

CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING SERVICES IN OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Guidance and counselling is a contemporary educational service that is still frantically battling for relevance in Nigerian education. Likewise, distance education is yet to gain its footing in achieving its laudable objective as a means of educating large number of people using multi-media approaches. Despite several challenges and shortcomings, guidance and counselling services are perceived as a means of achieving the goal of open and distance education in any country. This study therefore, examined the challenges and prospects of guidance and counselling services in open and distance education in Nigeria. Among the challenges identified and discussed here are guidance and counselling as an integral part of learner support services, non-availability and inadequacy of guidance and counselling services in some open and distance education institutions, inadequate facilities, professionals, support staff, funds, staff development and ICT-related issues. The prospects of guidance and counselling services in open and distance education in Nigeria depend on adequate provision of funds, counselling facilities, personnel, ICT facilities and robust staff development that can ensure effective service delivery for students' support, retention and success.

Keywords: Challenges, prospects, guidance and counselling, open and distance education.

Education in Nigeria is seen as an instrument par excellence designed to acquire necessary skills and knowledge for effective individual and national development (Federal

Republic of Nigeria, 2004). To achieve this, education in the country is categorized into different stages ranging from pre-school/early childhood through primary and secondary to tertiary levels with varying appropriate modes of instruction. The history of modern education in Nigeria is traced to the incursion of Christianity via missionary activities into the social and educational development of the country which dates back to nineteenth century (Fafunwa, 1974). Since then, there have been series of challenges facing the sector without appreciable solutions and foreseeable prospects. The worst hit are the educational services like the guidance and counselling services, library services, and the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) services which could be blamed on their newness and lack of political will to use them to achieve desired educational goals.

Historically, an attempt to tackle the challenges facing education in Nigeria led to the inauguration of the first ever national curriculum conference at Ibadan in 1969 which culminated into the first national policy on education in 1977. A remarkable feature of this policy which was revised in 1981, 1998 and 2004 was the recognition of guidance and counselling services at secondary school level in view of the fact that many young people are ignorant about career prospects, and coupled with personality maladjustment among school children. In the same vein, the 2004 revised edition recognized the need for open and

distance education to provide access to quality education and equity in educational opportunities for those who were otherwise denied as youths or as a means of improving individuals' educational level for appropriate and relevant career prospects and advancement.

The Open and Distance Education in Nigeria

The emergence of distance education in Nigeria dates back to the era of external examinations organized by Universities of London, Cambridge and Oxford when many Nigerians used the opportunity to obtain General Certificate in Education (GCE) for further studies and employment (Awe, 2013; Ukwueze, 2013). According to Tanglang (2012), the Ashby Report of 1960 paved way for the establishment of Examination Success Correspondence Colleges the same year. Thereafter, several institutions and study centres or correspondence colleges sprang up to float correspondence courses for Ordinary and Advanced Level General Certificate in Education, diplomas and degrees of London, Cambridge and Oxford Universities. This was witnessed across the country; and the students merely read on their own without tuition from parent institutions except examination fees.

According to Awe (2013), the recommendation by the Ashby Commission of 1960 to establish the University of Lagos with a department for correspondence courses was adopted. Also, the University of Ibadan and Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria were allowed to provide extension services to their catchment areas. In the same vein, the Institute of Management and Technology (IMT), Enugu in the early 1980's offered both National and Higher National Diploma (HND) in management courses like marketing, business administration, mass communication and public administration through the "University of Air" programme, provided to students using radio and television broadcasts and week-end face-to-face facilitation (Ukwueze, 2013).

