RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Challenges of Student Counseling in Open and Distance Learning: The Case of Zimbabwe Open University

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Manuscript Info

Abstract

Students in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) face a number of challenges and most of these emanate from the fact that they are separated from their institution of learning in terms of space and time. If quality is to be attained in Distance education then counseling must be put at the centre of student services. Counseling affects and influences student performance thereby influencing the quality of education delivery. Of great concern is the separation from the teacher and fellow students which imposes a sense of psychological isolation for the ODL student. The psychological trauma for ODL students is further exacerbated by the fact that most ODL students are mature adults who are usually employed and have family demands to balance in addition to the demands that ODL studies place on them. This makes the provision of counseling services an essential component of the students support services in ODL. Despite the key role that counseling plays in ODL there appears to be limited use of counseling services in most ODL institutions. The paper underscores the importance attached to counseling in ODL institutions as an essential student support service. The paper explores the reasons behind the under utilization of counseling services. It will also come up with recommendations to improve the uptake of counseling services in ODL.

Introduction

Professional counseling is a relatively new field in Africa more so in Open and Distance learning (ODL) environments. Initially questions were indeed raised regarding the relevance of counseling to ODL students. However, over the years counseling has emerged as a central and crucial student support service which has got a bearing on the quality of ODL. Students in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) face a number of challenges and most of these emanate from the fact that they are separated from their institution of learning in terms of space and time. If quality is to be attained in Distance education then counseling must be put at the centre of student services. Counseling affects and influences student performance thereby influencing the quality of education delivery. Of great concern is the separation from the teacher and fellow students which imposes a sense of psychological isolation for the ODL student.

The psychological trauma for ODL students is further exacerbated by the fact that most ODL students are mature adults who are usually employed and have family demands to balance in addition to the demands that ODL studies place on them. This makes the provision of counseling services an essential component of the students support services in ODL. Counseling services in ODL become first and foremost a quality issue that is vital in influencing the quality of graduate education and is essential for the continued sustenance of distance learning. This ensures that ODL students complete their study programmes. Despite the key role that counseling plays in ODL there appears to be limited use of counseling services in ODL institutions. The paper underscores the importance attached to counseling in ODL institutions as an essential student support service. The paper explores the reasons behind the under utilization of counseling services. It also comes

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up with recommendations to improve the uptake of counseling services in ODL.

Definition of Key Terms

Distance Education
According to Portway and Lane (1994) the term distance education refers to teaching and learning situations in which the instructor and the learner or learners are geographically separated, and therefore, rely on electronic devices and print material for instructional delivery. Thus distance education entails the separation of teacher and learner which sets it apart from conventional face to face lecturing. It may also involve two way communication so that the student may benefit or even initiate dialogue.

Distance learning is used as a term to describe the student-centeredness of distance education and it utilises print and new multimedia communication technologies to present individual lessons to learners at a distance. While distance teaching refers to the didactic strategies of delivering instructions to students, and this is teacher-centered. Correspondence study entails distance education through the postal sub-groups. That is, learning at home and communicating with teachers using the print resources as primary elements of distance education. (Keegan, 1996:32-34).
Distance education relies on noncontiguous communication between the educator and the distant student. Put simply, distance education refers to the delivery of useful learning opportunities at convenient places and times for learners who are usually adults, irrespective of the institution providing the learning opportunity (Kaufman, Watkins & Guerra, 2001:19-26).

Distance education has four key features which are: institutional certification where learning is licensed by an institution; the use of diversity of media especially multimedia technologies for instructional delivery; provision of two-way communication to ensure the interaction of the teacher with the learner, and the learner to learner interaction; and the possibility of face-to-face meetings for tutorials for teacher-student interaction as well as student-student interaction and laboratory or practice session or library study.

Counseling
According to Osipow (1970:10-11) counseling refers to all efforts directed towards the facilitation of the learning process by looking at the relationship between the individual's overt responses and the environment of that individual in order to assist in the

development process and broaden the individual's problem solving and coping repertoire. Counseling in the context of distance learning systems means "the advice, help and support given to students to enable them to make satisfactory progress in the system" (Mapfumo, 2001).

