

## STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE QUALITY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING SERVICES AT THE ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY

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### Abstract

*Academic guidance and counselling is emerging as a crucial aspect of students' support services especially for distance education students. The current debate on student support services in general and counseling in particular, has now shifted the attention of researchers from questions like: "Do distance education students need counseling?" and "Should a distance education institution provide counseling services to its students?" to: "What are the counseling needs of distance education students?" and "What counseling services should a distance education institution provide and how?" (Tucker, 2003). The primary purpose of the present study was to demonstrate how an Open and Distance Learning institution can develop and provide quality and effective guidance and counseling services to its students through the use of a four-step model. Data for the present study was collected from a random sample of 200 students registered at the ZOU for the academic year 2010, through a survey that employed questionnaires and interviews. Major findings of the study were that: Although ZOU has institutionalized guidance and counselling as a key support service for ODL students by setting up a student support service unit (SSSU), the majority of students 80% of whom live and work in the rural areas, needed quality and effective guidance and counselling and general academic support in the following area: distribution of learning materials (modules), management of coursework (assignments), tutorials, processing of examinations, communication, and individualized counselling.*

### Introduction

Academic guidance and counselling is emerging as a crucial aspect of students' support services especially for distance education students. But not all open and distance learning institutions have organized student support service in a systematic way. Some distance learning institutions see guidance and counselling as an unnecessary service, others offer a little and very few have organized it into the system. The Zimbabwe Open University is one of the few universities that have organized guidance and counselling as an integral part of students support services. This article reports findings of a study, that examined students' perceptions on the quality and effectiveness of guidance and counselling services at the Zimbabwe Open University, an open and distance learning institution.

### Background of the Study

The Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) is the largest state funded university, in Zimbabwe, established to cater for a substantial component of people who, by design or unintentionally, could not be accommodated in conventional universities, by offering them the opportunity to study in their homes and in their workplaces through distance education. The (ZOU) evolved out of the University of Zimbabwe in 1993, initially as a Centre for

Distance Education in the Department of Education. In 1996 the Centre for Distance Education became the University College for Distance Education. Three years later, on 1<sup>st</sup> March 1999, through an Act of Parliament (Chapter 25:20), the College for Distance Education became the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). Over the past ten years, distance education at the ZOU has grown in leaps and bounds. ZOU has become a mega university with approximately 18700 students, 1795 academic staff and 395 non - academic staff. During the time of this study in 2010, ZOU had four faculties, (1) the faculty of Arts and Education, (2) the faculty of Science, (3) the faculty of Commerce and Law and (4) the faculty of Applied Social Sciences. The university was by then offering 50 undergraduate degree programmes, 5 diploma courses, 10 masters' degrees and 5 doctoral degrees.

The ZOU has two other very important units – the Department of Student Support Services and the Department of Quality Assurance. One of the critical role of the student services and support unit is the provision of guidance and counselling services. In higher education, guidance and counselling of students is not a new phenomenon. Students have always had problems for which they need counselling. In most cases, students are in need of academic advisement and career guidance. These services have always been provided on a low profile. However, the advent of distance education and the challenges faced by both students and their tutors have generated much interest in the issue of student counselling. These challenges include the issue of student dropout, low completion rate and low pass rate. In an effort to address these issues, distance education systems are now providing student support services of which counselling is a critical component. However, a lot of controversy surrounds the role of counselling in distance education.

This article reports a study the present researchers conducted at the ZOU to establish the quality and effectiveness of student guidance and counselling as a support service. The study was guided by four key questions.

- What are the characteristics and counselling needs of ZOU students?
- What student guidance and counselling services are provided at the ZOU?
- How do students perceive the quality and effectiveness of guidance and counselling services provided by ZOU to its students?
- How can ZOU improve the quality and effectiveness of guidance and counselling services it provides to its students?

### **Importance of the Study**

The present study has both theoretical and practical significance to ODL institutions. It presents a critical analysis of the quality and effectiveness of guidance and counselling services at the ZOU. The study assesses challenges and opportunities faced by both ZOU and its students in the provision of guidance and counselling services and recommends strategies that can be adopted to improve these services. The present study, therefore, has direct implications to ODL institutions that are providing or planning to provide counselling services to their Distance Education Students. Above all, it is important for researchers and distance educators to constantly gather data from the students on what they need and prefer, the problems they face and what they want to be done for them. Unless we do this, we cannot attain what we want from distance education.