In the 1990's and mid 2000's, several universities established outreach centres in several cities across the country for various certificate, diploma and degree programmes. The National Open University hitherto suspended on April 25, 1984 was resuscitated on the 27th of March, 2002 as the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) to take care of many willing Nigerians who desire to acquire knowledge irrespective of age, gender, religious or ethnic bias. This led to the closure of all the outreach centres of conventional universities and establishment of new ones was declared illegal. Today, the NOUN and the National Teachers' Institute (NTI) are non-conventional institutions authorized to provide single mode open and distance education in Nigeria. Several conventional universities like the University of Ibadan, University of Maiduguri, University of Abuja, University of Lagos, Ahmadu Bello University, Obafemi Awolowo University, and the Modibo Adama University of Technology, Yola, operate dual mode of open and distance education. The unfortunate observation here is that of all the conventional universities in the South East and South-South geopolitical regions of Nigeria, none of them has considered it necessary to run dual mode of distance education as obtained in other parts of the country.

Open and distance education is seen by the UNESCO (2002) as a means of meeting the educational needs of adult population with a view to providing new and alternative learning opportunities for those who were initially deprived of them, or who for one reason or the other, did not make use of them. As an alternative to the conventional face-to-face method of training available and most preferred in most educational systems, open and distance education provides freedom of access, and a wider range of opportunities for learning at a cheap cost. Besides, many people cannot just

leave their work in order to study, or afford the high cost of education in conventional systems; some find it difficult to mix with their younger ones in a classroom setting. This may mean a more learner-centred approach with a lot of flexibility and choice of contents as a viable means of educating many Nigerians.

According to the FGN (2004), Nigeria has embraced open and distance education as a means of acquiring lifelong learning by those who graduated from school and desire to update their knowledge and skills in disciplines or courses of their choice. Similarly, COL (2001) states that the objectives of distance education in Nigeria as enshrined in the national policy are to:

- Provide access to educational opportunities in cost effective manner for those who otherwise would have been denied access;
- Provide a second chance for those who left school for one reason or the other, but who having matured further would want to make a re-entry into the knowledge arena;
- Provide a chance for those who did not avail themselves the opportunities to go to school but who are still within the age range for Universal Basic Education (UBE), to make up for their shortcomings or to become literate and get on with life;
- Enrich the knowledge base of students in regular school programmes as well as others who cannot afford to attend full-time schooling; and deliver educational services in a manner that would be more learner-friendly and would motivate learners to realize that learning is a lifelong affair (COL, 2001, p.108).

With the above objectives in mind, efforts are being frantically made to engage in developing understanding of the various dimensions of learner support as an intervention

to strengthen individual capacity in Nigerian open and distance education (COL, 2001). One of such measures is the use of guidance and counselling services to assist students in solving their problems. There is no gain saying that students in open and distance education are faced with legion of problems like change of job, marriage, finance, social adjustment, academic and other social engagements which necessitate the need for professional counselling via robust learners support services (Ukwueze, 2013). The support services will provide counselling functions like facilitations of students' learning, assisting students in time management, study habits, self-understanding, provision of advocacy services, personal-psychological counselling, vocational guidance and careers development counselling (Ikeotuonye & Ukwueze, 2014). It is obvious therefore, that counselling is the hub of learners support services in open and distance education which makes it imperative for distance education providers to have professional counsellors to interact with students and staff to ensure support, retention and academic success of students.

Guidance and Counselling services in Open and Distance Education in Nigeria

The need for guidance and counselling services in open and distance education as earlier discussed, stems from the student characteristics, nature of open and distance education programmes and allied problems inherent in the system. In Nigeria, open and distance education is majorly provided at the tertiary level of education. In line with this, the Federal Ministry of Education (2000) states that as one of the support services that can aid the realization of the objectives for which tertiary institutions are established, guidance and counselling is expected to:

- Develop in students, skills for better self-understanding;

- Equip students with skills for self-improvement both at school and in later life;
- Assist students in adjusting to the life and culture of their tertiary institutions;
- Provide information on family life education;
- Highlight dangers inherent in various social vices;
- Help students develop better interpersonal skills;
- Equip students with skills for achieving fulfilled academic life;
- Equip students with knowledge, attitude and skills for developing adequate social skills; and assist students develop effective time management skills.