An Overview of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Zimbabwe
The narration of student support services for distance education clients in Zimbabwe dates back to 1993 when University distance education was first offered in the training of educational practitioners. The department of Education at the University of Zimbabwe established a Centre for Distance Education with an initial enrolment of 623 Students studying for the Bachelor of Education in Educational Management. In 1996 the Centre for Distance Education became the University College for Distance Education. On the 1st of March 1999, through an Act of Parliament (Chapter 25:20), the College for Distance Education became the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). Over the past decade, distance education at the ZOU has grown exponentially. ZOU has become "THE UNIVERSITY" with approximately 18700 students, 1795 academic staff and 395 non - academic staff. ZOU has four faculties, (1) the faculty of Arts and Education, (2) the faculty of Science, (3) the faculty of Commerce and Law and (4) the faculty of Applied Social Sciences. ZOU established Regional Centres in each of the ten Municipal provinces of the country.

These include the following:
1. Harare
2. Mashonaland East
3. Mashonaland Central
4. Mashonaland West
5. Matebeleland North
6. Matebeleland South
7. Bulawayo
8. Manicaland
9. Midlands
10. Masvingo

The Structure of Student Management Services at Zimbabwe Open University
The Centre for Student Management Services is one of the most important departments responsible for student support services. The fundamental role of the centre for student management services and support unit is the provision of counseling and advisement services. In higher education, advisement, guidance and counseling of students is not a new phenomenon. Students have always had challenges for which they needed counseling or advice on. However, at ZOU

the provision of professional student counseling services has only just emerged. The department of student management was created in 2008 and this was followed up by the appointment of Regional Student Advisors/Counselors in September 2008 throughout the ten regional municipal provinces.

Before then, advisement and counseling services had always been provided, albeit on a low profile. Thus counseling and advisement was provided to students by non professionals in the form of tutors and lecturers. However, the ever growing student numbers and the increased sophistication of problems encountered by students necessitated that a professional approach to student counseling in distance learning be adopted by ZOU. The challenges which called upon the use of professional counselors included the increases in student drop outs, low completion rates and low pass rates. It is firmly on the background of such challenges that professional student counseling services were developed at ZOU in the bid to curb and address the problems.

The main aim of guidance and counseling in the University is to identify a potential student from the point of first inquiry through graduation and often for a life time through various activities that incorporate former university students in university activities as a way of boosting future enrolments like the alumni , planning intervention strategies in order to assist students to painlessly over come both academic and socio-psychological obstacles that will militate against their successful and timely completion of their studies with maximum effort. The Counselor's role in ODL includes providing induction/orientation activities, academic counseling, informing and advising, career and personal counseling thus exploring problems and suggesting directions to take. The counselor is also expected to make referrals to the appropriate professionals, assessment: giving feedback to the individual on nonacademic, aptitude and skills, advocacy: noting university short comings by 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 and administration (McNickle (2004), Bailey (1985), Brown (1987) and Somayajulu and Ramakrishna (2008).

The most commonly used media for counseling learners are; face to face individual/group counseling, telephone (one to one) counseling by letters and handbook. At the moment the student counselor has not commenced telephone conferencing, counseling through e-mail and computer conferencing (posters,

mailing, e-mailing e-chat) or even videoconferencing. This is mainly because such technologies are still yet to be made available by ZOU. With the large population of students in need of counseling and the geographical spread of ODL students the media being used by the student counselors at ZOU seem to be inadequate and ineffective in meeting the needs of students of providing timely responses to students' inquiries, complaints, information dissemination, advising and counseling students.

This paper reports a study the researcher conducted at the ZOU Mashonaland East Region to establish the challenges and effectiveness of student counseling as a support service. The study was guided by five key questions.

Importance of the Study
The study has both theoretical and practical significance to ODL institutions. It presents a critical analysis of the challenges faced in providing counseling services at the ZOU thereby giving an insight into challenges in ODL counseling in general. The study assesses challenges and opportunities faced by both ZOU and its students in the provision of counseling services and recommends strategies that can be adopted to overcome the challenges.

