understanding the clients as they sit in front of a camera (Suler, 2000). This platform can however be compromised by loss of body language, jerky conditions, reduced or blurred picture, loss of sound, thereby creating interruption when interacting with a group of students synchronously (Kolog, 2014).

Instant messaging and chat: The use of mobile telephone especially the digital and smart phones has become a turning point in text-based communication over the Internet or other related networks. The short message system (SMS) does not even require Internet services before sending a message across to another person. The instant messaging is usually a private network communication between two individuals while chatting

involves two or more users in a network communication. Chat provides virtual group session for chatting and permits more than one person for information sharing or counselling services (Kolog, 2014). Jennings et al (2006) posit that chat or instant messaging can either be private, where a user is invited to join a session or public, where users also join counselling sessions on invitation. Thus, with webcam usage, voice chat sessions and SMS, e-counselling in open education has high prospects for coverage over a distant. Kolog (2014) lists AOL Instant Message (AIM), Skype, Microsoft Messenger (MSN) or Yahoo Messenger (YMSG) as useful chats and instant messaging platforms that could be used widely for online counselling using standard mobile phones like smart phones, and android among others.

Twitter: This social media network allows users to send and receive messages called tweets (Okoroegbe, 2013). The twitter platform or tool is a free online device that can enable individuals who are connected to the account to post and read tweets online. Highlighting the advantages of twitter, Okoroegbe (2013) states that non-registered users can read tweets posted online, while users who are registered customers can post and read tweets posted by others through the website. In e-counselling, this tool is quite useful and can be widely used in disseminating information at no cost.

Blogs: This is another computer mediated communication (CMC) platform that can facilitate educational counselling in open education where learners often face some problems relating to fatigue, poor time management as well as academic and social isolation. Blogs are used in education to connect students, foster support, promote self-expression, share information and personal opinions (Deng & Yuen, 2010). This platform simplifies information dissemination in group e-counselling sessions by encouraging collaborative work in a dynamic learning environment like open education system. Blogs are web logs where an individual can write or post recent information and links to other websites that are of interesting and relevant to them.

The social media networks discussed above as tools or strategies for embarking on e-counselling in open education are by no means exhaustive. Besides, more sites are evolving as there continues to be more revolution in technologies due to constant quest for research and breakthrough in the area. In all, it is quite obvious that social media sites can bridge the gap between learners and counsellors in open and distance education (Okoroegbe, 2013). In this regard, students can raise issues that they feel are relevant to them within a confidential environment without allowing the counsellors to be in

charge of discussions as often witnessed in face-to-face situations (Debenham, Whitelock, Fung & Emms, 1999). With these ICT empowered platforms, e-counselling is expected to provide remote counselling to students over a long distance (Kolog, 2014) as an alternative means of contacting counsellors towards assisting students in their academic and social activities. It is therefore expected that students would be given the opportunity to engage in effective learning and life management via e-counselling in open education through various social media sites as explained in this paper.

Benefits of E-Counselling in Open Education

In the foregoing discussion of social media sites used in e-counselling, attempts were made to bring out some advantages of e-counselling in open education. It is important to state here that in spite of the huge benefits associated with traditional face-to-face counselling, e-counselling remains more flexible with diverse benefits such as convenience, cost saving, time control and reduction of potential intimidation of clients during counselling sessions (Kolog, 2014)

Online counselling is an easy and convenient means of reaching clients. In open education, it offers platforms capable of increasing accessibility and reducing frustration. Thus, e-counselling provides students access to service anytime including holidays and ensures that at any convenient time, they can contact their counsellors remotely (Kolog, 2014). Okopi (2010) asserts that in e-counselling, counsellors interact with more learners simultaneously at different times using cyber space where they log in to discuss issues concerning assignment and other pressing matters wherever they might be. Such interactions can be at the comfort of students' leisure time and place. E-counselling also saves costs for travelling, accommodation and time. In this regard, students can use their mobile phones and laptops to contact their counsellors without travelling to meet them. This arrangement saves cost especially if the two parties are not living in the same location; the students might also be far away from their study centres for another personal engagement that may require assistance.

