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Online counselling services: The future of counselling and psychotherapy, here and now in Nigerian universities

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Abstract

Purpose - The purpose of this paper is to stress the increasing imperativeness of counseling and psychotherapy in Nigerian universities, given the growing, strident, and persistent reports of maladaptive behaviors such as suicidal ideation and behaviors among university students.

Method - The study employed the method of informed arguments to present online counseling as a veritable tool to assist the universities in linking the undergraduates with the sources of counseling and psychotherapy with the view to promoting their self-consciousness, self-understanding, and adequate mental health needed to develop top-level human resources.

Result - It shares the experiences of online counseling interactions obtained from the Obafemi Awolowo University online counseling platform.

Implication - Recommendations are also made to guide other universities in Nigeria and similar climes as to establishing their home-grown platform or sharing in the use of the existing dedicated platforms.

Originality - The paper is one of the earliest to present an argument for including online counseling services in the systems of universities, particularly in the developing world. It is also the first to present a report of practical experiences garnered in such an established service in a Nigerian University to guide the establishment of more of such in other universities.

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Konseling online, mahasiswa, komunikasi yang dimediasi komputer.

Abstrak

Tujuan - Tujuan dari makalah ini adalah untuk menekankan meningkatnya ketidaktegasan konseling dan psikoterapi di universitas-universitas di Nigeria, mengingat laporan yang terus meningkat, keras, dan terus-menerus mengenai perilaku maladaptif seperti ide dan perilaku bunuh diri di kalangan mahasiswa.

Metode - Penelitian ini menggunakan metode argumen yang terinformasi untuk menyajikan konseling online sebagai alat yang tepat untuk membantu universitas dalam menghubungkan mahasiswa dengan sumber-sumber konseling dan psikoterapi dengan tujuan untuk meningkatkan kesadaran diri, pemahaman diri, dan kesehatan mental yang memadai yang diperlukan untuk mengembangkan sumber daya manusia tingkat atas.

Hasil - Penelitian ini membagikan pengalaman interaksi konseling online yang diperoleh dari platform konseling online Universitas Obafemi Awolowo.

Implikasi - Rekomendasi juga dibuat untuk memandu universitas lain di Nigeria dan negara lain yang memiliki iklim yang sama untuk membangun platform buatan sendiri atau berbagi penggunaan platform khusus yang sudah ada.

Keaslian - Makalah ini adalah salah satu yang paling awal yang menyajikan argumen untuk memasukkan layanan konseling online ke dalam sistem universitas, terutama di negara berkembang. Makalah ini juga merupakan yang pertama yang menyajikan laporan tentang pengalaman praktis yang diperoleh dari layanan yang sudah mapan di Universitas Nigeria untuk memandu pendirian layanan serupa di universitas lain.

Introduction

The term university is commonly used to describe a further or higher educational and research institution that teaches specific capacities of higher learning and confers academic degrees in various academic disciplines at undergraduate or postgraduate levels. Specifically, Crow (2014) described universities as “.....factories for the unmatched idea and talent assemblers, where the creativity, idealism, and passion of great minds, can be explored to identify, brainstorm and proffer solution to social problems and concerns with the view to advancing social and economic well-being”. Consequently, a university can be described as a non-compulsory educational institution that provides the high-level skilled human resources necessary for every labor, specifically in the form of essential specialists such as lawyers, teachers, engineers, doctors and nurses, civil servants, physical and social scientists, entrepreneurs and a myriad of other personnel. In general, the World Bank (2019) posits that such tertiary education is increasingly becoming even more relevant for graduates to compete effectively in

the labor market, considering the future of work and the increasing role of science and technology in productive value chains.

Research suggests that the entire developmental framework of the socio-economic development of a nation revolves around quality university education and that such contribution to university education comes in varied forms (Otonko, 2012). These include helping in the rapid economic industrialization of the society by providing human resources with adequate technical, professional, and managerial skills; helping in the transformation of the societies into a knowledge-based by providing knowledgeable workers who would contribute significantly to the growth of the national economy; by helping in the acquisition of good attitudes; and engendering attitudinal changes which are essential for the socialization of the individuals, thereby, and can result to the overall transformation and eventually modernization of the society.

