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Counselling as a Learner Support Service for Enhancing Quality Learning for Students of National Open University of Nigeria, South-East Study Centres of Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigated the extent counselling as a learner support service have enhanced the quality of learning for students of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) Study centres in South-East of Nigeria. Two research questions and one null hypothesis guided the study. The descriptive design was adopted for the study. Survey research study that was carried out at the four Study Centres of NOUN in the South-East states of Nigeria. The population of study was 4,765 students while a sample of 480 respondents were selected using a multi-stage sampling technique. The instrument for data collection was researchers' structured questionnaire titled "Counselling as a Learner Support Service for Enhancing Quality Learning" which was face validated by three experts. The Reliability coefficient of 0.77 using Cronbach Alpha was obtained. The research questions were answered mean while hypothesis was tested using Mann-Whitney U-test. The result from the study showed that counselling as a learner support to a high extent have enhanced the quality of learning at the NOUN South-East Study centres. Based on these findings, recommendations were made among which were that: National Open University of Nigeria should make provision for adequate media facilities for counselling so as to ensure that students are guided as expected. Availability of a standard well-equipped computer counselling room that provides for a more supportive counselling delivery will ensure that distance learners' problems are attended to at all times.

Key words: Counselling Service, Learner Support Service, Open and Distance Learning

Introduction

Open University is a means of providing access to quality and equitable higher educational opportunities for those who wish to improve and upgrade their knowledge. It is a social evolution which has brought real educational transformation, the desired changes and development at the speed educationists have never imagined before (Okoronkwo, 2010). Its uniqueness lies on its flexibility, easy access, immediate application and combination of media facilities in providing mass education. It uses varieties of digital technologies to liberalize education, turning homes and offices into learning environment as rich as that of schools, colleges and universities (Lucia, 2005). The rapid growth of the concepts of open and distance education are possible because of continuing increase in the demand for education, encouraged by the convergence of digital technology. Hence, open and distance education allows access to study without academic restrictions that enables as much independence and self-determination as possible. Therefore, open and distance education is a flexible form of education, providing help to learners in many kinds of learning environments. It has also become a legitimized mode of education and has globally been embraced as a cost effective model for providing higher education to a large segment of the population (Krishnan, 2012).

In Nigeria, Open and Distance learning (ODL) plays a tremendous and unassailable role in tackling the country's higher educational problems including access and equity. Some remarkable emergence of ODL include, establishment of National Teachers Institute (NTI), National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) and various distance and E-learning centres in different universities of Nigeria. National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) was initially established as National Open University on 22nd July 1983 as springboard for open and distance learning in Nigeria. It was suspended by the government on 25th April 1984 and in 2002, the National Open University Act of 1983 was reactivated and this paved way for the

resuscitation of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) as we have it today (NOUN, 2015). It operates from its administrative headquarters located in Lagos, with study centres throughout the country. Currently the student enrolment stands at over 120,000 and about 63 study centres spread across the nation. NOUN currently offers over 50 programmes and 750 courses, stair casing through from certificate to diploma and degree level, and maintain a strong commitment to internationalisation (NOUN, 2015). NOUN was established with mission to provide functional, cost-effective, flexible learning, which adds life-long value to quality education for all seeking knowledge. The learner support services of the institution are therefore designed to assist in accomplishment of the above mission of NOUN.

Learner support services are all aspects of the institution's facilities from the enquiry desk, through quality of learning activities and all aspects of interpersonal relations between the institution's staff and its learners (Lucia, 2005). These include provision of personal guide, counselling, library services, media resource centre/service, feedback, study kits, tutoring and administrative guidance designed to assist the open and distance learners to successfully achieve their academic goals. Learners support services contributes greatly towards the successful satisfaction of distance learner's educational needs. It ensures that distance learners go up to the educational ladder putting forth their best, assist them to cultivate a sense of direction and become motivated in their academic work (Babatunde, 2010). It also develops in them a sense of belongingness to the institution as well as help them graduate at the shortest possible time.

Importance of quality learners' support services cannot be under-estimated, due to the fact that learners of distance education are physically removed from the teacher and also isolated from other learners. Thus, achieving effectiveness in open and distance learning institutions requires a range of quality services for learners so as to complement the varieties of course materials offered uniformly for all learners` in the programme (Lucia, 2005).