Nnaka and Ezekannagha (2013) are of the opinion that open and distance education has become an integral part of higher education where many students report feelings of isolation and boredom, lack of self-direction, time management and eventual decrease in motivational levels which arise because students are basically separated from their institutions, facilitators/instructors and peers. Students in this category require counselling to prevent higher failure rate and dropout; maximize students' potentials and enhance their learning success, completion rates and full development. Ojo (2012) opines that counselling in open and distance education should include suggestive ways and means of improving students' reading skills, planning and execution of assignment and projects, giving salient points of a lesson, inducting the new comer into the system and providing an exposure to improve study skills.

The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) has a directorate of learner support services which provides counselling services to students and staff. In its entirety, learner support is seen by Keegan (1996) as all the assistance provided by distance education or an e-learning

system which matches the facilities that a face-to-face system provides for the success of its students through information, guidance, registration, integration, results, accreditation assistance and guidance on further study phase. According to NOUN (2003), the main focus of learner support services is to help learners maximize the aims and purposes of their studentship in all ramifications and go through university education with minimal difficulties. The specific counselling-oriented goals of NOUN's directorate of learner support services are to facilitate students' learning; run workshops and seminars on learning strategies and related issues; help learners in time management, study habits and self-understanding; and serve as a bridge between the university and all learners through advocacy services. Others are to provide personal, psychological, vocational and career development counselling; provide required support for students with challenges; and assist students develop side-line capacities needed and useful for enhancing their success as students. Sadly, to achieve these laudable objectives, there are only 67 professional counsellors for 69 study centres of NOUN spread across the country.

In the dual mode institutions (University of Lagos, University of Maiduguri, Obafemi Awolowo University, University of Ibadan, Ahmadu Bello University, and Moddibo Adama University of Technology, Yola), counsellors are also stationed in their distance learning units as coordinators of student support services. It is however, sad to note that in the National Teachers' Institute (NTI), administrative officers who are not trained counsellors work with State Centre Directors of the institute in the 36 state offices of the country to provide counselling services like admission guidelines, resolution of personal problems, registration into various

programmes, and examination matters to students.

Challenges and Prospects of Guidance and Counselling in Open and Distance Education

Open and distance education in Nigeria has its own challenges which to a large extent, have spilled over to other units of the system. Awe (2013) identifies such challenges in terms of societal recognition, funding and quality assurance of academic programmes. For guidance and counselling services in open and distance education, a lot of challenges are suffocating the smooth implementation of the support service. Ukwueze (2013) identifies such challenges as role conflict, funding, poor office accommodation, cultural differences of learners, large population of learners, lack of psychological tests, lack of time for counselling and the problem of e-counselling. With particular reference to NOUN, Ikeotuonye and Ukwueze (2014) enumerate challenges in counselling services in areas of professional counsellors and support staff, staff development, facilities and time for counselling, funding and counselling awareness which can only be solved through the employment of more counsellors, increase in support services, need for more funding and facilities, more opportunities for staff development, freedom from administrative duties and creation of more counselling awareness among students. There are also other challenges like grades in continuous assessment and examinations, missing results, registration of courses, consultation of other sources outside prepared course materials and mix up in examination timetable which students often present for solutions. Among the challenges discussed here include guidance and counselling under learner support services, non-availability and inadequacy of guidance and counselling services in open and distance education institutions, staff development, facilities and

time, funding, counselling awareness, and ICT issues.

Guidance and Counselling Under Learner Support Services:

The concept of learner support services as earlier described makes counselling a sub-set of the unit. While the functions of learner support services are basically counselling oriented, counselling is merely recognized to assist students on information about course registration, change of programme, deferment of admission, adjustment to family life and study life, academic problems, acquisition of appropriate study skills and motivation of students to reduce dropout rate (Nnaka&Ezekannagha, 2013). Despite these counselling roles as enshrined in learner support services, headship of the unit is often based on seniority level in the university without due consideration to professional competence. Ideally, learner support services should be changed to guidance and counselling directorate with a professional counsellor as the officer-in-charge in open and distance education institutions. It makes no sense hiding counselling services under any other unit to ensure effective functioning.