However, it has been contended that tertiary education has become increasingly complex in Nigeria, and in general, learning in Nigerian higher institutions can be very stressful (Oduwaiye Yahaya Amadi & Tihamiyu, 2017) mainly resulting from the challenge of adjusting to transactions in changes recently being experienced. This is in addition to other challenges from time management, scrambling for inadequate facilities, family pressures, poor interpersonal relationships, health issues, sexual harassment and its reporting, cultic activities, anxiety about unemployment, etc. These students are also not immune from the growing number of social problems that affect the lives of young people, as identified by Mbongo, Möwes, and Chata (2015) to include competitiveness, bullying, social exclusion, unintended pregnancy, family crises, sibling rivalry, school under-achievement, internet abuse, peer pressure, and substance abuse.

As a result, stress arising from all these and others are known to cause some dominant psychological problems such as loss of appetite, absent-mindedness, memory loss, depression, nervousness, frustration, and blood pressure and are very common in Nigerian Universities. Many reports of depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation, and suicide keep coming from the universities regularly. Olufemi (2019) reported that fifteen university students reportedly committed suicide in 8 months. This does not include attempted cases or cases of those who were

resuscitated. At the Obafemi Awolowo University, an extra-year computer science and engineering student committed suicide over poor academic performance. At the same time, an earlier but similar case was reported about a year one student for scoring an “E” grade in CHM 101. Also, there is the case of an English student who swallowed “Snipper,” a lethal substance. All these appear to be threatening the primary duties allotted to university education.

Research Methods

The paper is a researched position paper that made use of the methods of informed arguments to set a premise for an understanding of online counselling as a veritable tool for assisting the universities to link her undergraduates with sources of counselling and psychotherapy, given the myriad of stressors embedded in its time-bound and highly demanding activities. Pantuso, LeMire and Anders (2022) defined a researched position paper as one in which a stance is taken on a chosen topic and defended with qualitative and quantitative research that can be found in scholarly or academic sources. The authors opined that in a researched position paper, the researcher places him/herself in dialogue with a scholarly community, taking a stance on the topic about which s/he feels strongly. Further, the informed argument as a research method helps writers to explore and articulate their beliefs more persuasively by exploring how diverse points of view can inform each other.

Results and Discussion

Many Nigerian universities are commonly imbued with mental health and psychological departments and units capable of providing services and research resources that should help students overcome the myriads of emotional challenges, troubles, and trauma. However, the effectiveness of these services and research efforts appears to be questioned by the continued manifestation of depressive symptoms among Nigerian university students.

Many reasons have been adduced for this development. For instance, Adebowale (2014) suggested that the too-low counselor-student ratio may be having an adverse effect on the effectiveness of counseling in the universities, with particular reference to the Obafemi Awolowo University, where only eight

counselors were saddled with the task of providing psychological support to 31,945 students, in addition to over 4,000 staff members during the year under study. Other possible reasons for this were also suggested by Adebowale, Popoola, Obisakin, and Aluede (2012) that some student-clients avoid entering into face-to-face counseling for fear of stigmatization for having problems or being laughed at by mates. Also, Adebowale and Popoola (2011) suggested another reason may be the students' consideration of their positions in their religious, social, and academic organizations. It, therefore, follows that approaches or modes of counseling in which the client's identity is protected, at least to the physical world, need to be explored.