The Role of Student Counseling in Distance Learning
The role of the student counselor in ODL is to provide counseling and clinical services to students experiencing psycho sociological problems that could be potentially disruptive to their successful academic performance. Counseling also enables ODL students in adopting new and more effective ways to cope with stress and disappointment which is often associated with mature students as they try to balance work, family life and academic study pressures.

Student counselors also make referrals, for seriously distressed students to psychiatrists and they also provide opportunities that enable students who may be experiencing personal, social or educational problems to work towards becoming more effective in their lives within and outside the institution. However of critical importance is the ability of ODL student counselors to assist and support students with the transition to university life. For most ODL students the transition involves a shift from conventional learning to ODL which is a huge change which if not managed properly may result in poor performance and alarming student dropout rates. ODL counseling services should encompass developmental and preventative programmes that

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assist students to become more effective and resourceful in their academic lives.

Characteristics of Distance Education Students and their Counseling Needs
Distance students are usually defined and categorized according to four major distinct characteristics which are namely age, gender, employment status, marital status, number of children, dependents, distance between residence and the distance education institution, Level of education and social status (Tucker 2003). Distance learning students are usually older comparing with typical students engaged in campus-based programs. Hence they encounter more psycho-social problems which they encounter which might affect their academic progress necessitating the need for counseling in order for them to pursue their studies unhindered.

The latest research shows that 75% of distance learning students are men at the global level. Such findings match those of Kangai (2010) et. al. Who noted that the number of male students at ZOU exceeded that of female students in their profile of a typical ZOU student**.** Most distance learning students

have full-time jobs. The reason why people use ODL as a means of study is because they want a chance to advance in their careers while they earn an income. The attempt to juggle careers and academic study whilst isolated from the tutor and fellow students places huge psychological stress and strain on the distance students hence the need for counseling.

Distance learning students are mature adults who are mostly married and have to combine study with their work and family. People study with ODL because they want to achieve enhancement in their careers. Therefore, their attitude to work is responsible. Distance learning students have little free time to pay attention to the details of assignments. Therefore, instructors should provide them with a clear and detailed syllabus. Instructors should understand that their students may be busy with work and family and sometimes have no time for assignments. Therefore any attempts to provide counseling services should note the limited geographic reach and limited time that ODL students have.

Profile of a ZOU Student

Age	20-60 Years
Gender	Male (60%) Female (40%)
Educational level	Minimum Ordinary level
Marital status	Married
Average number of own children	3 Children
Average number of dependants	3 People
Employment status	Employed
Income-Salary	Less than USD 2,400 p.a
Mean distance travelled to local regional centre	100km
Means of transport	Public Transport
Means of communication	Notice board, cell phone
Type of Residence	Rural (90%) Urban (10%)

Adopted from Kangai, Rupande and Rugonye (2010)

In order to ensure that counseling needs of its distance learners are met, an ODL system should understand who these students are. Tucker (2003) notes that, it is imperative to examine the characteristics of ODL students in order to be able to best serve them. Thus counseling services that address the needs of students will depend on the unique needs and characteristics of the learner (Dillon and Blanchard, 1991). According to Ference and Vockell (1994), students characteristics can be described under two categories: psychological factors

and sociological factors. A combination of the two types of factors makes up the psychosocial characteristics of the student. Guy (1991) adds a third category- the socio-cultural context of the student.

Psychosocial Characteristics of the Distance Student
Psychological factors refer to the internal characteristics or elements of the distance student. Adult learners are; active-learners, experienced-based and have expertise in some area, independent, hands-on, life-centered, task-centered, solution-driven, value-driven, skill-seeking, self-directing, motivated (externally), and motivated (internally). (Ference and

Vockell ,1994). Sociological factors are those that exist within the external environment. The environment comprises of the family background, work setting, peer group influence, school setting and societal expectations. The interaction between these two groups of factors (psychosocial) is important in determining the nature of counseling services that ODL students might require and in the manner in which these may be delivered to them.