Non-availability and Inadequacy of Guidance and Counselling Personnel and Services:

It is astonishing to observe that some open and distance education institutions do not make use of professional counsellors in attending to students' problems. For instance, the NTI, Kaduna has no single professional counsellor since its approval and inception as an open and distance education provider in Nigeria. This is an institution that has over 100,000 students nationwide. The institute, rather, depends on administrative officers who are not trained counsellors to provide support to students. Similarly, the population of students in dual mode institutions is quite intimidating but the number of practising counsellors in such

institutions is quite negligible. The student-counsellor ratio is equally intimidating and cannot account for effective counselling service delivery. In a situation like this, some counsellors may decide to be indulging in truancy to avoid students. This is a serious challenge that can only be remedied by employing more counsellors in such institutions for better and prosperous service delivery in guidance and counselling units to ensure adequate assistance to students. The recommendation of one counsellor to 2,500 students by the Counselling Association of Nigeria (CASSON) and adopted by the National Universities Commission (NUC) (Arijesuyo, 2012) should be implemented without further delay. Most importantly, the Federal Ministry of Education should compel the NTI to implement the introduction of guidance and counselling services in their system for professional assistance to their numerous students. There is also the need for more support staff to be employed in order to assist counsellors in discharging their duties.

Problem of Staff Development: Another serious challenge facing guidance and counselling services in open and distance education in Nigeria is poor staff development. Sponsorship to conferences and workshops by open and distance education institutions in Nigeria is not always encouraging. In most cases, such requests are kept in view. In addition, opportunities for research and training activities are not adequately available to professional counsellors. As a result, many practitioners often engage in self-sponsored professional conferences and workshops, which is not healthy enough as it dampens the morale of many counsellors in the open and distance education system. There is therefore, the need for increased capacity building in staff development through regular sponsorship of counsellors to professional conferences and workshops in order to update their skills and knowledge in handling

emerging issues and challenges facing students in open and distance education.

Problem of Facilities and Time: Ukwueze (2013) opines that poor office accommodation and lack of psychological tests are major challenges facing counselling in open and distance education in Nigeria. Some practicing counsellors are often seen occupying the same office with their support staff which undermines confidentiality in counselling. Similarly, Ikeotuonye and Ukwueze (2014) further identifies lack of space for displaying information, lack of data bank for research activities, inadequate quality assurance mechanism in counselling, lack of counselling infrastructure like computer sets and lack of time for individual and group counselling as some challenges facing guidance and counselling in open and distance education. The way forward in this regard is to provide counselling facilities like comfortable and well-furnished counselling offices and provision of relevant psychological tests that can be used to measure students' interests, aptitude, attitude, study behaviours and other personality traits. A counselling office should be centrally located for easy access by students and staff with adequate space to display information relating to academic, vocational, psychological and sociological issues that affect students. There should also be a data bank for research activities in the counselling units to enable counsellors improve their counselling skills and knowledge regularly for effective and qualitative guidance and counselling services. Time allocation to counselling is also very important in open and distance education. Students should be aware of when to meet with their counsellors to solve their problems while counsellors on their part should always make themselves available for individualized and group counselling.