## **Literature Review**

### **Guidance and Counselling**

Guidance is the provision of information to groups or individuals with common general problems so that those individuals can reach informed choices. Counselling in the context of distance learning systems means “the advice, help and support given to students to enable them to make satisfactory progress in the system” (Mapfumo, 2001).

### **Open and Distance Learning**

We need to have a common understanding of what it is we mean by “open and distance learning”. In the context of guidance and counselling, open learning is considered as an organised educational activity, based on the use of teaching materials, in which constraints on study are minimised in terms either of access, or of time and place, pace, method of study, or any combination of these (SAIDE, 2003). Distance education is defined as an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner (SAIDE, 2003). Distance education, therefore, needs to be conceived as a sophisticated collection of methods for the provision of structured learning in situations where students are unable primarily to attend fixed classes at a centralised venue and in the physical presence of a teacher. Thus, the term “open and distance learning” is used as an umbrella term to cover educational approaches of this kind that reach students in their homes and work places, provide learning resources for them, or enable them to qualify without attending college in person, no matter where or when they want to study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Counselling as a student support service for distance education is an area that has not yet been fully researched. However, the few studies that have been conducted in this area have generated much interest and built a convincing argument in support of counseling for distance education students. The current debate on student support service in general and counseling in particular, has now shifted the attention of researchers from questions like, “Do distance education students need counseling?” and “Should a distance education institution provide counseling services to its students?” to, “What are the counseling needs of distance education students?” and “What counseling services should a distance education institution provide and how?” Research has shown that answers to these questions depend on three factors- the nature or characteristics of the distance education student, the capacity of the Distance Education institution and the level of technological development the institution’s country has reached (Tucker, 2003).

In order to provide a theoretical framework for the present study, the present researchers reviewed related literature on counseling in ODL systems. The review of literature focused on five critical elements: characteristics of ODL students and their guidance and counselling needs, features of ODL systems, problems of ODL students, organization and management of guidance and counselling services in ODL systems, counselling techniques for ODL.

## **Characteristics of ODL Students and their Guidance and Counselling needs**

In order to ensure that guidance and counseling needs of its distance learners are met, an ODL system should understand who these students are. As Tucker (2003) points out, "it is important to examine the characteristics of these learners in order to be able to best serve them." Guidance and counselling services that address learner needs will depend on the unique needs and characteristics of the learner (Dillon and Blanchard, 1991). The key characteristics that are usually used to define a distance education learner include the following; age, gender, number of own children, dependents, marital status, employment, distance between residence and the distance education institution, Level of education, social status (Tucker 2003). According to Ference and Vockell (1994), students characteristics can be described under two categories: psychological factors and sociological factors. A combination of the two types of factors make up the psychosocial characteristics of the student. Guy (1991) adds a third category- the socio-cultural context of the student.

### **Psychosocial Characteristics of the Distance Learner**

Psychological factors are normally resident within the learner. Ference and Vockell (1994) gave a list of psychological characteristics of adult learners. These characteristics show that an adult learner is; an active-learner, experienced-based, an expert, independent, hands-on, life-centered, task-centered, solution-driven, value-driven, skill-seeking, self-directing, motivated (externally), and motivated (internally). Sociological factors on the other hand, are usually resident within the external environment. The environment in this case includes the family background, peer group influence, school setting and societal expectations. The interaction between these two groups of factors (psychosocial) is important in the provision of effective guidance and counseling services.

Salih (2004) argues that in order to design effective guidance and counselling services, a distance education institution should in addition to identifying who its students are, also take into consideration the socio-cultural context of its students. Guy (1991, 163) advises that "it may be more appropriate to identify the cultures of the learners prior to the development of an institutional response so that it is sensitive to those cultural forms". Understanding the socio-cultural context is the key to developing appropriate support systems for distance learners (Murphy, 1991).