Computer-mediated communication has been suggested to help address issues that account for the ineffectiveness of school counseling services, particularly if it is appropriately integrated into the school system. Specifically for counseling, computer-mediated counseling services commonly referred to as online counseling, e-counseling, cyber counseling, or web-counseling (Pollock, 2006; Attridge, 2004) have been advocated by many authors (Adebowale & Popoola, 2011; Haberstroh, Parr, Bradley, Morgan-Fleming & Gee, 2008; Ainsworth, 2004; and Alleman, 2002). Gedge (2002) posited that people who are uncomfortable with face-to-face interaction would find online counseling beneficial, while Suler (2001) even suggested that clients may find it more accessible to discuss their inner self in online counseling than in face-to-face interaction, as it would have a disinhibiting effect. These are in addition to other advantages of cheaper costs (Mitchel & Murphy, 1998), convenience (Baron, 2009), flexibility (Mulhauser, 2011), providing services to the underserved (Ainsworth, 2004), serving as a valuable tool for training counselors-in-training (Haberstroh et al., 2008) and etc.

However, downsides also exist to adopting online counseling. The most important one identified is the lack of non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions, body language, and voice tone (Baker & Ray, 2011; Liess, Simon, Yutsis, Owen, Altree-Piemme, Golant & Giese-Davis, 2008). This was reported to lead to difficulty in establishing strong therapeutic alliances between the counselor and the client (Rochlen, Zack, & Speyer, 2004; Cook & Doyle, 2002). However, Alleman (2002)

considered non-verbal cues a necessity in counseling relationships, while Altman and Taylor (1973) stressed the importance of non-verbal cues and messages in developing intimacy and, in particular, the counseling relationship. Also, Poh-li, Jaladin, and Abdullah (2013) posited that the lack of non-verbal cues can result in a more significant potential for miscommunication or misinterpretation (Baker & Ray, 2011).

Conversely, Cook and Doyle (2002) reported that respondents in their study claimed that despite the absence of non-verbal cues, they still experienced a stronger alliance with their online therapist, such that a strong therapeutic alliance was effectively established. Baker and Ray (2011) surmised that favorable characteristics of text-based communication may have partially offset the non-verbal cues drawback. They argued that clients who contact via email can disclose at an accelerated rate and that online support groups may have a disinhibiting effect. Clients may also get to the point earlier than face-to-face, and the seeming anonymity may enhance disclosure that clients perceive as not being seen physically or by not revealing their physical identities. Harrad and Banks (2016) saw an advantage in the absence of non-verbal cues. They believe that clients can avoid potentially offensive cues from the therapist, like reactions to client disclosure, and may disclose more distressing and painful information during the therapeutic session.

Given the upper hand of the advantages of lack of non-verbal cues and to compensate for the lack of these cues, practitioners have designed approaches by which acronyms, abbreviations, and emotional bracketing can be used to convey emotions (Fletcher-Tomenius & Vossler, 2009). Collie, Mitchell, and Murphy (2000) also recommended that therapists employ emoticons and bracketing emotional content to ensure the proper/accurate interpretation is portrayed to clients. Emotional bracketing involves enclosing the emotional context within a pair of brackets behind the typed words to allow the client to understand the intended vocal tone in the words. Descriptive immediacy can also provide the client with images to better understand the therapist (Poh-li et al., 2013).

Another essential downside attributed to online counseling is that most internet interactions do not take place in real time, such that if the client can send, read, and reply to emails any time, the response time-lag from the therapist could take hours, days, or even longer (Baker & Ray, 2011; Mubarok & Karim, 2022), despite clients' perception of the email easy accessibility, falsely indicating that the counselor's "door is always opened" (Peterson & Beck, 2003). Also, Harrad and Banks (2016) observed that clients may send long or short emails, depending on how they express and describe their concerns. This may be without a clearly expressed need. When emails are not immediately responded to, some clients may feel ignored. Consequently, automated responses are commonly used to address these challenges, and have been found to be favorably comparable to online responses by the human being (Tate, Jackvony, & Wing, 2006).

Other challenges identified with online counseling are in the area of ethical and legal considerations. These include issues related to jurisdiction, regulation, and licensing. When violations or other problems occur during treatment, it may be difficult to pinpoint the regulatory body with jurisdiction to effect redress. Also, licensing boards have yet to provide clear parameters of their jurisdiction, and most codes of ethics from professional organizations have very little to say about online counseling and psychotherapy (Baker & Ray, 2011). Also, the confidentiality risk of third-party access to clients' information in online counseling must be addressed.