Directorate of Learner Support Service is responsible for providing learner support services to all NOUN participants. It is a comprehensive arm of NOUN with various staff and units which handles learner support services at the headquarters and different study centres across the nation. The Directorate is therefore, responsible for handling a pivotal aspect in teaching/learning of NOUN learners because distance learners are mostly adult learners and are mostly very busy and prefers flexible learning system like open and distance learning which will allow them learn and work as well as learn and engage in other life activities. Thus, they are faced with enormous challenges like family, career, political, economic, health even cultural issues that may inflict some level of learning difficulties (Patrick & Ihejirika, 2012). These challenges however, can be reduced through effective institutional counselling support that will contribute to their overall success and course completion by recognising their needs, assisting them to become more competent and self-confident in their learning, enhancing their social interactions and self-evaluation (Rae, 1986).

Counselling is an integral part of learner support in open and distance education (ODE) which is based on interpersonal or group communication and interaction between the counsellor and learners (Okopi, 2008). Counselling services are useful for building confidence and motivation in the distance learner, reassuring them that they are heading towards the right direction, as well as providing answers to problems pertaining to the course programme (Rickwood & Godwin, 1997). Counselling unit of NOUN is in charge of providing learners with guide, direction and motivating services, coordinating the work and activities of the instructional facilitators, monitoring and supervising matters pertaining to tutoring, creation of learning circles; matters pertaining to learning habits, and related issues, change of programmes etc (NOUN, 2015). Counselling services also play vital role in ensuring quality learning in open and distance learning.

Quality learning in Open and Distance Learning entails excellence in provision of institutional support, course development, teaching/learning, course structure, student support, faculty support and evaluation as well as assessment (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2000). Furthermore, quality learning in ODL must include the success of learners in achieving the goals that made them to seek education. Thus, the institutional counselling service being part of support service plays an important role in guiding and motivating students to continually seek new knowledge. Many studies in recent past have shown that most students are unaware of the different types of support services and as such, they use these resources at a low level at National Open University of Nigeria, Lagos and Ibadan study centres (Damilola, 2013).

According to Ajadi, Salawu and Adeoye, (2008) inequality of access to the support services by NOUN students is one of the challenges facing the use of learner support services. The authors further noted that most of the students are reluctant to take responsibility for their learning but preferred to be spoon-fed at all times which could affect their performance. This is even more difficult for married distance learners especially the women who have additional responsibility to keep their job/ business, taking care of the family daily activities, etc. when women enter colleges their role demand expands, they face pressures from family, spouse, home, and employers (Patrick &Ihejirika, 2012). These challenges may restrain distance learners from enrolling in the formal school and even when they enrol without experiencing reasonable support services, they will most likely dropout. Thus, distance education learners need to develop a coping strategy for overcoming isolation, lack of regular peer group interaction, and the absence of direction by the tutor. Nonetheless, this separation could result to grievous disconnection without initial counselling support services which will help ameliorate learning difficulties of these NOUN learners. Empirically, the researchers sought to fill this gap by investigating the extent to which

counselling as a learner support service have enhanced quality learning among students of National Open University of Nigeria, (NOUN) and the problems associated with inadequate use of counselling services as a learners support service for enhancing quality learning by NOUN students in South-East Study Centres of Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem: Counselling services in open and distance learning is an essential aspect of learner support services. It is prepared and designed to guide the open and distance learners to easily achieve their educational pursuit at shortest possible time irrespective of the isolation syndrome and lack of regular social interaction among peers and tutor. Hence to ensure quality learning in open and distance learning, there is need for proficient counselling services with experienced counsellors sufficiently knowledgeable on how to deliver counselling services to open and distance learners. However, the ability of counselling services to assist students to achieve their personal educational goals and its ability to reflect on the varieties and diversities of the individual needs is still tentative.

Regrettably, most of the learners may even be unaware of the importance of institution's counsellors and this may affect the quality of their academic performance. More so, the separation of tutor and learner and among students themselves may also take away much of the social interaction that is very essential in learning environment. The isolation that results from the distance learning may complicate learning process for distance learners which may hinder their level of utilization of counselling services. These showed that facilitation and transactional theories are relevant for the study in that the counsellors need to establish an attitude and close contact with the students, getting to know them and offering empathy. Also, the theories take into consideration the need for an adult friendly learning environment to be conducive for quality learning. It is on these bases that the researchers examined the extent counselling as a learner support service have enhanced the quality of

learning for students of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) South-East Study Centres.

