

Enhancing Quality through the Adoption and Implementation of an Electronic Mode of Counselling (E-counselling) in Open and Distance Learning in Zimbabwe

Nkululeko Sibanda^{1*}, Grace Moyo², Douglas Gasva³

¹Centre for Student Management, Zimbabwe Open University, P. O. Box MP 1119 Mount Pleasant, Harare, Harare, Zimbabwe

²Faculty of Applied Social Sciences, Zimbabwe Open University, P. O. Box MP 1119 Mount Pleasant, Harare, Harare, Zimbabwe

³Quality Assurance Unit, Zimbabwe Open University, P. O. Box MP 1119 Mount Pleasant, Harare, Harare, Zimbabwe

*Corresponding author: Nkululeko Sibanda

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Abstract

Original Research Article

Counselling psychology experts as well as other counselling para-professionals have in recent years come up with an electronic mode of counselling, namely, E- Counselling; which is in tandem with the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) revolution that encourages counsellors to harness ICT in order to assist clients who need help. E- Counselling exploits the power and convenience of the Internet and other electronic platforms to allow simultaneous (synchronous) and time-delayed (asynchronous) communication between an individual (counseee) and a professional (counsellor). The purpose of this study was to explore the uptake of electronic mode of Counselling (E-counselling) at the Zimbabwe Open University's Matabeleland North Regional Campus as a way of enhancing quality. The study adopted a qualitative research methodology which utilised a case study research design. The population of the study was drawn from the total number of students at the Regional Campus, recruited during the August – December 2017 semester. The study used purposive sampling to get a sample of 20 students (n=20) and utilised an Interview guide as its data generation instrument. Data gathered was analysed and presented using thematic content analysis. The major findings were that E-counselling had several advantages to both the counsellor and counseee. However, the students were not taking advantage of E-counselling because most of them had not been introduced to ICT-based counselling which consequently led them to being sceptic to respond to E-counselling practices. The study concluded that ICT is of paramount importance in modern operational practices including counselling and academic advisement, hence, accordingly recommended that the ZOU embraces the initiative as an institution while also incorporating E-counselling courses in its curriculum.

Keywords: Counselling, Academic advisement, Electronic Counselling, Information and Communication Technology.

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INTRODUCTION

Background to the study

Zimbabwe boasts of having 12 state universities which are dotted around the country and Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) is one of the state universities which was an offshoot from the Centre for Distance Education, a unit set up at the University of Zimbabwe in 1993 [1]. ZOU is the only institute of higher learning in Zimbabwe that was mandated by the government of Zimbabwe through an Act of parliament (Chapter 25:20) to provide Open Distance Learning (ODL) to the population [2]. As noted by Kurasha [1], ZOU offers certificates, diplomas and degree courses as higher education to different classes of people regardless of gender, to working adults, people in the

remote areas, students coming straight from school without achieving the requirements to go to a convectional university.

Open institutions of higher education have a social mandate to provide access to higher education developing countries for people who would otherwise not have the opportunity to study; working adults, people in rural areas remote from facilities; students coming straight from school into the tertiary system without the school achievements or the means to attend contact universities [1]. Thus, access to higher education and other support mechanisms for initially marginalised groups are major hallmarks of ODL. Kabatei [3] postulated that ODL essentially lies in the philosophical nature of geographical dispersion of

students and the vast distances apart between the students and the ODL institution. With this in mind, ZOU decentralised its operations to ten Regional Campuses taking after Zimbabwe's ten political provinces so that education is made closer to the student.

The ten functional Regional campuses have a Student Advisor each, who is responsible for advising, counselling and informing students in their academic journey through to graduation. Chireshe [4] opined that students regardless of being in a conventional university or in an ODL institution, face academic, social, financial and family challenges which all have a negative effect on their academic life and success. In that regard, Holmberg [5] avers that higher education students, particularly so with ODL students, have always had problems for which they need counselling and academic support. In most cases, ODL students are in greater need than conventional students of both academic advisement and career guidance. In other words, the academic journey is not as easy as one would anticipate for the distant learner. There has been a steady increase in the number of students enrolling into the university since its inception in 1993 with the highest being 22 000 students in 2007 [6].