This may be why Zamania, Nasira, and Yusooff (2010) surmised that online counseling should supplement the FtF traditional counseling services. It is however necessary that, in agreement with Mallen, Vogel, and Rochlen (2005), online counselors should receive adequate training in communication and the use of new technologies, such as interpreting text messages written through synchronous chat and assessing clients without the aid of non-verbal cues.

The Obafemi Awolowo University Experience

The journey to the establishment of a dedicated platform for the university's online guidance and counseling services started in 2009 as studies have stressed the need to employ emerging information and communication technology to support learning and cognition, stressing the pressing need to do so to minimize

the mediating effect of culture on learning and cognition (Adebowale & Ehindero, 2012). An empirical exploration of the prospects and challenges of online guidance and counseling services was also carried out (Adebowale & Popoola, 2011; Adebowale, 2009). The studies explored the students' views on their potential preferences for and nature of online guidance and counseling services, as well as the problems that might be presented in that context. It also appraised the material and human resources available for running such services.

Results from the studies indicated a favorable disposition by most students towards the possible establishment of e-counseling services in the University. They preferred online guidance and counseling concerning their educational/academic concerns, specifically for acquiring practical study skills, problem-solving skills, and career planning. Sexual, dating, and relationship issues were not prominent in the indicated preferences. Also, some significant limitations in terms of material and human resources were identified.

These observations were confirmed in a mid-term report assembled about eight months after establishing the dedicated platform christened OAU online guidance and counseling services (Adebowale, Popoola, Obisakin, and Aluede, 2012). The study showed that patronage of the services was on a steady rise, and the main issues discussed were academic matters, career issues, and health concerns. At this point, students showed no significant difference in their preference for real-time chatting or email.

However, further studies in this area showed that online guidance and counseling services would be a viable source of psychological support for students (Adebowale, 2013). This study also examines the students' disposition to OAU online counseling services with specific reference to the prevalent disposition, dispositional types, and distribution of students across the dispositional types. The results confirmed that most students were favorably disposed to online counseling services in OAU, particularly in the form of curiosity, enthusiasm, and trust, and their age and level did not influence these in the university. However, sex and their awareness of the weblink significantly influenced their disposition to online counseling (Adebowale, 2014).

As the use of the platform progressed, further studies indicated that students preferred real-time chatting to email but only switched over when connection issues arose or when the online counselor and client could not meet in real-time. Most of the student-clients adopted the voluntary mode of entry into the online counseling relationship and still confirmed that the two significant issues as expressed by the student – academic and personal-social concerns (Adebowale, in Press)

The preceding performance of the online counseling platform made the university adopt the platform in 2013 as part of the services rendered by the University's Directorate of Student Affairs, placing the link on the University's web page and e-portal. It was also included in the webpage of every student to make the services readily available. Also, many more postgraduate studies are carried out on the platform, ranging from the exploration of anonymity, mutual disclosure, and trust in an online counseling relationship (Omotehinse & Adebowale, 2020) to determinants of communication effectiveness in online counseling relationships (Eli, Adebowale & Omotehinse, 2021) and other studies yet to be completed.

Conclusion

It can be concluded from the preceding that online counseling is the way to go for prompt, easily accessible, and cost-effective psychological support for Nigerian universities, given the ever-increasing population of young people craving for university education, increasing myriad of psychological challenges to which these young people are being subjected and the promise of greater challenges such as a significant increase in school fees, lower purchasing power of the country's currency and incessant strikes and disruption of academic calendar arising from that place. The following recommendations are therefore made:

1. Universities should establish online counseling services and provide adequate material and human resources.
2. Provide the counseling and psychotherapy staff members with training to make them functional in delivering quality online counseling services to the students and even staff who may request such services.

3. Make the use of the services compulsory for all students to access before the commencement of every semester so that students' academic and personal-social challenges can be timely addressed.

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