

# COUNSELLING AT A DISTANCE: NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA MODEL

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## **Abstract**

*The paper identifies and explains the concept of counselling, usefulness of counselling in Open and Distance Learning, concept of academic and non-academic counselling, qualities, skills and attributes of an effective counsellor, counselling theories and media for counselling, functions and responsibilities of a student counsellor in National Open University of Nigeria.*

**Key words:** Effective, qualities, skills, counselling, distance, National Open University of Nigeria

Counselling is specialised helping relationship between the therapist/counsellor and client(s). Kahn (1999:1) reveals that the relationship is the counselling itself. Effective counselling therefore consists of a definitely structured permissive relationship which allows the client to gain an understanding of himself or herself to a degree which enables him or her to take positive steps in the light of this new orientation (Rogers, 1942, 18). Strupp (1986) notes therefore, what counselling may be regarded as developing, maintaining and managing, a specialised human relationship with therapeutic intent. Egan (1986) acknowledges that, the prime responsibility for creating that relationship called a therapeutic climate lies with the therapist, who must be congruent in the relationship. The concession, among the authors above is that, the effectiveness and efficiency of a counsellor in counselling process lies with his or her ability to communicate to the client his or her empathic understanding and unconditional respect for him or her

Wickramaratne (2001) reveal that review of relevant literature has identified counselling is an appropriate way to enhance the capacity of students to develop themselves and also to overcome barriers that they may encounter in the process of successful completion of programmes, According (Commonwealth of Learning, 2002) the provision of counselling services to the distance students, is basically not only to enhance the capacity of the learner to take responsibility for their learning but also to equip and support the distance learner acquisition of the potentials for action from what is learnt.

Wickramaratne, (2001) opines that, among the different modes of intervention, counselling services extended to the distance learner stand out as one of the best ways. For the distance learners to be effective and efficient in their studies, they must be painstakingly trained and tutored to acquire appropriate learning skills and habits they would apply on their own, anytime, and anywhere to enable them to learn how to learn.

Counselling support service in distance learning is academic and non-academic in content and execution. Academic counselling tends to relate to specific and cognitive issues. For example all course and course-based topics, specific course study difficulties and examination; while non-academic counselling tends to relate to general and affective issues for example, course choice, general difficulties and examination anxiety etc. The two other possible classifications of counselling are developmental and problem solving counselling in nature.

**Developmental counselling** is concerned with the development of learners and covers issues related to clarification of course information, entry requirements, orientation to study at a distance, overall career directions; support to deal with the sense of frustration and disappointment; encouraging return to study, organising and structuring time and social demands, etc.

**Problem solving counselling** provides appropriate response to barriers in a learner's progress. Barriers to a learner's progress can be study-related, time related, personal or institutional. . Subcategories of this might be:

**Institutional:** for example, dealing with system breakdowns, discussing cases for exception and appeal against regulations, dealing with unsuccessful appeals, changing tutors and so on.

**Personal:** for example, illness, disability, marital breakdown, childcare, bereavement, aging, employment, re-employment, work pressure- all in so far as they affect a learner's progress

**Assessment:** for example. Essay writing skills, providing assessment and dealing with examination anxiety

**Time:** organising and structuring time, prioritising activities, clarifying motivation and so on.

In open and distance settings, very often tutors and others are expected to act in counselling roles although they are not trained as professional counsellors. It is important that the entire learner support personnel, including administrators who might

be in a situation in which they provide guidance or advice to learners, are aware of this categorisation of counselling services

### **National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) Approach**

The National Open University of Nigeria approach in the provision of guidance and counselling to distance learners is unique in ODL. Other variants see guidance and counselling services as purely academic. In these institutions, academic facilitators are given in-house training in guidance and counselling techniques and skills, they are therefore saddled with this responsibility. In NOUN, taking into consideration the diverse background of the student clientele, recruits professional guidance counsellors, designs and provides guidance counselling services in line with the vision and mission of the University. In a nutshell, provision of guidance services in NOUN is premised on the impact of the dynamics of access, available facilities and resources, national policy on education, nation's education, socio – economic, growth and development landscape.

Open and distance learning due to its nature and modus operandi would not run efficiently and effectively without robust learners support services (LSS); nor achieve its goals and objectives without student counsellors. The student counsellors in performing their roles, functions and responsibilities were recruited, trained and still being recruited and trained to provide qualitative guidance services to the learner at various study centres across Nigeria

Guidance and counselling services in Open and Distance Education include informing, advising, academic and personal counselling (Indira Gandhi National Open University 2001) While Commonwealth of Learner (2003) classified counselling services to include orientation, learning and study skills assistance, career and personal counselling. In National Open University of Nigeria, counselling services include Orientation, Learning and study skills assistance, academic counselling, information, advising, career and personal counselling, monitoring academic progress and referral.