Purpose of the Study: The major purpose of the study was to examine the extent counselling as a learner support service have enhanced quality learning among students of National Open University of Nigeria, (NOUN) in South-East Study Centres of Nigeria. Specifically, the study examined:

1. the extent counselling services as a learner support service have enhanced the quality of learning at National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) South-East Study Centres.
2. the problems associated with the utilization of counselling as a learner support service by distance learners at NOUN South-East Study Centres.

Research Questions: The following research questions guided the study;

1. To what extent have counselling as a learner support service enhanced quality learning at National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) South-East Study Centres?
2. What are the problems associated with the use of counselling as a learner support service by distance learners at NOUN South-East Study Centres?

Research Hypothesis: The null hypothesis of this study was tested at 0.05 level of significance.

H₀₁: Male and female NOUN learners will not differ significantly on their means ratings on the extent counselling as a learner support service have enhanced the quality of their learning in NOUN South-East study centres.

Conceptual Clarification

Learner Support Service

Learner support service is the generic name that has been applied to the range of services developed to help learners meet their learning objectives and gain the knowledge and skills that they need in order to be successful in their courses. In open and distance education, learners support services include a range of human and non-human resources to guide and facilitate educational transaction (Garrison, 1989). The resources or what Tait (1995)

referred to as the elements of learners' support services are made-up of tutoring, whether face-to-face, by correspondence, telephone or electronically; counseling; the organization of study centres; interactive teaching through TV and radio and other activities as key conceptual components. In a broader view, Simpson (2000) describes learner support in distance education as all activities beyond the production and the delivery of course materials that assist in the progress of learners in their studies.

In all these descriptions the commonalities lie in utilizing all possible means essentially to ensure the successful delivery of learning experiences at a distance. They are all those interactive processes that are intended to support and facilitate the learning process. Learner support services are meant to provide all the information learners need, encourage them to fully utilize the available facilities, motivate them to assimilate what they learn, and provide necessary counselling for them as well. Some of the major components of learner support services include; Counselling Service, Library Service, Technical and Media Support, Face-to-Face Facilitation/Tutorial, Orientation, periodic workshops/seminars and feedback. However, the focus of this study was on counselling as a learner's support service in promoting quality education.

Counselling Services

Counselling Services in open and distance learning is very important and quite unique in achieving the impressive objectives of open and distance learning programme. It is a way of interacting with the distance education students to actively get them involved in their academic pursuit and to provide solution to their numerous queries and challenges. Counselling support services can be academic or administrative. Academic support includes information about scheduling of face-to-face tutorials, advice on course choice and lots more. While administrative support provides general enquiries regarding admission, registration,

advice on course exemptions, course amendments, change of address/examination centres, financial services and issuing of study material.

Counselling in distance learning is more challenging due to the students' characteristics; nature of open and distance education programmes and allied problems inherent in the system (Ukwueze, 2015). The role of counsellor to distance education students is very critical and as such, requires that they acquire adequate skills and professional ethics to be able to assist the learners understand their learning challenges as a result of the effects of distance on the ODL students (UNESCO, 2002). The counsellor should clearly incorporate the counselling functions and principles needed so as to achieve these roles. Simpson (2000) describes the six attributes of an effective distance learning counsellor using the acronym 'WHALES': Warmth, Honesty, Acceptance, Listening, Empathy, and Structure. Hence, counsellor has a greater degree of responsibility to the learner to ensure they understand and are able to take the information and make decisions that are useful to their course of study. Thus, the task of a counsellor in distance education is to give appropriate information, suggest best approaches or courses of action, and help learners clarify issues and problems concerning their studies.

In addition, Simpson (2000) noted that counselling can be seen as a cyclic process of five phases:

- ❖ clarifying: ensuring the learner's needs are clear;
- ❖ checking: ensuring the counsellor correctly understands the needs;
- ❖ conceptualizing: restating the need in the counsellor's own words;
- ❖ challenging: pointing out contradictions and other ways of seeing an issue; and
- ❖ consequent action: agreeing to what the counsellor and learner each might do as a result of their discussion.

