



COUNSELING SERVICES FOR STUDENTS SUSTAINABILITY IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING SYSTEM: A CASE OF ILALA REGIONAL CENTER OF THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF TANZANIA

Martha Jacob Kabateⁱ

The Open University of Tanzania,
P.O. BOX 23409, Tanzania

Abstract:

Open and Distance learning (ODL) programs are generally designed to serve an off campus population. These programs provide access to higher education for students who cannot attend traditional courses due to employment, marital status, family responsibilities, distance, and expenses incurred with traditional education (Hannay and Newvine 2006). According to Bukaliya and Musika,(2015), ODL lies in the philosophical nature of geographical dispersion of students and the vast distances apart between the students and the ODL institution. That nature of ODL underlie in the premise that, students know on how, where, when and what to study (Keegan, 1986), as a result students face a lot of challenges resulting in low learning motivation (Bukaliya and Musika, 2015). For sustainability in Open and Distance learning, counseling service as one of the Students Support Service (SSS) is very important in academic arena (Jung, 2005). Counseling is the process of helping an individual to receive, accept his/her conception of him/herself and his/her problems, perceptions, attitudes, goals, plans and choices and use advice that can help him to understand and solve his/her problem/disturbing issues or to cope with it successfully for a better future (Biswalo, 1996). For the counseling process to be effective the counselor should have the knowledge of counseling skills, counseling techniques on how to conduct the counseling interview. In Open and Distance Learning, a counselor has to understand the effect of distance on the choice of technology (UNESCO: 2004) by considering Accessibility, Flexibility, Cost, and Speed (COL, 2003).

ⁱ Correspondence: email martha.kabate@out.ac.tz

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Statement of the Problem

Counseling is one of the Students Support Services (SSS) in educational settings. Counseling practice is seen to be of more importance in open and distance learning system, this is due to the nature of study under Open and Distance Learning system and the method of delivery. According Croft (1999) counseling help distance students to realize the instructional objective of the course by minimizing the negative effects of isolation and the lack of regular personal contact. For effective counseling to take place, a counselor should be professionally competent that is having enough knowledge and skills on how to provide counseling services to a distance learner. Yet the level of effectiveness of counseling in ODL institution has not yet well described in the body of literature. Therefore, this study is interested in examining effectiveness of the provision counseling services at the Open University of Tanzania, Ilala regional center in particular.

Specific Objectives of the Study

In having the picture on the effectiveness of the provision of counseling services the OUT as an Open and Distance Learning institution, the study therefore ought to:

- i. Identify knowledge of academic and administrative staffs have on how to provide counseling services to distance learner;
- ii. Explore issues which staffs come across which needs counseling service;
- iii. Identify the potentials of counseling services to distance learner;
- iv. Explore challenges academic and administrative staffs encounter in the provision of counseling as a student support service to distance learner.

Significance of the Study

The study will help the Open University of Tanzania to come up with good practices of providing counseling services to the students, so that they can fulfill their academic as well fulfilling institutional vision and mission.

Research Design and Methodology

The study employed exploratory qualitative research design. The study was done at the Open University of Tanzania at Ilala Regional Center. The targeted populations included administrative (3) and (9) academic staffs. Purposive sampling was applied in getting the respondents. According to Given (2008) purposive sampling involves a strategic choices about with whom, when and how one does research. The study therefore, involved the Open University of Dar-es-Salaam Staffs who works with Ilala regional center.

Data were collected through structured and unstructured interview to all respondents, issues which involved in the interview include; knowledge of academic and administrative staffs on how to provide counseling services to distance learner; issues which staffs come across which needs counseling service; potentials of counseling services; challenges encountered academic and administrative staffs encounter in the content analysis involves counting and comparisons, usually of keywords or content, followed by the interpretation of the underlying context provision of counseling as a student support service to distance learner. The collected data were analyses through content analysis, content analysis can be defined as "*the study of recorded human communications*" (Babbie 2001), According to Creswell, (2003), content analysis involves counting and comparisons, usually of keywords or content, followed by the interpretation of the underlying context.

The Open University of Tanzania and Ilala Regional Center

The Open University of Tanzania (OUT) is a distance learning Single mode public University in Tanzania, established through the Act of parliament No. 17 of 1992 (The Act has now been replaced by the Open University of Tanzania Charter which is in line with the University Act No. 7 of 2005 which came into effect on the 1st of January 2007). The OUT offers Certificates, Diploma and degree courses. The OUT conducts its operations through 25 Regional centers and 69 study centers. Ilala Regional center is one among the Dar es Salaam Regional centers of the OUT; others are Kinondoni and Temeke regional center. Ilala Regional center was established in 2006 (Facts and Figure, 2012/2014). In 2008/2009, enrolled students were 782, 2009/2010 (557), 2010/11(681), 2011/2012 (714), 2012/2013 (706), 2013/14(455) and 2014/2015 (734) (Facts and Figure... Therefore, the academic survival of the number of students depends on the provision of the counseling services and hence sustainable development of ODL.