In National Open University of Nigeria, the Student Counsellors perform the following academic and administrative duties at the local Study Centres across Nigeria. The student counsellors provide regular guidance and counselling to the students with respect to several aspects of their studies including enrolment, choice of programmes and courses, when and how to study, and when to seek for special clinics for academic guidance. The counsellors have the responsibility of keeping in constant touch with distance learners and providing early warning signals regarding difficulty with studies in order to provide prompt remedial actions.

### **Other Responsibilities of Student Counsellors are:**

To guide distance learners in the choice and management of peer groups for the purpose of tutorial and other instructional facilitation.

1. To devise, develop and manage student database and constantly monitor all counselling needs of students for the purpose of providing effective guidance and counselling services.
2. To liaise with study centre managers and with NOUN headquarters regarding counselling matters relating to examination and assignments.
3. To provide professional consultation to students and staff who may have difficulty with rejoining the academic world.
4. To organise professional workshops and seminars on matters relating to students' support.
5. To provide follow-up services i.e. the counsellor remains in constant touch with the student in order to ensure that he/she does not drop out from the academic pursuit
6. To help in providing preventive services by being sensitive to students' needs academically and behaviourally right from the registration stage.
7. To provide guidance in the choice of suitable techniques and encourage development of a sustainable study habit.
8. To provide guidance services on change of programmes, suspension and deferment of admission. (NOUN, 2006).

### **Theories of Counselling**

Counselling in its general sense can be seen as a branch of psychotherapy bearing the same relationship to psychotherapy in theories, principles and in practices. Counselling shares with psychotherapy in theories like psychoanalysis, humanistic psychotherapies- gestalt, transactional analysis, psychodrama, bio-energetic, client centred and so on. There are quite a number of guidance and counselling theories but in Open and Distance Education, **eclectic therapy** seems to be the most appropriate. Most often, the choice of eclectic therapy is necessitated by the diverse counselling situations and multifaceted nature of the guidance services in ODL. Eclectic therapy is a formation of systems of thought by choosing from the theories or doctrines of others, already developed systems. The Eclectic theorists combine what they regard as the most valid theories, to understand clients although often these theories of personality do not make an integral unity (Encarta, 2008)

### **Qualities of an Effective and Efficient Counsellor in ODL**

According to COL,(1999) effective counsellors need to develop and demonstrate qualities that are appropriate to their role. It is not for them to be 'simply advisors, as if they had all the requisite solutions. Rather, they should be able to help the learner reach his or her own conclusion. Rogerian therapy named after its founder

Carl Rogers (1902-1987) identified four particular personal qualities that appeared to be essential to working as an effective counsellor in ODL. They are warmth, acceptance, genuineness and empathy. While Simpson describes the attributes of an effective counsellor using the acronym ‘**WHALES**’

- i. Warmth;
- ii. Honesty;
- iii. Acceptance;
- iv. Listening;
- v. Empathy; and
- vi. Structure

According to IGNOU (2001) warmth, acceptance, genuineness and empathy are considered as qualities that an effective counsellor should develop while selecting, listening, structuring and epilogue are skills that an effective counsellor should possess. In whatever way one looks at the categorisation, the bottom line is that an effective counsellor should develop the aforementioned qualities and skills

**Warmth** means the ability to communicate personal warmth and to make the learners feel welcome and valued as individuals. Rogers called this ‘non-possessive warmth’ which means that it should be appropriate and genuine but not overcome; it should not make the recipient feel taken over or manipulated in the way that, say, they might feel by the behaviour of some kinds of salesmen. People are sometimes not warm for various reasons: tiredness, overwork, consciousness of status, and may be unfavourable attitude. Without an initial welcoming start, a counsellor is unlikely to have a chance to practise the other qualities and skills ( IGNOU, 2001)

**Acceptance:** The quality of being able to accept other people and their feeling for what they are without criticising or judging them personally (which of course is different from judging their behaviour). Criticism, whether in the form of moral injunctions or negative statement, has little role to play in counselling, as it tends to shut down communication

**Genuineness** is the ability to be naturally yourself, open, friendly and un-defensive. It means not adopting a superior role as in the ‘white coat syndrome’ of the person who has the answers and must be respected. It also means being honest with yourself and your learner about your feelings and activities. People are sometimes not genuine because of status-consciousness or feelings of their own inadequacy which are hard to admit (IGNOU, 2001)-