Counselling could be burdensome and time consuming in dealing with individual problems. However, since many learners experience common problems and to make counselling easier and less time consuming, a number of issues and situations can be foreseen and addressed effectively with a well-prepared leaflet, which can be included in course materials and widely distributed to study centres, tutors, or local co-ordinators (Commonwealth of Learning, 1999). These common general problems can also be addressed utilizing other communication media such as audio-visual, CD and online information.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Facilitation Theory

Facilitation theory was developed in 1980 by an American psychologist Carl Roger. The theory stated that learning will occur by the educator acting as a facilitator; that is by establishing an atmosphere in which learners feel comfortable to consider new ideas and are not threatened by external factors (Laird, 1985). The major tenets of the theory are:

1. The belief that human beings have a natural eagerness to learn.
2. There is some resistance to and unpleasant consequences of giving up what is currently held to be true.
3. The most significant learning involves changing one's concept of oneself.
4. The educator or teacher and learner have roles to play to promote the learning process and ensure effective learning. Thus, the teacher as a facilitator should be:
 - ❖ Less protective of their constructs and beliefs.
 - ❖ More able to listen to learners, especially to their feelings.
 - ❖ Inclined to pay as much attention to their relationship with learners as to the content of the course.
 - ❖ To accept feedback, both positive and negative and to use it as constructive insight into themselves and their behaviour. (Lim, 2009).

In addition, facilitation theory also stipulated that effective educational process depends also on the learner as well. In order to contribute to their own learning, students should be:

- ❖ Encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning.
- ❖ Provide much of the input for the learning which occurs through their insights and experiences.
- ❖ Encouraged to consider that the most valuable evaluation is self-evaluation and that learning needs to focus on factors that contribute to solving significant problem or achieving significant results. (Lim, 2009). Therefore, a facilitative teacher or educator establishes an enabling atmosphere by being open to new ideas, listening to students, paying as much attention to his relationship with the students as he does to the content he is teaching, encouraging learner to take responsibility for their learning and actions and to take self-evaluation as the highest form of evaluation. The theory is relevant to learner support services as it relates to counselling support.

Transactional Distance Theory

Transactional theory was propounded by Michael Moore in 1993 and refers to the theory of cognitive space between instructors and learners in an educational setting, especially in distance education. According to Moore (1993), transactional distance is a psychological and communication space to be crossed, a space of potential misunderstanding between inputs of instructor and those of the learner. Thus, in distance education, students and instructors experience a sense of separation that is caused by more than the simple physical distance between them. The basic tenet of the theory as explained by Kuhn and Bussack (1997) is that there are series of transactions (like contacts) that are made between the different people involved in a distance education programme such as between learner and course material, between learner and tutors or counsellors, between learner and other learners and between learners and their institution. In other words, a large transactional distance may

contribute to students' feelings of isolation and disconnectedness, which can lead to reduced levels of motivation and engagement and consequently attrition (Moore, 1991).

The significance of the theory to this study is that when designing learner support systems certain variables must be given careful consideration to affect the transactional distance towards achieving an effective learning experience. First, the structure must be flexible both in instructional methods and strategies applied in learning experience. Secondly there must be a true dialogue—an effective interaction between the instructor, programme and learner during learning experience. More so, providing learner support services implies that there are actions and responsibilities between two parties; a sort of communication and contract between the providing institution through its administrative or counselling or academic staff, or its course materials, and the students.

Review of Related Empirical Studies

In a related study, Patrick and Iherjirika (2012) investigated students' perception of the quality of learner support services in National Open University of Nigeria, Port Harcourt study centre. The study was guided by two researcher questions. The design of the study was a descriptive survey. The population of the study consisted of 764 distance learners in Port Harcourt study centre. Proportionate and stratified random sampling techniques were adopted in determining the sample size of 229 learners. The data were collected using questionnaire. Mean and Standard Deviation (SD) were used to analyse responses to the research questions. The findings show that the female adult learners in distance learning programme experience more learning difficulty. This implies that female students need more learner support services than men, so that they can overcome barriers to learning and complete their studies successfully. The findings also show that the distance learners value counselling service and orientation especially on E-examination. The counselling services enable learners to identify their learning needs and to reflect on their competence and expectations with regards to their commitment to succeed. However the distance learners were not satisfied with the provision of motivational workshop and administrative support. The study has a link with the current study as it analyses the level of satisfaction and dissatisfaction by distance learners with various learner support services provided by NOUN.