Conceptualization of the Term Counseling and Counseling Services

The term counseling according to Biswalo (1996) is defined as a process of helping an individual to receive, accept and use advice that can help him to understand and solve his problem or to cope with it successfully. Counseling also refers to a learning-oriented process, which occurs usually in an interactive relationship, with the aim of helping a person learn more about the self, and to use such understanding to enable the person to become an effective member of society (UNESCO, 2009). Another definition Counseling is defined as a process designed to help an individual solve some of his/her problems or assist the individual in planning the future (Zindi & Makotore, 2000). The three definitions show that, the aim of counseling is to provide information which can help a person to acquire self-understanding, self-direction or self-initiatives to the disturbing problem or an issue, that activity is what termed as counseling services. From the definitions above, two individual are found, one who has a problem or a disturbing issue (client) and the other who provide counseling service that is a counselor. For the case of the Ilala regional center of the Open University of Tanzania, both administrative and academic staffs provide counseling services.

Students Needs and Potentials of Counseling Services for Sustainability in Education in Open and Distance Learning Mode

In this study sustainability in education refers to the systematic and continuity of providing and receiving education for meeting the needs of students and meeting the vision and mission of the institution or organization. In this study the Open University of Tanzania the vision statement include; to be a leading world-class University in the delivery of affordable quality education through Open distance learning, dynamic knowledge generation and application and the mission statement is to continuously provide quality Open and distance education, research and public services for sustainable and equitable socio-economic development of Tanzania in particular and rest of Africa'. Thus in having quality education and more students retention the education provision has to be sustainable.

Open and distance learners need counseling services in meeting their objectives from point of first inquiry through graduation (Col 2000). Students needs include financial, academic, psychological and social issues or problems which have to be addressed and solved through counseling hence enhance quality education and sustainable development in education. Students' counseling in educational settings begins with the pre admission period, continues through the duration of the program or

the course, and till the time of course or programme completion. Distance learners have special needs: the need of information to help learners relate to the institution and understand its system; contact with tutors to help maintain motivation and overcome learning problems; institutional identity, which is some means of helping learners identify with a remote institution and to feel that they are part of a body of learners rather than studying in isolation; and advice on how to study; as well as that provided within the course itself, learners often need additional support to guide good study techniques (Col and ADB, 1999). Ghazi, Malik and Safdar (2013), in their study on “*addressing psychological problems of distance learner through guidance and counseling*” they pointed out functions of guidance and counseling including; guidance and counseling enable a student to face and work through personal difficulties, provision of accurate and appropriate information. In the provision of guidance and counseling services, there are challenges like poor quality of some of counseling sessions (Krishna, 2012). In addition, in the study by Mwangi (2012), in his study on “students’ perception of Guidance and counseling: A case Study of Loreto School, Nairobi”. The study found that students could not follow their tutors for guidance and counseling services rather they were to go to their parents/ guardians , the reasons behind that is majority of the first years are not familiar with their tutors or counselors for seeking for advice or a help.

Knowledge in Providing Counseling Service: A Case of Open and Distance learning System

According to Bukaliya and Musika (2015), counselor’s knowledge on counseling skills and techniques are significant in the counseling process for effective provision of counseling services. The counselor must be skillful and able to apply his or her professional competences in different settings and for different types of clients (Omari, 2006). Counseling skills may be either basic or supportive (Biswalo, 1996) and their application greatly depends on the counselor’s understanding of the counselee, his/her environment and problem to be solved. Basic Skills for counseling can be explained using the acronym **REUNDA** which stands for; R for *Relation building*, E for *Exploration of the problem*, UN for *Understanding the client* and A for *Action plan*. However, supporting counseling skills include attending behavior, empathy, warm relationship, respect for the counselee’s viewpoints, genuineness of the counselor to help, right language and gestures, listening and questioning skills, self-disclosure and reflection and immediacy of actions. Both types of counseling skills are used in face to face counseling as well as for counseling clients/students at a distance. Moreover, face to

face counseling is also found in Open and distance Learning system in a limited way. Provision of Counseling services at distance (online counseling) is through means of telephone and computer that is internet, depending on the nature of the problem, the choice of the means or technology in counseling according COL, (2003) depends on Accessibility, Flexibility, Cost, Speed; how quick can the information be disseminated through the medium, Interactive and user friendliness. All of the issues mentioned in this part have to be well known by a person who provide counseling services to students particularly students under open and distance learning system.