Funding Challenges: Funding is always a serious issue in every human organization. It is sad to observe that NOUN for instance, hardly receives the whole amount of money appropriated to her on annual basis. Awe (2013) observes that only 67.7% (#337,000,000.00) out of #497,800,000.00 appropriated to the university in 2011 was released while by May 2012, only 23% of the amount appropriated to the university for the year was released. There is no doubt that this epileptic release of funds to the university and other institutions, affects sectorial release of funds in the system. Counsellors lack funds or fail to secure funds on time to organize programmes for students; and acquire counselling materials and resources (Ukwueze, 2013). In addition, sectorial allocation of funds to guidance and counselling units is grossly inadequate. Similarly, the meager resources released for guidance and counselling services are never regular. This poor funding often constrains the effective functioning of counselling services in open and distance education institutions. Perhaps, a way out of this quagmire is to institute a consolidated revenue fund for guidance and counselling services as the hub of students' support in open and distance education. This could be achieved through the internally generated revenue (IGR) funds realized every semester from school fees and other levies. This will no doubt, make funds available to purchase necessary and required counselling materials on time, for smooth implementation of guidance and counselling services in open and distance education in Nigeria.

Lack of Counselling awareness: There is a serious indication that the lukewarm attitude by people towards open and distance education also pervades counselling services in the system. It is observed that students' response to counselling services is very poor due to insignificant awareness of the services in open and distance education institutions. Students are not aware that

they could be assisted by counsellors in their study centres to achieve greater heights academically and socially in open and distance education system. Several of them often lack information concerning their courses, tests and examinations, facilitation schedule where available, accessibility to other sources of information through both digital and analogue library services; and availability of counselling services for their personality problems. Consequently, some may drop out of the system before graduation. One of the purposes of counselling services in open and distance education is to provide support and encourage retention and success among students. This could be achieved through effective sensitization of students about guidance and counselling and other support services. Counsellors should therefore, endeavour to create more counselling awareness among students through such strategies like orientation, excursion, group counselling and public lectures. This awareness will no doubt, ensure effective response of students to guidance and counselling services for their academic and social enhancement as students of open and distance education and later in life.

Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Challenges: Open and distance education is a technology-driven system of providing education to a large number of people in different locations. Leach and Moon in Esere and Idowu (2012) are of the opinion that quality learning by students in different locations can only be achieved when ICT is utilized as an intellectual multi-tool adapted to learners' needs. This equally involves the use of Internet services for counselling, which can aptly be referred to as e-counselling. Myers (2012) sees e-counselling as an approach where a qualified, experienced counsellor can work with a client from any distance, as long as the client has access to the

Internet, and is motivated to engage in counselling. As laudable as this might be, and practised in the advanced world as a means of providing counselling services to open and distance education learners, the situation is different in the Nigerian system. Most institutions do not have enough computer sets linked to the Internet for e-counselling. Besides, several students are not computer literate and depend on cyber cafes at exorbitant cost to access the Internet services. There is always epileptic power supply and not every student can afford independent power supply as well as personal computers (desk top or lap top). These are ICT-related challenges facing guidance and counselling services in open and distance education in Nigeria which must not be wished away. Hence, every institution providing open and distance education in Nigeria should provide uninterrupted Internet services and power supply for the benefit of counsellors and students. Efforts should also be intensified to constantly engage counsellors and students in computer usage training. It is the firm belief of this researcher that with these ICT-related problems checkmated as suggested, open and distance education in Nigeria will become a solid avenue for mass education and among the best across the globe.

Conclusions

Distance education is a learner-centred approach of providing education in a non-conventional process to learners. With flexibility as its trademark, distance education deals with students independently using several media for facilitating teaching and learning. This process no doubt requires guidance and counselling services to ensure students' support, retention and success. Unfortunately, this educational service is faced by various challenges which threaten the quality of distance learning in Nigeria. These challenges range from the provision of guidance and counselling services under another support

service, non-availability and inadequacy of guidance and counselling services in open and distance education institutions, inadequate facilities, professionals and support staff, poor funding and staff development, lack of counselling awareness to ICT-related challenges. There should be a frontal attack to the above challenges through adequate funding, provision of enough and qualified personnel and support staff, and counselling facilities. Also, compulsory implementation of guidance and counselling programme in every institution that provides open and distance education will no doubt, ensure excellent learning outcomes among students and a formidable distance education system in Nigeria.

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