The high numbers of students being enrolled into the different programmes at the ZOU denotes that the 10 Student Advisors that the institution employees have a toll order characterised by the need to provide effective counselling services. Face-to-face counselling is the most profound type of counselling used by both students and the Student Advisor at the ZOU as noted by Musika and Bukaliya [7]. With the ZOU scenario, students have to visit the Campus for them to have their concerns attended to by the Student Advisor of that particular Regional Campus.

The researchers chose the area under study, which has its furthest students being over about 500km away from the Regional Campus, hence, it is imperative that the campus in general and the Student Advisor in particular understands the diverse types of counselling and choice of technology for appropriate use. Ideally, these would consider taking into account factors of accessibility, flexibility, cost, and speed; while focusing on providing quality service to learners [8, 9]. Arguably, the use of educational including e-counselling technologies in distance education has the potential to address most of the challenges that higher education distance learners encounter in their learning which sometimes are so pressing to the extent that some distance learners opt to withdraw from studies and others delay to graduate [10, 11]. It is against this backdrop and in the context of the management of student challenges within the Open and Distance Learning landscape that the current study was undertaken.

Statement of the Problem

Due to the nature of ODL, students are bound to face academic, financial and socio-psychological hurdles along the passage of learning from the day of entry up to graduation day which makes university life not an easy stroll in the park. In order for students to have a smooth sail through these hurdles, the ZOU has provided them with a Student Advisor in its ten Regional Campuses to offer counselling services to those in need. Matabeleland North Regional Campus provides services to students who travel long distances, and consequently, have a torrid time in accessing counselling services. The problem at stake is that the most popular type of counselling used at the campus is traditional face-to-face counselling which poses a challenge as most students have to bear the challenge of long distances in order to access the often desperately needed counselling services, yet, there seems to be potential opportunities for e-counselling.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The current study aims to establish the prospects of E-counselling at Matabeleland North Regional Campus of the ZOU and was guided by the following specific objectives;

- To identify the types of counselling media used for students at the campus
- To ascertain the benefits that higher education students may accrue from E-counselling
- To explore challenges that are faced by students in accessing E-counselling at the campus
- To establish opportunities for enhancing quality through adoption and implementation of E-counselling for students at the ZOU's identified Regional Campus.

Significance of the Study

It is envisaged that the study will benefit both Student Advisors and students at the Zimbabwe Open University. Without restricting the significance of the study to the area under study, it is anticipated that Student Advisors will benefit in that they will determine the appropriate mode of counselling of needy students with E-counselling as possibly the more preferably one considering the nature of ODL. On the other hand, students will also have a choice on which type of counselling method they would prefer being used for them when faced with difficulties in their areas of study and geographical location. Over and above, the adoption and preference of E-counselling for the ZOU will to a large extent reduce costs associated with travelling long distances for students, and in addition provide the convenience of being counselled in the comfort of their homes and at their convenient time.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The Nature of 'Counselling' and 'Electronic Counselling'

Counselling is generally viewed as a professional service offered by a counsellor who has the

expertise to generate alternatives, help the client in loosening and breaking old patterns, facilitate the decision making process as well as to find viable solutions to his or her problems [12]. For Zindi & Makotore [13], it is a process that is designed to help an individual solve some of his or her problems or assist the individual in planning the future. The traditional face-to-face counselling involves the physical presence of the counsellor and counsee who engage in information exchange with the former rendering counselling services. This is in agreement with www.counsellingsolutions.co.uk who believe that face to face counselling takes place when a counsellor sees a client in a private and confidential setting to explore a difficulty the client is having, distress they may be experiencing or perhaps their dissatisfaction with life, or loss of a sense of direction and purpose. It, thus, follows that it is an interpersonal communication which has an objective of assisting individuals, in this case, students, to understand their problems individually and to restore them according to their ability without external coercion [14]. Murgatroyd [15] echoed by Mutanana & Gasva [16] equates counselling to helping; suggesting that counsellors can be drawn from professional, semi-professional and experienced layman populations; hence counselling is a broad field, constituting both specialized, professional and social activities.

However, with the advent of communication technologies in the international arena, face to face counselling is being questioned if it is the best mode of counselling for ODL students particularly in terms of costs incurred and time lost during travelling. Technology is now involved in every aspect of our lives. In that regard, Okopi [17] emphasised that e-counselling involving use of computers, interactive video-disc or other e-counselling platforms are a growing phenomenon especially with the advent of relatively cheap micro-computers and the Internetisation of communication. It is an open fact that we are now living in a digital technology-based society, hence, the counselling profession that has grown so much in demand, therefore, needs to embrace these technologies.