Salih (2004) notes that in order to provide counseling services that meet the needs of ODL students, apart from identifying students characteristics ODL centers should also consider the socio-cultural context of its students. Thus socio-cultural factors may impede the access and utilisation of counseling services in ODL. Guy (1991) acknowledges that it may be more appropriate to identify the cultures of the learners prior to the development of an institutional response so that it is sensitive to those unique cultural forms that have a bearing on the uptake of counseling services. Acceptance and acknowledgement of the socio-cultural context is the key to developing appropriate counseling support systems for distance learners (Murphy, 1991).As Adult education develops and educational experiences of students transform, the need to provide adult students with counseling services increases. The physio-psychological, social, and economic changes and challenges ODL students face at different stages of life makes the need for counseling services apparent in ODL. (Oduaran, 2000).

Purpose of the study
- To establish the challenges facing counseling and advisement services at ZOU
- To find out the counseling and advisement needs of ZOU students.
- To find out the level of utilisation of counseling services amongst ZOU students
- To find out how counseling services may be improved.

Statement of the problem
What are the challenges facing counseling services at ZOU and the counseling needs of ZOU students?

Research Questions

- What are the factors that impede students from accessing counseling services?

- What are the counseling needs of ZOU students?

- What student advisement and counseling services are provided at the ZOU?

- How can existing advisement and counseling services provided by ZOU to its students be improved?

- How can ZOU improve access to counseling services to students?

Assumptions of the study

- The respondents will respond to questionnaires issued and will agree to interviews

- The respondents will honestly answer questions

- Students are aware of the importance of counseling and advisement services.

Scope of the study
- The study focused on 450 ZOU Mashonaland East registered Students and 1 Student Advisor Counselor

Limitations of the study

- The study was conducted in Mashonaland East region and therefore cannot be generalized for the other 9 ZOU regions.

- The study was conducted over a single semester which might limit accuracy and validity of the information obtained.

Methodology
In order to gather information on the challenges encountered in the provision of counseling services the researcher used the survey technique to gather information regarding the access and utilisation of counseling services. Data was gathered using 200 questionnaires which contained closed and open ended questions and interviews were conducted. Questionnaires were issued to students who came to the Mashonaland East Regional Library, who attended weekend tutorial classes and who came to regional offices for various administrative purposes.

Sample Selection

The researcher randomly selected 210 students out of a total population of 450 students who were registered for the semester and 200 students responded to the questionnaire. An interview was conducted with 1 Student Advisor/Counselor based at the Mashonaland East Regional Office.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected between the periods August to November 2011. The data collected was analysed statistically.

Summary of Findings

- 57% of the students who responded to the questionnaires were male while 43% were female. This concurs with the findings made by Kangai (2010) et. al. in their profile of the typical profile of the ZOU ODL student which indicated that males a more dominant in terms of numbers than females. This may be attributed to the economic inequality which is tilted in favour of men as they have greater access to economic resources and are therefore able to afford to learn.

- The age groups of the ZOU students indicate that only 23% of students are between the ages of 17-30 years while 77% are between the ages of 31-60+. While 71% of students are married, 6% are single, 12% are divorced and 11% are widowed. This marries well with the set up of ODL institutions which are usually made up of mature adults who have limited time and are constrained by distance largely due to family and work commitments. Hence they cannot study using conventional study modes due to family and work commitments but however, they seek to advance themselves academically through distance learning.

- It also emerged from the study that 88% of the students reside in rural to peri-urban residential areas whilst only 12% reside in urban areas. This has got implications on the ability of ODL students to access counseling and advisement services. Thus communication media has to be used that allows students to receive counseling and advisement services from a distance.

- 47% of students are aware of the existence of the Student Advisor/Counselor at the ZOU while 53% are not aware of the existence of the Student Advisor/Counselor. While 23% of students who responded to the questionnaire have consulted the Student Advisor before and 77% have not. This highlights the limited utilisation of counseling and advisement services by ZOU ODL students.