**Empathy** is the ability to sense the feeling and experience of another person, and so to fully appreciate them as if you were that person. This is not quite ‘sympathy’ in which

you take over the feelings for yourself. It is being able to say, 'I think I can see how you feel, and not I felt exactly the same when that happened to me. The latter statement takes over the learners feelings and in a sense takes it away from them. Empathy can be a difficult quality to acquire, sometimes because of the difficulty of understanding that every person's experience is unique and that our own experience can only be a fallible guide to how other people might feel about an ostensibly similar experience. But it is important to try to feel empathy in all circumstances (STRIDE- IGNOU, 2001)-

### **Skills of an Effective and Efficient Counsellor**

There are three essentials skills of a counsellor, selecting, structuring and listening. There are a host of other subsidiary skills, but these are the core ones

**Selecting** is the process of deciding what kind of response from the informing advising-counselling spectrum is appropriate at any particular stage in an interview. An inappropriate response can halt progress in its tracks. Giving information to someone who really needs advice or counselling may satisfy him/her temporarily but will not answer his/her real or long –term needs; giving counselling to someone who would like a piece of straight information is likely to be frustrating for him/her (IGNOU, 2001)-

**Listening:** The skill of active intelligent listening is central to counselling of any type, whether information, advisory or counselling. The counsellor listens actively by encouraging learners to think through their query or problem for themselves: the counsellor listens intelligently by clarifying what is being said and looking (sometimes) for what is not being said – the implications of omitted or unclear statements. There are some useful but simple techniques to help you list better. ,they are open-ended questions, acknowledgements, reflections, and silences.

- i. Open-end questions: Use questions that encourage a learner to think and to develop rather than giving straight mono syllable answers
- ii. Acknowledgements: this simply means that counsellors do not sit listening in inscrutable silence)-
  - a) They are always indicating that they are listening----nodding, saying 'Ah-ah'(or umm' if you prefer) and using positive 'body language( maintaining reasonable eye-contact, sitting alertly on the same side of the desk as the learner and so on).It also means not interrupting the learner unnecessarily
  - b) Reflecting: the most useful listening skills is 'reflecting' sometimes called 'mirroring'. It simply means saying back to the learner something that they have just said but in such a way as to clarify it, reassure the learners that they are being heard correctly and encourage them to go on (STRIDE-IGNOU, 2001.

**Structuring:** This is the heart of counselling. It is known when, for example, is the right moment to stop counselling and give advice, when a learner has solved a problem for himself/herself or at least come to terms with it, when you have done as much as you can. Structuring consists of the three stages; clarification, checking and consequences

- i. Clarification is the basic counselling process of clarifying the issue or problem by dialogue with the learner. Clarification is important because it is essential to find out what the learner's needs are. This is often a short process but can be much longer when, for instance, learners are fully aware of what they need
- ii. Checking- going back to the learner that the problem or issue is now completely clear or at least that it is as clear as it is possible to be at this stage. Checking is important before deciding on any action, to be sure that it is appropriate.
- iii. Consequences- settling with the learners what will be done by them and by the counsellor (action or advice) as a result of the interview. Consequences agreed upon mutually are important because any action or advice not mutually agreed upon is almost certainly to fail. Think how often you have been given advice which you failed to take because you found it unconvincing or inappropriate

**Epilogue:** short session that end the counselling or a concluding speech

### **Media of Counselling**

Communication media are essential facilitating tools in counselling process in Open and Distance Education. Their effective use requires counsellors to understand the effects of distance and technology so that you can choose the right delivery method for the message, and design messages to make the best use of the technology (UNSCO 2004). For example, it is much better to convey detailed information in print rather than over the phone, so that the learner can refer to the printed message later on (COL, 2003). The writer would as of now highlight the most commonly used media of counselling in NOUN. These include face to face individual/group counselling, telephone (one to one) telephone conferencing (one to many), counselling by letters, and handbook, Counselling through email and computer conferencing now counselling using social media.

**Face-to-face counselling** in many ways remains the most important medium for counselling of all kinds, at all the study centres of the University. However, it is extremely expensive in terms of staff, time and travel and sometimes, could also be inaccessible to distance learners. One way of at least reducing the problems of individual face-to-face counselling is through group counselling. Although a group loses the one-to-one relationship of counsellor and learner, it provides the opportunity for learners to share their concerns with each other.