In another situation, Alaneme and Olayiwola (2010) appraised the organisational management of learner support services in distance learning. The study presented an investigation of the type of learner support services existing in the distance learning centres of five dual-mode institutions and the single mode institution within Nigeria. The study was guided by four research questions. The study used the ex-post facto and survey design to ascertain the practices of learner support services in the dual-mode universities. The population of the study comprised of five dual-mode and one single-mode universities in

Nigeria. The study sampled two staff from each of the universities making a total of twelve (12) respondents and the student sample comprised of 260 students of the distance learning institute of the University of Lagos. The major tool for data collection was questionnaire and data were analysed using frequency tables as well as percentages. The findings of the study showed that there is provision for learner's support services in all the universities studied even though they vary according to the institution's ability and were also grossly inadequate. The findings of the study also showed that learner support services in dual-mode universities are below standard to address learners' needs, content, institutional context and technology. In linking this to the current study it examined learners' perception of the organisational management of learner support services in dual-mode universities which means it also examined the usage in learner support services by students.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Descriptive survey design was adopted for the study. Descriptive survey design is used to obtain information concerning events in a precise way and portrays the participants in an accurate way. Descriptive survey according to Ali (2006) is concerned with describing events as they are, without any manipulation of what caused the event or what is being observed. This design is appropriate for this study because it involves selecting and studying samples of population in order to describe and make a value judgment about the respondents on the extent counselling as a learner support service have enhanced quality learning among students of National Open University of Nigeria, (NOUN) in South-East Study Centres of Nigeria. The population of the study comprised 4,765 registered undergraduate students who had spent a minimum of one year in the programme (Second year to final year students) from all the study centres of the National Open University of Nigeria in South-East, Nigeria.

Multi-stage sampling technique was adopted for the study. Multi-stage sampling technique is a form of cluster sampling which involves breaking down the population into groups or clusters. This technique entails a sampling in which larger cluster are further subdivided into smaller targeted groupings for the purposes of surveying. The sample was drawn from all the four clusters of the states NOUN study centres and further subdivided into classes. Furthermore, the researchers randomly selected 10% of learners from these classes who had spent a minimum of one year in the programme from all the centres, which yielded approximately 480 respondents. The instrument for data collection was researchers' designed questionnaire titled "Counselling as a Learners Support Service for Enhancing Quality Learning Questionnaire" (CLSSEQLQ). It contained 17 items weighted on a 4-point rating scale of VHE, HE, LE and VLE as well as SA, A, D, SD respectively.

CLSSEQLQ was face validated by three experts, two from the department of Adult Education and Extra-Mural Studies and one from Measurement and Evaluation unit of the department of Science Education of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The experts were requested to advise the researchers on the clarity of the statement, suitability of rating scale adopted etc. The Reliability coefficient of 0.77 obtained using Cronbach Alpha is an indication that the instrument is reliable. The instrument was administered to the respondents during their weekend contact session with the aid of three research assistants. From 480 copies of administered instrument, 460 were rightly completed accounting to 95.83 per cent return rate and were used for data analysis. The data collected from the respondents were analysed using weighted mean and Mann-Whitney U-test for the research questions and hypothesis respectively. In analysing CLSSEQLQ the real limit of numbers was the decision rule for research question one. The limits was classified as follows: 3.50-4.00 = Very High Extent (VHE), 2.50 – 3.49 High Extent (HE), 1.50 – 2.49 Low Extent (LE), and 0.5 – 1.49 Very Low Extent (VLE). While for research question two, the decision rule was based on the

criterion mean of 2.50 derived by the sum of values of all the weights assigned to each response mode divided by the number of the response categories. Mathematically expressed as follows: $\frac{4 + 3 + 2 + 1}{4} = 2.50$. Therefore, mean scores within the criterion mean of

2.50 and above were accepted while those below the criterion mean of 2.50 were rejected.

RESULTS

Table 1: Mean ratings on the extent counselling as a learner support service have enhanced the quality of learning at NOUN South-East Study Centres.