### **General Features of ODL Institutions**

The provision of effective guidance and counseling services is closely linked to the features of distance education. Keegan (1990) identifies the following as the general key features of distance education:

- the quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the length of the learning process (this distinguishes it from conventional face-to-face education);
- the influence of an educational organisation both in the planning and preparation of learning materials and in the provision of student support services (this distinguishes it from private study and teach-yourself programmes);
- the use of technical media - print, audio, video or computer - to unite teacher and learner and carry the content of the course;

- the provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue (this distinguishes it from other uses of technology in education);
- the quasi-permanent absence of the learning group throughout the length of the learning process so that people are usually taught as individuals and not in groups, with the possibility of occasional meetings (tutorials) for both didactic and socialization purposes."

The use of non-contagious methods of teaching and the separation of the learner from the teacher means that the distant learner is separated and isolated, in both space and time, from the institution and other learners. This isolation is responsible for a number of problems that affect the student's performance and may lead to a number of problems that include a high dropout rate, low completion rate and low pass rate. Therefore, it is crucial that guidance and counselling services be provided to distance education students.

### **Guidance and Counselling Needs of ODL Students**

Students in distance learning systems face not only the problems of conventional students, but also those generated by the system itself. Robinson (1991) categorise the problems as follows:

- Those relating to study techniques and learning difficulties which may well increase in complexity with the range of media being used
- Those arising from an individual trying to interact with a distant and sometimes impersonal institution
- Personal problems which affect the student's work

### **Problems relating to Study Techniques and Learning Difficulties**

All distance education students at some time experience problems in managing their own learning effectively, for example in scheduling and using time efficiently, in expressing their thoughts in written work, and in developing adequate reading and comprehension skills to enable them to make use of what they read and to cope with the volume of reading required.

### **Problems arising from an Individual trying to interact with a Distant and sometimes Impersonal Institution**

In most conventional institutions students have access to their lecturers or counsellors, or to their fellow students for help, advice or information. In some cases the problems become evident to the lecturer whether or not they have been voiced by a student. The student is likely to observe fellow students experiencing similar difficulties with the work, and some of the strategies they adopt to deal with them. In a distance – learning system the student is more likely to experience isolation, even alienation from the institution, She may be geographically remote from the central institution or its local centre and even living at some distance from fellow students or unaware of their existence even if they live nearby. The system may appear to him too complex or remote to allow him easy access to its services.

## **Personal Problems which affect the Student's Work**

The student may have difficulties arising from his personal circumstances. He may have no suitable place to study at home, no access to libraries, or his working hours may prevent attendance at weekend schools. He or she may have domestic problems of one kind or another, including those arising from the conflicting demands on his or her time of fulltime employment, family commitments and study requirements. He or she may get ill and fall behind with his or her work or miss the examination. He or she may have difficulty in paying fees. In most ODL systems, distance learners may need help before, during and after the learning programme. Thus the provision of guidance and counselling services has in most ODL systems followed three stages: pre-entry stage, during the learning programme and exit stage after students have completed a learning programme.

**Pre-entry Stage:** At this stage the learners need information, advisement and counselling about programmes, courses, entry requirements, application procedures, structure, functions, rules and regulations of the institute, recognition of the institute, market value of the programmes and so on. They may need advice for selecting a particular programme or course for their career advancement. They may need guidance and counselling on the kind of individual support they might need and the best way of achieving their goals and objectives without disturbing their daily routine activities.

**During the Learning Programme:** At the beginning of the programme, when the learners have already received their packages (study materials, programme guides, assignments, experimental kits, etc.), they may need some guidance. Many learners might have returned to their studies after a long gap, so they may need constructive help at this stage. As the learners are unfamiliar with the self-learning materials, assignments etc., they may ask for some guidance on study skills, the process of dealing with the assignments, and so on. During the middle stage of the programme, the learners may want to discuss about their progress, assignments grades, study visits, projects, seminars, practicals, improving study skills, learning from media, overcoming personal and technical problems and so on. At the final stage, the learners may need some guidance for incomplete tasks/assignments, difficult units, revision work, preparation for semester examinations, and so on. Besides all these, from time to time, they need help and guidance to perform some formalities according to rules and regulations of the institute e.g. registration and payment of fees and tutorials and date for sitting semester examinations.

**Exit Stage:** After completion of a particular programme the learners may need information on graduation, certification and advanced programmes to further their studies. In the present study we wanted to find out what guidance and counselling services ZOU provided at each of these stages and the quality and effectiveness of these services.