Conceptual Framework: Students Supporting Services in Open and Distance Learning Institutions

This study will use a conceptual framework illustrating the major students support services which are provided in Open and Distance Learning Institutions. Among these students support services, the counseling will be considered in particular. To assess the effectiveness of counseling services in Open and Distance Learning mode, this study considers knowledge of counselors, issues in counseling, potentials and challenges in counseling are the main variables to be researched. The conceptual framework is illustrated in the following figure.

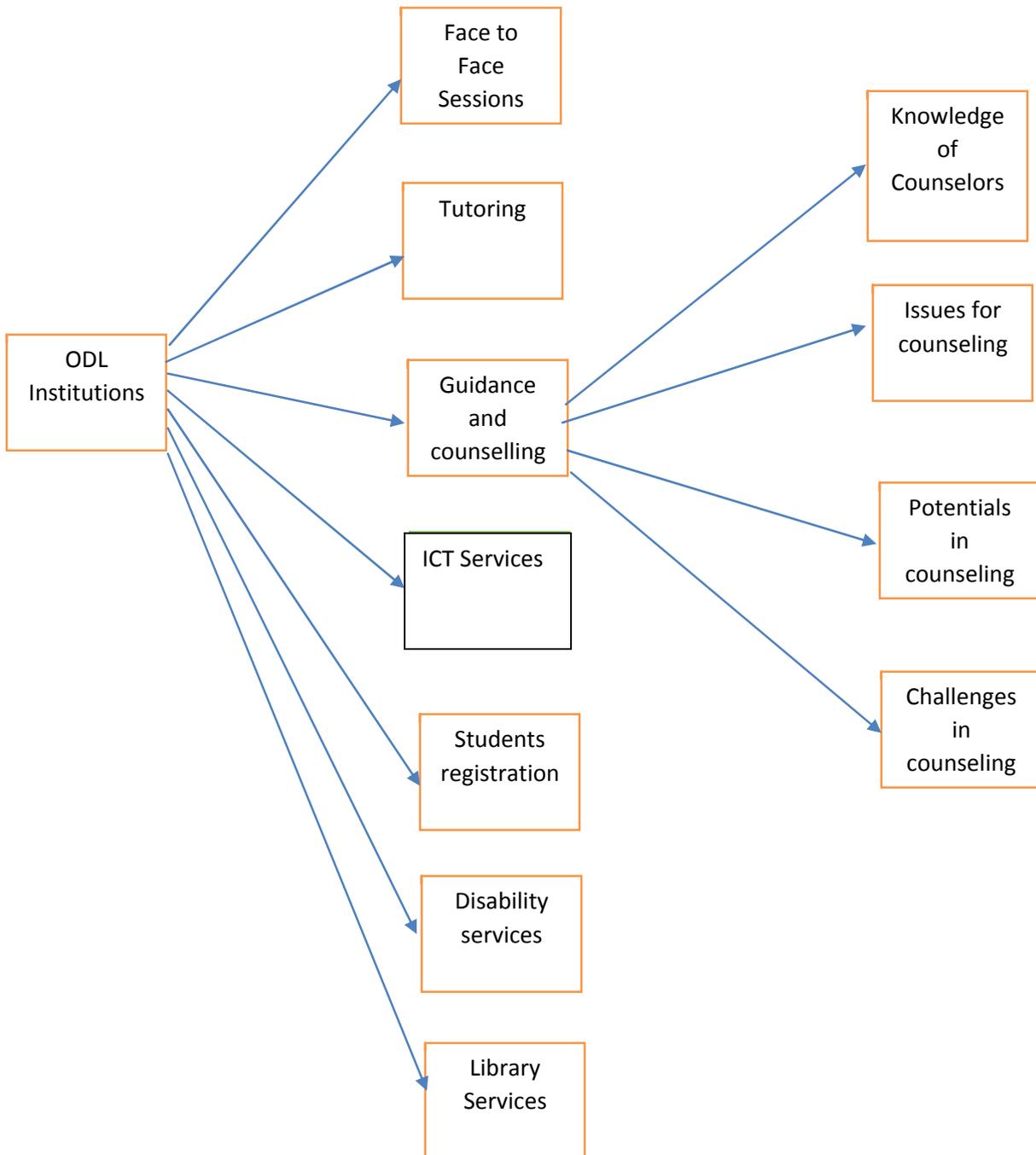


Figure 1: Students Support Services

Findings of the Study

Table 1: Knowledge of respondents concerning Counseling and their area of specialization

Items	Academic staffs	Administrative staffs
Number of respondents	9	3
Knowledge / skills on providing counseling	4	None
Knowledge / skills on providing counseling to distance learner	None	None
Provide counseling to students	YES	YES