SN	Counselling Services	VHE	HE	LE	VLE	\bar{X}	Decision
1	Counselling services enhances learners' decisions regarding enrolment, course choice, in the programme.	271 (58.9)	121 (26.3)	62 (13.5)	6 (1.3)	3.43	HE
2	Counselling services help clarify doubts and problems pertaining to the course programme.	243 (52.8)	136 (29.6)	67 (14.6)	14 (3.0)	3.32	HE
3	Counselling services motivates and encourages retention of learn content	213 (46.3)	155 (33.7)	64 (13.9)	28 (6.1)	3.20	HE
4	Counselling services help remove the feeling of alienation and isolation	162 (35.2)	229 (49.8)	44 (9.6)	25 (5.4)	3.15	HE
5	Counselling services provides information on issuing and purchasing of course material, study guides, prescribed text books	150 (32.6)	148 (32.2)	88 (19.1)	74 (16.1)	2.81	HE
6	It provides information about scheduling of face-to-face tutorials	139 (30.2)	175 (38.0)	62 (13.5)	84 (18.3)	2.80	HE
7	It helps learners to identify important learning needs	176 (38.3)	165 (35.9)	74 (16.1)	45 (9.8)	3.03	HE
8	It provides advice on course choice, course exemptions and course amendments.	194 (42.2)	153 (33.3)	72 (15.7)	41 (8.9)	3.09	HE
9	Counselling services offers help to learners on how to study as an independent learner.	161 (35.0)	181 (39.3)	88 (19.1)	30 (6.5)	3.03	HE

Key: VHE= Very High Extent, HE= High Extent, LE=Low Extent and VLE= Very Low Extent

Results presented in table 1 shows the mean responses of the respondents on the extent counselling as a learner support service have enhanced the quality of learning at NOUN South-East study centres of Nigeria. Table 1 shows that the respondent agreed that to a high extent, counselling as a learner support have enhanced the quality of learning at NOUN with mean scores of 3.43, 3.32, 3.20, 3.15, 2.81, 2.80, 3.03, 3.09 and 3.03 respectively.

Table 2: Mean ratings of respondents on the problems associated with utilization of counselling as a learners support service by distance learners of NOUN

SN	Items	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Decision
10	Centre counsellors are too committed to attend to learners always	161 (35.0)	158 (34.3)	102 (22.2)	39 (8.5)	2.96	A
11	Ignorance of the role of the study centre counsellor	74 (16.1)	102 (22.2)	230 (50.0)	54 (11.7)	2.43	R
12	Insufficient study centre counsellors hinder learners ability to make use of the study centre counsellors	101 (22.0)	151 (32.8)	95 (20.7)	113 (24.6)	2.52	A
13	Lack of self-confidence and courage to approach the counsellor	70 (15.2)	75 (16.3)	188 (40.9)	127 (27.6)	2.19	R
14	Fear the counsellor may not be able the to solve learners personal problems	140 (30.4)	121 (26.3)	151 (32.8)	48 (10.4)	2.77	A
15	Inconsistent time table for visiting the study centre counsellor	104 (22.6)	110 (23.9)	124 (27.0)	122 (26.5)	2.43	R
16	Inexperienced counsellor handles counselling services	102 (22.2)	87 (18.9)	140 (30.4)	131 (28.5)	2.35	R
17	Inability to interact with students Counsellors through phone and on-line chats	161 (35.0)	158 (34.3)	102 (22.2)	39 (8.5)	2.96	A

Key: SA= Strongly Agree, A= Agree, D= Disagree, SD= Strongly Disagree, A= Accepted and R = Rejected

Results presented in table 2 shows the mean responses of the respondents on the problems associated with the utilization of counselling as a learner support service by distance learners at NOUN study centres. The table shows that the respondents accepted items 10, 12, 14, and 17 with mean scores of 2.96, 2.52, 2.77 and 2.96 while items 11, 13, 15 and 16 with mean scores of 2.43, 2.19, 2.43 and 2.35 were rejected as the problems associated with the utilization of counselling services as a learner support service by distance learners at NOUN study centres of South-East, Nigeria as they were below the 2.50 set as the criterion mean point.