## **Counselling Techniques in Open and Distance Learning**

Counselling techniques in ODL vary according to distance between the counsellor and the counselee, and the type of information communication technology used. These techniques may include

- **Face-to-face Counselling**

Face-to-face counselling remains the most important medium for counselling of all kinds. However, it is extremely expensive in terms of staff, time and

travel, and sometimes, could also be inaccessible to distance learners living in remote places far away from the study centres. 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)**

- (a) One-to-one telephone counselling involves the counsellor staying in different location from the learner and didactically communicating through cellular or fixed-line telephone with the learner. The telephone offers the opportunity for group links via teleconferencing, and television has led to the development of videoconferencing.
- (b) Teleconferencing is another counselling technique used 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 are at different ends. Teleconferencing can be in the form of two-way-audio and one-way-video conferencing.

- **Counselling through Computer and Internet**

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 locations. E-mail is another commonly used method 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 and 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. In this way the counsellor can see the distance learner and the learners can see the counsellor.

In industrialised countries, counselling by computer or video is a growing phenomenon especially with the advent of relatively cheap micro-computers. The relatively interactive and non-threatening nature of computer counselling makes many learners appear to enjoy it and find it useful. However, the use of computers and the Internet is still in its infancy in developing countries due to limited infrastructure and the attendant high costs of access (Kangai and Bukalia, 2010).

- **Counselling through Letters**

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. Counselling by letter or short messages through the phone is suitable for informing and advising the distance learners.

- **Counselling through Handbooks and Manuals**

Print materials, such as “student handbook”, “getting to know your university”, etc., are 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. In the present study, we attempted to establish the techniques used in the provision of guidance and counselling services to ZOU students.

### **Research and Design Methodology**

The present study was a survey of student perceptions on the quality and effectiveness of guidance and counselling services provided by the Zimbabwe Open University. Data was collected from a stratified random sample of 200 students made up of 40 students selected from each of the 5 ZOU Regional Centres conveniently identified in order to save time, money, and effort. Questionnaires were sent to programme coordinators working in the selected Regional Centres. The programme coordinators assisted in distributing the questionnaire to the students and collecting the completed questionnaire and then sent it back to the researchers.

**Table 1: Representative Sample of Respondents who participated in the Study**

Regional Centres ( <i>Convenience Sampling</i> )	Students ( <i>Stratified random sampling</i> )
Mashonaland West	40
Mashonaland Central	40
Harare	40
Manicaland	40
Mashonaland East	40
Total	200

### **Discussion of Findings**

Findings of the present are discussed here under the four research questions that guided the study:

#### **Research question 1: Characteristics of ZOU Students and their Counselling Needs**

Providers of distance education have often used students’ characteristics and their needs in planning students’ support services. The present study, focused on students’ characteristics and needs in order to determine the quality and effectiveness of the guidance and counselling services ZOU was providing to its ODL students. In order to identify key characteristics of a ZOU student, the present study had to first answer the question, “who is a ZOU student?” It is critical that an ODL institution fully understands who its students are. Feminist analyses within ODL have been particularly educative about the principle of acknowledging the identity of learners (Tait, 2003). In order to identify the characteristics of a typical ZOU student, the present researchers analysed two documents - student application forms and registration forms. Le Compte and Preissle (1993) say documents can tell the researchers about the inner meaning of everyday events and they may yield descriptions of extraordinary events in human life.



In this study the question who is a ZOU student, was used as the platform on which to analyse their needs in terms of guidance and counselling services. Firstly, we unpacked the question, according to a number of dimensions which are: age, gender, educational background, marital status, number of own children and dependants, geographical distance, income, access to communication and technology. We then analysed registry records and collected relevant student bio-data. From this comprehensive analysis of students bio-data we were able to construct a consolidated profile of a typical ZOU student (See Table 1 below)

**Table 2: Profile of a ZOU Student**

1. Age	20 – 60 years
2. Gender	male (60%) female (40%)
3. Educational level	minimum ordinary level
4. Marital status	Married
5. Average number of own children	3 children
6. Average number of dependants	3 people
7. Employment status	Employed
8. Income – salary	less than USD 2,400 p. A
9. Mean distance travelled to local regional centre	100km
10. Means of transport	public transport
11. Means of communication	notice board, cell phone
12. Type of residence	rural (90%) urban (10%)