Also, e-counselling allows students in open education to engage in meaningful time control and management. It encourages more control and less time wasted on non-agenda issues as counsellors and students usually arrange and agree on time and purpose of meeting ahead of time (Kolog, 2014).

Finally, with virtual or online counselling, students in open education are saved from potential intimidation usually experienced in face-to-face counselling sessions. For instance, victims of rape, HIV/AIDS, homosexuality, terrorism, child abuse and neglect, wife battering and a host of others can discuss their problems using online platforms to disclose their personal problems. They could do this without fear of intimidation, labelling, discrimination or stigmatization. Thus, e-counselling provides a cover for students to disclose their problems at any time without necessarily contemplating on how they could be received by counsellors.

Challenges Facing E-Counselling in Open Education

In open education, learning is not place bound; rather it occurs in students' locations to demonstrate its relative freedom of access and choice of routes towards course completion. The place of e-counselling in this regard cannot be overemphasized as earlier stated in this paper. However, despite the laudable advantages of e-counselling over the traditional face-to-face counselling, it is sad to observe that full implementation and integration of e-counselling into the learner support services of open education is facing a lot of challenges especially in Nigeria and indeed several other countries in Africa. Prominent among such challenges include power failure, poverty, network coverage and outage, issue of confidentiality in e-counselling using social media network, attitudinal problem and illiteracy.

Unsteady Power Supply: The epileptic power supply in Nigeria is a huge challenge to the use of automated media in counselling. In general, the poor supply of power and telecommunication facilities such as radio receivers, television and computers grossly affects the integration of ICT into Nigerian education (Alumode, 2013). This is even compounded by non-availability of alternative power supply at the disposal of students (Odoemenam, 2013). Similarly, not every Nigerian can afford generating sets as alternative sources of power, which invariably affects people that may wish to benefit from automated counselling. The three tiers of government in Nigeria should endeavour to revamp the electricity industry to make it functional in order to avoid interrupted power supply. Alternatively, functional generating sets with high voltage should be supplied in every study centre of open and distance education institutions with ICT facilities.

Poverty: Statistics has shown high level of poverty in Nigeria, which has affected many people in different forms. For instance, one of the recent reports released by the World Bank indicates that between 2004 and 2014,

about 33% of Nigerians are considered poor (www.nairaland.com/2418994/ranking-nigerian-states-poverty-rates). The use of ICT facilities in counselling requires Internet services via computer sets and mobile phones, which requires a reasonable amount of financial resources to acquire and maintain. The fact remains that many Nigerians cannot afford computer sets or android mobile phones to access and service Internet services. In most cases, they depend on cyber café providers whose services are often provided at exorbitant prices, which cannot be easily afforded in most cases. The government at all levels should initiate poverty reduction programmes that can empower Nigerians towards acquiring wealth in order to afford what they need, especially facilities they can use to improve themselves such as computers and alternative power supply to operate the computers.

Network Coverage and Outage: Although Internet services have been in existence in Nigeria for quite some time via cyber cafes but the use of mobile phones came into the country in the year 2001. Till now, not all the communities are covered by mobile telecommunication network. Where there are services, users often complain of network outages and poor services, which is a serious challenge to e-counselling in open education. Such users cannot engage in e-counselling but may rely heavily on face-to-face counselling that could be limited in time and space. For e-counselling to be meaningful to such disadvantaged people or learners, the Nigeria Communication Commission (NCC) should ensure that all the communities and wards in Nigeria are hooked to the network grid of all telecommunication networks in the country. In addition, service providers whose services are often epileptic should be sanctioned and made to pay for damages each time they default.

Problem of Confidentiality: The use of social media networks for e-counselling suffers a lot of integrity and confidentiality challenges. For instance, as laudable as chat platform might be, Ralls (2011) believes that chat does not offer enough confidentiality to clients and can only be used to disseminate general information to an individual or group of students. His argument is based on the fact that chat messages can easily be hacked thereby leaking confidential information to the public. Similarly, tweets posted to the website via twitter and face book often suffer the same fate as the confidentiality of information posted using the tools are not always guaranteed. However, with secure and customized server, information on

such social media tools is highly secured to ensure confidentiality in e-counselling.