Table 3: Gender is not a significant factor in the mean rating of the respondents on the extent counselling service as a learner support service have enhanced the quality learning by students in NOUN South-East study centres.

	Item 1	Item 2	Item 3	Item 4	Item 5	Item 6	Item 7	Item 8	Item 9
Mann-Whitney U	2.373	2.372	2.542	2.418	2.367	2.554	2.325	2.562	2.240
Wilcoxon W	5.099	5.098	5.268	5.006	5.093	5.142	4.913	5.150	4.827
Z	-2.166	-2.111	-.774	-1.741	-2.029	-.666	-2.371	-.618	-3.013
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.030	.035	.439	.082	.042	.505	.018	.537	.003

a. Grouping Variable: Gender

The table 3 shows the male and female distance learners responses on the extent counselling as a learner support service have enhanced the quality of learning at NOUN South-East study centres. Out of nine items, five were found to be significant as their p-values were less than the chosen level of significance of 0.05. These are items 1, 2, 5, 7 and 9 while the remaining four items were not significant. Thus, since the number of significant items are greater than the insignificant ones, gender is a significant factor on the extent counselling as a learner support service have influenced the quality of learning in NOUN South-East Study Centres of Nigeria.

DISCUSSION

The study revealed the extent counselling as a learner support service have enhanced the quality of learning at National Open University South-East study centres of Nigeria. Research question one showed that counselling as a learner support service to high extent have enhanced the quality of learning at NOUN. It showed that enhanced learners' decisions regarding enrolment, course choice; clarification of doubts and problems pertaining to the course programme. It also provides assistance on how to study as an independent learner, remove the feeling of isolation and provide information on course schedules and helps to encourage the retention of learning. Counselling services also helps distance learners to identify their important learning needs. These findings are in line with Patrick and Ihejirika (2012) study which revealed that counselling services enables learner to identify their

learning needs and to reflect on their competence and expectations with regards to their commitment to succeed. Although the results revealed that counselling service as a learner support service enhanced quality of learning to a high extent, there is need for continuous improvement for more quality learning since most of the identified items do not contribute to a very high extent as would expected.

The research question two revealed that most of the respondents are not ignorant of the role of study centre counsellor, do not lack self-confidence and courage to approach the counsellor, and they have experienced counsellors to handle counselling services but that counsellors are too committed to attend to them always with inconsistent time table for visiting the study centres. This could be because there are only one or two counsellors per study centre and even in some cases the counsellor is committed to dual functions of a counsellor and study centre coordinator. This could also be as a result of the attitude of the students towards the utilization of online information for inquiries about nature and functions of the NOUN support services. These findings are in line with Ajadi, Salawu and Adeoye (2008) which remarked that the attitude of NOUN Students do not give room for independent learning and that most of NOUN students are reluctant to take responsibility for their own learning but rather preferred to be spoon-fed at all times.

CONCLUSION

Open and distance education provides a great deal of flexible opportunity for the learners yet, the learners encounter enormous constraints that may hinder their learning process. Learners support service therefore, is built to address these challenges and to reduce barriers to quality learning in Open and Distance Learning centres. Counsellors of open universities are therefore, the major players in providing guidance and direction to the distance learners. It is evident in this study that counselling as a learner support service to a very high extent, will enhance the quality of learning at NOUN South-East study centres. The

study revealed that counselling services enhanced learners' decision as regards to enrolment and course choice; clarification of doubts and problems pertaining to course programme; encourage the retention of learnt contents as well as help learners to counter the feeling of isolation.

The study also indicates that there is low counsellor-students communication and interaction using modern ICT facilities, like online chats and mobile phone facilities. It also showed that the study centre counsellors were not sufficient enough to attend to the learners needs consequently, hindering effective counselling support service delivery and as such, it needs to be strategically re-addressed so as to improve the quality of learning at NOUN study centres.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were proffered from the study:

- The National Open University of Nigeria should make provision for adequate media facilities for counselling so as to ensure that students are guided as expected. Availability of a standard well-equipped computer counselling room that provides for a more supportive counselling delivery will ensure that distance learners' problems are attended to at all times.
- The institution should provide constant in-service training for counsellors as a strategy for improving the quality of counsellor-student interaction so as to overcome isolation syndrome, increase retention and ensure more use of information communication technology (ICT) for interactive teaching/learning processes.

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