### **Age, Gender and Educational Background**

The composition of ZOU students varies from program to program. In most undergraduate programs, the students are young adults between 20 – 35 years old, but for post graduate programmes (Masters and PhD programmes), the students are much older (35 – 60 years old) and already working in their areas of specialization. The age of ZOU students is not very much different from other ODL students in the developed countries. In America, ODL students' ages range from 20 – 50, at Anadolu University in Turkey, the age of students range from 17 – 80 years. In distance education, the age of the student is very important. Whilst Coggins (1988) has argued that students who are younger and have a higher level of education are more likely to complete a distance education course, Holmberg (1989), on the other hand, argues that older mature, better-qualified students are self directed and are more likely to have the strong motivation that is necessary to succeed at a distance. With regards to

support services, young students are likely to need general academic advisement whilst older students seem to need individualised counselling services since they may experience more personal problems as they try to balance their studies with work and family responsibilities.

## **Gender**

One of the promises of distance education is that it promotes equality of educational opportunities and gender equity. Studies elsewhere have shown that more women than men are motivated to enrol in distance education programmes. In contrast, the percentage of ZOU female students is 40%. The last National population census show that women in Zimbabwe constitute 52% of the population. The gender imbalance in higher education and at the ZOU should be understood in its socio-cultural context. Historically and traditionally, Zimbabwe is a patriarchal society in which men are considered as majors whilst women are treated as minors. Attitude towards the education of women has been very negative. The roles played by women as wives and mothers have not been compatible with the demands of conventional education. For example women find it difficult to leave their husbands and families and go into college for further education and training. Distance education, therefore, has the potential to increase women access to higher education. However, in Zimbabwe, there are many socio-cultural economic and technological factors that still restrict the access of women to distance education. The gender imbalance in student enrolment at the ZOU has direct implications for student support services.

A joint survey research undertaken at the Fern Universität, West Germany, and Open University, UK, (Kikup and Prummer, 1990) suggests that men and women students have different needs with respect to the support services provided during their distance study. Thus distance educators have argued for the importance of providing distance education and support services suitable to women's needs (Kikup and Prummer, 1990).

## **Educational Background**

One of the best predictors of success in distance education is the educational background of the student (Coggins, 1989). Adults with more recent educational experiences tend to persist and do better than those who have not had those experiences (Verdiun and Clark, 1991). In the present study, we found that the minimum entry qualification for all undergraduate degree programmes at the ZOU was 5 "O" levels including English and mathematics. Most students were working and studying to improve their present qualifications. Guidance and counselling must, therefore, take into consideration the fact that ODL students whether teachers, farmers or housewives etc., would require education and skills they can immediately put to use in their occupation.

## **Marital Status, Family and Dependants**

The majority of ZOU students are married with three children and three dependants. This means most students have family commitments that may negatively affect their studies. For example spouses and children may demand time and attention. The size of the family and the number of dependents may stretch the budget. Students with families often experience difficulties in balancing their academic demands with their family and social commitments. The stress of multiple roles has been mentioned by researchers as one of the major constraints that hinder students from persisting in a distance education program (Moore, 1975; and Thompson, 1984; as cited in Ojo and Olakulehin (2006). Adult learners assume multiple

responsibilities at home, in society and in their workplaces. They spend a great deal of time and energy on fulfilling their family, social, and occupational responsibilities. This may drastically reduce the time and energy which could otherwise have been used for learning activities. The course difficulty and lack of appropriate counseling services could also negatively affect the student's persistence in distance education. The multiple roles of adult students must, therefore, be considered when planning the provision of guidance and counselling to ODL students.

### **Employment and income**

The majority of students (86%) in the faculties of Arts and Education, Physical Sciences & Sport and Applied sciences are civil servants. Their incomes are less than the average equivalent to \$2,400 USD per year income. The majority of students in the faculty of Commerce and Law (66%) work in the private sector earning better salaries than civil servants. Low salaries mean that the majority of ZOU students struggle to pay their college fees.