As noted by Kolog [18], ICT has brought about diversity in counselling methodologies in different fields. It was discovered gradually over the years that it is possible to administer e-counselling in educational settings in order to provide remote counselling to students over a long distance. Researchers in this area have given several definitions of e-counselling which generally entails the provision of counselling services through electronic means or counselling that takes place through different e-media particularly the Internet. It usually happens when a professional counsellor or therapist talks with a client over the Internet or any appropriate electronic gadget so as to render distant emotional support, mental health

advice or some other professional services. It goes with many connotations like online counselling or therapy, Internet counselling, e-mail counselling, web counselling, e-therapy, tele-therapy or cyber-therapy [19].

In other words, e-counselling is a form of therapy that involves the process of interacting with a counsellor or therapist online in an ongoing series of conversations overtime. It means deciding to explore deep thoughts and feelings and share them with someone who cares, who will listen and try to help online. Arguably, e-counselling would be more appropriate for open and distance learning (ODL) in general and the ZOU in particular considering that “ODL is an educational process where all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone geographically removed from the learner, with all or most of the communication between tutors and learners being conducted through print or electronic media” [20].

Benefits That May Be Accrued By Higher Education Students from Use of E-Counselling

E-counselling holds the potential to provide high quality health and wellness care and represents a vehicle through which clients can easily access counsellors on-line [21]. Manuel Castells [22] supports the view that global society relies heavily on the use of technologies to breach the imperatives of physical distances. With the rate at which the ZOU is embarking on a radical paradigm shift from manual way of doing things to technological driven education service delivery, it is prudent that Student advisors within its Regional Campuses rise to the occasion in order to keep pace with the fast moving communication technologies. In that regard, Das, Kumari and Saini [23] stated that counselling has traditionally been viewed as a person-to-person activity, yet emerging trends indicate that the future of counselling resides on the degree to which technology can be deployed to increase both the efficiency and effectiveness of advising clients.

Proponents of online counselling cited evidence that, despite the lack of non-verbal cues, skilled and experienced counsellors could establish close, empathic and warm therapeutic relationships with their clients when their interactions were deep, smooth, and engendered feelings of positivity, emotional arousal and a sense of being helped [24-26]. They argued that both the process factors and the therapeutic alliance online appeared to be equivalent to those in face-to-face therapy [24, 27, 28]. In addition, they also noted that online counselling provided anonymity, convenience, and ease of access for populations that had limited access to traditional face-to-face psychological support because of transportation difficulties, physical handicaps and the need for anonymity due to shyness or fear of face-to-face interactions [29-31]. In other words, E-counselling’s main advantage to higher education students is that they are able to access counselling

services or therapy from the privacy of their homes and own electronic gadgets particularly the computer without the stress of worrying about distance to meet the counsellor, who in the context of this study is the Student Advisor.

Paradigm Shift towards Enhancing Quality through the Implementation of E-Counselling In Higher Education

Traditionally, counselling in higher education including open and distance learning has been conducted face-to-face, with immediacy both in terms of responsiveness and physical presence [32]. Face-to-face counselling in many ways remains the most important medium for counselling in most social settings the world over [33]. However, in higher education, it is extremely expensive in terms of time and travel and sometimes, could also be inaccessible to distance learners. In recent years, different ways of engaging in the counselling of students and other individuals have emerged, partly predicated on the rapid development of communication technologies with which the general population is familiar and comfortable.

This includes systems for audio communication (using public telephone networks or internet-based telephony), written communication (such as email or online chat), or audio-visual communication (such as video conferencing). These provide the opportunity for synchronous communication (where each person's response is responded to immediately) or for asynchronous communication (for example, exchanges via e-mail, where there is a delay between sending a message and receiving a response). Zamani [34] and Shiller [35] identified five e-counselling tools, namely, email, chat, web based messaging, video-conferencing and text messaging or short message system (SMS).