Poor Attitude towards the Use of Computers: Inadequate knowledge of Internet operations may contribute to poor attitude and lack of interest in the use of ICT facilities for counselling. Many adults see computers as devices meant for the young ones. Several of such people pay little or no attention to the use of computers to solve any problem. Thus, young people who are often referred to as *digital natives* are more interested in ICT usage than their older counterparts called *digital migrants* who use computers only as their work and basic needs demand. Also, many Nigerian students do not even want to discuss their personal problems online because they are not sure of the confidentiality of their discussions. Hence, many Nigerians need reorientation and change of mindset in the application of computers to counselling in order to be part of the ongoing and unprecedented pace of information technology explosion all over the world.

Inadequate Computer Literacy: Distance learning as earlier stated is a technology-oriented learning approach, which requires adequate knowledge of use of computers and Internet services. Several Nigerians as observed are digital analogue and migrants who have little or no knowledge of the use of computers. The digital natives are the young ones who are currently in conventional institutions and some service agencies like banks, cyber cafes and other places. In addition, several students generally lack knowledge in the use of ICT equipment, which affects their interest in computer Internet assisted activities (Odoemenam, 2013). Similarly, many counsellors are not computer literate and cannot apply it in e-counselling; some of them are merely struggling to use computers because they are compelled by their authorities to do so. In addition, most of the students of the open and distance education system that are relatively older, cannot access information from computers easily without assistance. As a result, they may not have e-mail facilities through which they can interact with counsellors to solve their problems. Be that as it may, mass training of Nigerians who are computer illiterate at community level at no cost can boost computer literacy in order to embrace e-counselling in open education.

Conclusion and Suggestions

Open education is an approach that ensures easy access to education. Its effectiveness is dependent upon available learner support services. Students enjoy maximally with effective learning outcomes in the system if adequate

counselling services are provided during their course of studies. It is reasoned that one of the effective means of strengthening learners support services in open education is to ensure that e-counselling is given its rightful position as a means of engaging students for effective learning and retention. This is premised on the fact that the facilities available for online counselling are interactive to enable counsellors and students explore information that are tangential to the process of solving some or all the students' problems in their various locations. Currently, counselling is practiced through the traditional face-to-face interaction where counsellors are merely consulted to sort out issues relating to change of programme, course registration, graduation period and missing results in various study centres of open and distance education institutions. It is expected that these students' problems could easily be solved by counsellors through the application of ICT facilities in counselling using social media networks. With this in place, it is also expected that several students would be reached with ease using computers, Internet services and mobile phones where social networks are available for use. It is also envisaged that this form of counselling in open education could be hampered by power failure, poverty, network coverage and outage, issue of confidentiality in e-counselling using social media networks, attitudinal problem and illiteracy. However, these problems could be solved through government interventions in several ways. It is in realization of this that this paper suggests that:

- Government at all levels should initiate poverty reduction policies and bursary awards to indigent students in ODL institutions to enable such students acquire computers and ICT facilities that they can use as students in order to access information needed for their studentship.
- Government and wealthy individuals should assist in providing alternative sources of power to people in every community where there is a community study centre for distance education for effective functioning of ICT facilities for students' use.
- There should be regular training and retraining of every practicing counsellor in ODL institutions to update their knowledge in the tenets of automated counselling through seminars, workshops and conferences.
- There should be outreach counselling services for reorientation of the mind-sets of distance learning students and the general public too towards the use of computers in order to be abreast with the huge benefits of e-counselling in open education.

- All the civic centres and the education units of all the 774 Local Government Areas in Nigeria should be equipped with modern computer sets with Internet services, which should be operational from Monday to Sunday to enable poor distance learners in remote areas have access to the facilities in such centres for e-counselling and other academic assignments provided online by their counsellors and facilitators.
- Every student in open education should be provided with a modem and an Internet package at subsidized rate by his/her institution as part of his/her learning materials to enable him/her have access to Internet services at all times.

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