**Telephone counselling (one-to-one, teleconferencing, answer phones):** One-to-one telephone counselling involves the counsellor staying in different location from the learner and didactically communicates through cellular or fixed-line telephone with the learner. This counselling process is being used for counselling distance learners living far away from the University study centres. This process can either be initiated by the counsellor or the learner. Counselling through telephone is quite different from face-to-face counselling and main difference is the absence of facial clue but the counselling skills used are the same. Toll call phones are provided at every study centre and personal cellular phones of the counsellors are being used for informing, advising and counselling the students of NOUN but very expensive because of the high tariff charged by Global Mobile Service providers and poor service rendered.

**Teleconferencing** is another counselling process used in NOUN to counsel distance learners and it involves linking a number of people at different locations to the same telephone line with the counsellor being at one end while others at are different ends. Teleconferencing can be in form of two-way-audio and one-way-video conferencing. A well equipped e-learning has been established at the NOUN Headquarter. The University currently working with National Space Research and Development Agency (NASRDA) through collaboration had linked up 16 of its study centres with the Nigerian satellite for the provision of internet connectivity, conduct of interactive video conferencing and conduct tutorial facilitation, advice, information and counselling on line across all these centres from just one base (Ipaye, 2007)

**Counselling by internet** is commonly in use to counsel learners in NOUN. The use of internet for counselling demands access to computers and telecommunication equipment. On-line discussion or dial-up telephone can be conducted through the computer networks. The counsellor interacts with more learners simultaneously at different terminals. The counsellor announces the contact time in cyberspace and distance learners log-in to discuss the issues. It is known as bulletin board system as the chat room or talk room which holds one-to-one or to many conversations respectively. **E-mail** is another medium commonly used for counselling by internet. For example instead of writing letters and waiting for several days to get the reply by post, counsellors can post assignments, announcements, supplemental materials, as well as give feedback or responses to distance learners' individually or in a group.

**World wide web** is another way that can be used by the counsellor of reaching out in a one-to-many way. With the aid of web camera, the counsellor can see the distance learner and the learners can see the counsellor. The internet counselling is suitable for informing, advising and counselling the distance learners. Counselling services are now offered through social media such as Facebook, twitter, YouTube etc. .

As earlier mentioned, effort is being intensified by the University to provide each study centre with computer laboratories equipped with between 30 to 50 computers each and internet connectivity. As of now 16 of its study centres have linked up with the Nigerian satellite for the provision of internet connectivity. The greatest challenge facing both the counsellors and students of NOUN is their low level of computer literacy. Though the University has been organising computer literacy training for all categories of staff and subsidising the purchase of lap top computers for staff, no appreciable progress has been made in counselling through internet

**Counselling by letter** is commonly used at all NOUN study centres. This is partly because other forms of communication can be very difficult and expensive in Nigeria. The process of counselling through letters whether as a counsellor initiative or a response to a letter received follows the basic principles of counselling. Active intelligent listening is conceived as an act of careful reading of the letter in order to clarify the feelings and issues in the learner's letter. It is possible to respond with warmth, acceptance, genuineness and empathy, structuring the letter to ensure its meaning is clear. Because of the technological development, electronic mail has virtually replaced physical letter. Counselling by letter or short messages through the phone is suitable for informing and advising the distance learners

**Counselling by computer or interactive video-disc** is yet to take off in NOUN to counsel the learners but earmarked in the university policy as a medium of counselling. Counselling by computer or video is a growing phenomenon especially with the advent of relatively cheap micro-computers. . In NOUN, all the study centres are expected to have computer laboratories equipped with between 30 to 50 computers each but some have taken off. The relatively interactive and non-threatening nature of computer counselling makes many learners appear to enjoy it and find it useful. This process is mostly used for developmental counselling and career. It is suitable for advising, informing and limited counselling of the distance learners. However, if learners are using a computer technology for the first time, it is better to provide instead instructions in print so that they are not left without any means of communication.

**Counselling through handbooks.** In NOUN, Print materials, such as student handbook, getting to know your university, etc are being developed, printed and distributed to the students. They are mostly used to address information and advisory needs of the students. In most cases frequently asked questions by the students are addressed in these books

There are other media of counselling in use in open and distance education. Some of these include counselling by broadcasting, radio broadcasting etc. but the writer had decided to limit his discussion to the ones commonly used in NOUN

word of caution, in NOUN there is no research to determine how effective these media of counselling are.

### **Conclusion**

Foregoing discussion has pointed to the fact that in many open and distance settings, very often tutors and others are expected to act in counselling roles although they are not trained as counsellors. It is imperative to point here, that other support services providers might be able to provide other guidance services but not counselling in the real sense of the word. This is because they lack the prerequisite qualification, qualities, skills and attitudes of an effective and efficient counsellor. It is important that the entire learner support personnel, including administrators who might be in a situation in which they provide guidance or advice to learners, are aware of this fact.

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