In an era where there is a need for fast, inexpensive communication, e-mail communication has thrived. While many assume that e-mail emerged in the latter part of the 20th century, in reality, the first e-mail was sent in 1971 and from its beginning in the business community, almost 40 years ago, e-mail communication has rapidly expanded [36]. Using e-mail for communication with colleagues and other professionals is an everyday experience for most counsellors though communicating with clients via e-mail is still less common. Nevertheless, many counsellors do exchange e-mail correspondence with clients, even if it is to clarify a billing issue. Zamani [34] points out that email is an ideal platform or medium for people with different time schedules, providing an opportunity for introspective responses; which makes it appropriate for higher education. Email is used as an electronic tool for counselling services, but it requires that both the counsellor and the client have access to the facility in order for the counselling to take place.

Teleconferencing and video conferencing are other counselling processes used in counselling distance learners. Down [37] says that teleconferencing involves linking a number of people at different locations to the same telephone line with the counsellor being at one end while the clients are at different ends. Teleconferencing can be in the form of two-way-audio and one-way video conferencing. More broadly, video-conferencing is a method of conferencing between two or more locations where both sound and vision are transmitted and received. The platform allows simultaneous interactive communication between users. In its most basic form, a video-conference involves transmission of image and voice of the participants over a long distance. Optional sources include still images and/or moving sequences from a video recorder, a DVD or a PC [37].

The platform is dynamic and can also be used for other purposes in an educational set up. Suler [38] described video conferencing as synchronous (real time). In that regard, open and distance education lecturers can also use the platform for virtual learning, especially for online academic assignments. Videoconferencing offers a range of exciting learning opportunities for higher education as it bridges the gap between students and the teacher. It can also provide, in a cost-effective, time-effective, and inclusive way; enriching and enjoyable distance learning experiences to people of all ages and abilities regardless of where they live. Arguably, it won't substitute for all face-to-face meetings, but can reduce their frequency and effect savings in time, travel and accommodation costs.

Instant messaging and chat are communication technologies which use text-based communication. The communication often involves two or more people over the Internet or other related networks. Instant messaging (IM) is a private network communication between two users, whereas a chat session is the network communication between two or more users [39]. Zamani [34] believes that the use of mobile phones largely characterises this development and can connect people anywhere, highlighting the connection of individuals to individuals and across urban to rural and rich to the poor divide. In this case, higher education counsellors could take up the advantage of the widely used device to efficiently engage clients in counselling services.

IM or chat applications are often designed for portable devices like mobile phones and provide virtual group sessions for chatting, and permits more than one person in information sharing or counselling services. Thus, higher education counsellors could virtually engage students into counselling with the intent of providing group or individual counselling. Zamani [34] described chat and IM as synchronous (happens in real-time), and noted that participants have to be logged on at the same time for chatting or messaging. In this

regard, time and scheduling become vital since parties have to be on the platform at the same time. Chat or IM sessions can either be private, where each user is invited to join the session, or public, where users also join the session on their own initiative [39].

Establishing Prospects and Benefits for the Implementation of E-counselling at the ZOU

E-counselling is a new and a beneficial method of helping students work through their academic life's challenges and issues without being in the same physical proximity of their therapists who, in the case of the ZOU, are Student Advisors. It is generally, convenient and offers accessibility to many students as it is time saving for one to sit at home or before an office computer and compose an e-mail or make a telephone call with regard to a pressing academic need and receive an immediate or short interval attention and feedback. It is also cost effective, at about half the cost of face-to-face counselling due to reduced over-heads [40].

Also, the client, who is the student, is in control of the timing of the email to suite his/her everyday needs. He or she can wait until he/she has some quiet time to write his/her email, to reflect or to read the response. In addition, promotes self-confidence and disclosure being in one's home or office, may take away the discomfort some students feel when they meet in person with the Student Advisor (counsellor) to discuss academic and personal problems. The privacy and anonymity provided by the distance may be comforting, disinhibiting and appealing to most students. The anonymity and self-confidence it offers may reduce some of the barriers to seeking help with personal stories which will enhance the process of counselling as it will promote client disclosure and facilitate the overall interaction.

E-counselling is also good for students with physical and other disabilities as it breaks down obstacles for those who have challenges accessing resources due to physical disabilities or communication challenges such as learning impairment, speech or language difficulties. For various other reasons, one may be confined to the home, the Internet or the telephone being the only sources of reaching out for help. Easily accessible e-counselling services may facilitate engagement in counselling services for students who may have difficulty with travelling, such as students from as far as 500km as alluded to in the current study. As a result, services may be provided to some students who would otherwise have difficulty accessing counselling or academic support. Thus, in the case of students in the area under study who live in rural areas where there is little or no access to other qualified professionals for counselling, these are easily taken care of. For such students who live in small communities, any other counsellors within their reach may already be known to them as friends, close

associates or co-workers, so privacy may be compromised; hence, with e-counselling, their needs are easily and effectively met [41].