- The study showed that of the students who received counseling and advisement services, 25% needed assistance on social problems, 60% on financial issues and 15% on academic and administrative issues. This is mainly so as mature adult learners have to balance varying family and social issues which requires a lot of financial commitment. Thus having at least three dependants and limited financial resources causes a lot of financial stress on ODL students. This is supported by Kangai (2010) et. al. Since professional counseling is a relatively new phenomena in Africa and the cultural African background encourages sharing of social and personal problems with close relations. This seems to explain why only 25% seek counseling on social personal problems as alluded to by Salih (2004).Creative ways have to be devised that allow students to open up on personal issues that are likely to affect academic performance and influence student retention or drop outs.

- The study unveiled that 76% of the respondents had **NOT** stopped or been disrupted in their studies whereas 24% had stopped and resumed their studies at some point. In addition the study reflected that only 35% of respondents were returning students and 65% were new students. These findings are not surprising considering that only 53% of students are aware of the existence of a student counselor at the ZOU hence the limited utilisation of counseling services. This results in low student retention and also affecting student performance.

- 82% of students indicated that they are comfortable using the telephone and face to face as a means of communication when receiving counseling and advisement. However, respondents cited the prohibitive costs of telephone and cost of travel and the lack of anonymity involved in face to face contact as some of the hindrances in the two communication methods. Only 18% of students preferred email and letters as a means through which they would receive counseling and advisement. This may be attributed to the digital divide hence the limited access to email and the internet and the slow and unreliable postal service.

- The interview with the Student Advisor/Counselor brought out that the major role of Counseling in ODL was to reduce student dropouts, improve academic performance and improving student enrolment. This is achieved through assisting students and potential students with their personal, social, financial, physiological and academic problems or issues in order to lessen the effects of these problems.

- The student advisor identifies students for counseling through observation at occasions such as weekend tutorials, orientation or during the registration. Some students come for counseling following referrals by lecturers and tutors, though these are few as well as drop in students who willingly approach the student counselor for counseling. The Student Advisor/Counselor indicated that Lecturers and Tutors are offering counseling services thereby compromising the provision of counseling services as they are not professionally trained counselors.

- The Student Counselor usually offers 80% of counseling through face to face and telephone communication. However, the student advisor mentioned that more needed to be done to improve student's access to counseling services. The student advisor cited lack of resources for embarking on outreach programmes to enable greater access to counseling services by ODL Students.

Conclusion and Recommendations

- ZOU should establish toll free lines dedicated to the provision of counseling services and this would go a long way in enabling students to access student counseling services. This will allow students to avert telephone and traveling costs. In addition students are more comfortable receiving counseling for personal problems as they can choose to maintain anonymity.

- The Centre for students management unit through regional Student Advisors/Counselors should engage in awareness and publicity drives during tutorials, orientation and registration periods. These will be aimed at raising the awareness of the existence of the Regional Student Advisors/Counselors and their roles and functions. This will go a long way in improving access and the utilisation of ODL

counseling services thus there will be "counseling literacy".

- ZOU should avail more funds for outreach counseling services that will enable the Student Advisor/Counselor to make follow up visits on students who dropped out or who might have received counseling before and who require follow up visits.

- Counselors should provide psychological consultative/advisory/voluntary training service to teaching and other staff enabling them to maximize their effectiveness in carrying out their guidance and learner support roles. Thus other university staff will be better placed to make referrals to counselors whenever they identify student problems that need the expert attention of a counselor. There has to be constant liaising between university staff members who deal with student's regularly especially teaching staff in the form of lecturers and tutors to provide counselors with particular individual students counseling needs. In addition Student Advisors/Counselors should create mail boxes in which students may drop in letters which contain issues they need counseling on while maintaining anonymity. Student counselors may then engage in group counseling sessions with students giving counseling advice on the issues raised.

It is important to note that the need for student counseling in ODL is a vital quality issue in distance education. One is tempted to say that the very existence of ODL is dependent upon attending to the counseling needs of ODL students. Counseling helps address student concerns which range in scope from academic issues to financial and personal social problems which may affect the academic progress of ODL students. Addressing these range of challenges which are largely associated mature ODL students through counseling will avert student drop outs thereby improving student retention and performance. This makes student counseling a very fundamental aspect of student support services in ODL.

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