Source: Data from field

The table above indicates that all staffs at the center provide counseling service to students though they don't have the knowledge and skills of Counseling as well as knowledge on how to counsel counseling distance learners. Four (4) academicians out of Nine (9) academicians reported to have been using general knowledge and skills of counseling which they got from their Bachelor Degree on Education that is Bachelor of Arts with Education (B.A. Ed) in which Guidance and counseling as a core course. However the remaining other academicians; two from Law specialization, two from Bachelor of science, and one from bachelor of business management (Finance) had no formal knowledge and skills of counseling neither knowledge on how to counsel Open and Distance learner. On the other side Administrative staffs, do counseling using day to day experience. One reported;

“When a student come with an issue of difficult I try to tell him or her I know and use any technique I see can help him/her in solving the problem otherwise I don't any knowledge on providing counseling”

Issues Usually Counseled at Ilala Regional Center

Issues reported by the academic and administrative staffs which they usually encounter from the students includes: academic issues; late registration of subject and exams, unclear result, how to study under ODL, how to balance work and study, problem of study materials: social issues, marital problem, loss of the beloved ones, financial problem (incomplete school fees). However, both, academic and administrative staffs mainly reported to have been providing counseling to new students who intend to join

or who have just joined to study with the Open University of Tanzania (OUT). As it was emphasized by one administrator:

“When students apply for study they have misconception on how to study under ODL, they ask classes, and sometimes time table for when and where the lesson will be taking place.... then you are forced to provide counseling, giving the information to students, sometimes you combine two or more students and counsel so that they know the philosophical nature of study under ODL”

Together with that the now days the Open University of Tanzania has advanced in using highly Information communication technologies by demanding students to use computer on line registration of the subjects which will be studied per year as well as the examinations registration is also a problem which new students encounter as well as continuing student.

Potentials of Counseling to Distance Learner

Both administrative and academic staffs at the center reported of seeing the importance of counseling services to students in attaining their academic goals, these include;

- Enabling students to gain more self-understanding and self-direction studying through ODL,
- Remove negative attitudes towards studying with the Open and Distance Learning System, the Open University in particular
- Builds in students a belief on what is provided through ODL.
- Build in students’ a strong relationship between students and staffs of the Open University of Tanzania, Ilala Regional Center in particular.

Challenges Staffs Encounter in Providing Counseling Services

Three categories of the challenges were reported by administrative and academic staffs of the Ilala regional center, these include; Personal oriented challenges and master / institutional oriented challenges. Starting with, personal oriented challenges; these are the challenges on the side of the students which frequently led counseling provision include; recalcitrant of behavior of students, lazier fair attitudes of modern students, non-observance of rules and regulations of the university by the students. On the other hand, the master oriented challenges, are the challenges which are on the side of the

institution; lack of an office to use as a counseling venue for privacy, and lack of skills and knowledge on how to handle and counsel the distance learner.

However, most the Staff of Ilala regional Centers reported technological infrastructure as also a challenge in the provision of counseling services. One academic staff reported;

“In counseling we usually depend on mobile means of communication and internet, most of our student at the center, use mobile for communication..... If it happens a student use mobile technology for counseling in there between, networking problems occur and that is the end of counseling service incomplete service”.

Another academic staff supported the above, as it was reported:

... the type of students at our center, majority are those who do not afford to have computer, and if it happens few can afford, but no access to internet..... majority of students are teacher in degree level as well as diploma level, ... nature of their work do not encourage them to own a computer, if you find... few of them. mobile technology remain a means used in the provision of counseling service

Discussion of the Findings

Studying with the Open and Distance learning, authentic counseling services is very crucial as All most all of the participants provide counseling services but they are not well trained, for that matter therefore, the counseling services provided is of poor quality they, this confirm the findings of Krishna, (2012). The study also showed that counseling provides students with a better self-understanding and direction, and corroborate the findings by Ghazi, Malik and Safdar (2013). However, this study was unique in finding out recalcitrant behavior of students who refuse to follow the advices due to their non-commitment.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, it is therefore concluded that competencies in the provision of counseling services are very significant for Open and distance learner as they harmonize students objectives, goals and university mission and vision for sustainable development in ODL; it makes students retain in the system of education, remove

student inner conflict on issues of difficulties and problems on academic and the related problems which affect ones study.

Recommendation to the OUT

- More emphasis to be put on the staff orientation course on Open and Distance Learning provided by the OUT, which provides knowledge and skills on ODL and related issues
- An identification of a counseling room for privacy
- Provision of an induction course on how to Counsel and Guide Distance learner for sustainability in education

Recommendation for Further Study

A comparisons study on the methodological provision of counseling services for ODL students and Convention students.

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