E-counselling is, therefore, intended to increase easy accessibility, save resources and decrease frustration among need students. Life design development process is continuous and must be consistent with the monitoring of students' life development [40]. Thus, e-counselling offers the opportunity for students to access the service anytime and anywhere including the holidays. In this way, Student Advisors who are the counsellors are able to keep in touch while students who are far apart, at both stakeholders' convenience, yet the student remain an intact community of learners. This is corroborated by Speyer and Zack [42] who say that the benefits of e-counselling are generally enormous. In other words, e-counselling makes it convenient for students to contact the Student Advisors remotely.

However, users of E-counselling should be computer literate which entails that the counsellor and client must be comfortable with the technological platform used in the online counselling process. Both should possess sufficient technical expertise to cope with skills required for the service. Both must be reasonably good writers and typists. They must be comfortable with what is essentially a letter-writing process. They must be able to express their thoughts and feelings clearly and interpret messages carefully, yet this is not always the case with some students whose background has seen them remain marginalised in the possession and/or use of electronic media particularly computers [19].

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research methodology was used for this study. According to Denzin, Norman, Lincoln and Yvonna [43], qualitative research is a methodology of inquiry employed in many different academic disciplines, traditionally in the social sciences, and other social contexts. A case study research design was utilised where the case of Matabeleland North Regional campus of the Zimbabwe Open University was considered. The case study was considered for its critical research hallmark of being concerned with a rich and vivid description of events relevant to the case [44, 45]. The population of the study was 275 students who were registered with the Regional Campus and only 20 students were sampled through Purposive sampling method.

Purposive sampling refers to the deliberate selection of a small amount of participants for a study as opposed to a larger, representative sample [46]. As such, purposive sampling was noted to be the most appropriate method for the current study, as it was particularly effective in identifying individuals who shared a common experience [46, 47]. The researcher

made use of interviews as research instruments to gather qualitative data from the participating students. The researchers personally administered the instruments to the Campus. Students participated voluntarily in the study and as a way of maintaining ethical standards; they were informed that results obtained from them will be used in confidence and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any given point of the study [48]. Data was presented in point form while being guided by the thrust of the research problem.

STUDY FINDINGS

The major findings of the study were that;

- The majority of students have laptops and smart phones that can access Internet services at the campus and at their homes
- The Regional Campus has desktop computers, some of which are connected to the Internet, hence, they can be accessed by students for communication purposes including counselling services
- Different types of counselling media were being used at the campus. Thus, in addition to the traditionally used face-to-face counselling, other media which were also being used were peer counselling, letter counselling, telephone counselling, instant messaging/chat, emailing and video Conferencing
- With students and lecturers having access to smart cell phones, desktops and Internet connectivity either at home or at campus, communication in general and e-counselling in particular becomes easy
- The major benefits of e-counselling as revealed by students include the fact that;
 - E-Counselling Is cheaper and convenient;
 - Cost of travelling are reduced;
 - Cost of accommodation are reduced;
 - The counsellor's physical absence reduces or even eliminates the client's initial shame or need to 'save face' while presenting a problem;
 - The student can revisit his/her conversation after sometime; and
 - The student can print out his/her conversation with the counsellor for further reference if necessary.

However, the study also revealed that while E-counselling is associated with several benefits, one of its major challenges is that it eliminates the human element where the counsellor and counsellee share verbal and non-verbal cues in order to enhance the effectiveness of the counselling process. In that regard, researchers note that this gap may be, however, be circumvented by use of e-communication technologies like Skype.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concluded that students at the regional campus studied are becoming more attuned to, and more dependent on technology in their everyday living including their studies. Accordingly, most students are now using E-counselling platforms to get their problems solved; which has since made them realise the many comparative benefits of using E-counselling at the expense of face-to-face counselling which is currently more popular and mostly utilised.

Based on the findings and conclusion, the researchers recommended that the Regional Campus should enhance quality through increasing its rate of implementing E-counselling and as well be equipped with E-counselling laboratory so as to harness its benefits through use of robust electronic counselling processes such as Skype, Video conferencing and Tele-conferencing.

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