### **Distance from the Local Regional Centre**

The central administration of the Zimbabwe Open University is based at the National Centre in Harare, the capital city. In order for the university to reach every potential student throughout the country, the ZOU operates through ten Regional Centres and district centres located in each of the ten geo-political provinces of the country. The main objective of these Regional Centers and district learning centres is to mitigate distance between the learner and the institution by taking the university out into the community (Benza, 2001). Despite efforts by the university to bring education to every doorstep, professional counsellors and tutor/counsellors are based at the Regional Centres. Thus the existing District Centres have not been very effective in the provision of students support services in general and counselling in particular. The majority of ZOU students who live in the rural areas, still have to travel a mean distance of 100Km to come to their local Regional Centre.

In most ODL systems, all support services especially counselling, information and advice are rendered to the students at the study centres. In a number of distance – learning systems, student support services are built on the concept of local centers (examples include UNA in Venezuela; UNED in Costa Rica; and UKOU in Britain. At the ZOU, the provision of Regional Centers is part of a strategy to decentralize a highly centralized and impersonal system. Regional Centers carry out three major functions; tutoring, counseling and handling of assignments. Regional Centers provide a focus of contact for students with each other and with tutoring and counseling staff. They enable students to have access to study materials. They also act as distribution centers for course materials and the collection and return of students' written assignments.

The Regional centres serve as the first contact point between the students and the university and coordinate the activities of the university. Aggarwal, (2004) notes that at Singapore Open University, tutors use various media and technologies to provide academic counselling. At Open University, United Kingdom, all students have access to personal tutor counsellors (Simpson and Gibbs, 2004). At Hong Kong university, weekend counselling classes are provided at study/learning centres. (Fan, 2004).

Literature on counselling argues that effective counselling depends upon the counsellor's ability to initiate and maintain contact with students (Robinson, 1994). This is easier to achieve if the counsellor is based near to the student and if the student has easier access to him. Locally-based counsellors are also better able to develop local centre activities for groups of students (Robinson, 1994).

### **Access to Communication and Technology**

The majority of ZOU students (98%) owned cell phones but only 10% had computers (Kangai and Bukalia, 2010). This means access to information and communication technology is still very limited for ZOU students. The majority of students working and living in rural areas have no access to a computer, Poor Network for cell phones and poor postal services negatively affect communication. ZOU heavily relies on the old traditional way of communication-the notice board. The local press is also used but many students who live in the rural areas have no chance of reading the newspapers. Thus serious communication challenges exist between ZOU and its students. As a result some students do miss tutorials or even examinations because of poor communication. Poor communication exacerbates the isolation of ODL students.

### **Research question 2: Guidance and Counselling Services provided at the ZOU**

At its inception, the ZOU set up the Student Services and Support Unit (SSSU), headed by the Dean of Students based at the National Centre and has a student advisor/counsellor in each of its ten Regional Centres. The Student Services and Support Unit (SSSU) offers academic and psycho-social support services to students throughout their study at the university. The services and support include guidance and counselling to ensue that students are guided correctly in career path, engage progressively in their academic work and are not handicapped by psycho-social challenges. It also assists students with special learning needs to access the curriculum. According to the ZOU General Information and Regulations Handbook (2007), the functions of the Student Services and Support Unit related to guidance and counselling include the following:

- To provide face- to- face and telephone counselling and advisory services to individual students or groups of students on academic and psycho-social issues that affect them in learning
- To offer career advisement on choice of programmes, course selection and exemption on courses
- To train and advise students on study skills and examination preparation techniques
- To support students with special learning needs
- To orient students to the university mode of operation, programmes and processes
- To prepare students for the world of work
- To initiate and conduct research on student counselling needs and the general effectiveness and appropriateness of the counselling services offered by the ZOU
- To collaborate with government and other stakeholders in the provision of HIV/AIDS education to students and advise on possible support services

After establishing guidance and counselling services outlined in the *ZOU General Information and Regulations Handbook*, the present researchers collected data on what guidance and counselling services are, in practice, being provided by the ZOU, who provides the services and how? The data collected is presented in Table 3 below.

**Table 3: Guidance and Counselling Services Provided by the Zimbabwe Open University**

<b>Stage</b>	<b>Guidance and counselling services provided</b>	<b>Provider</b>	<b>Media</b>
<b>Pre-entry stage</b>	<p>Students receive information on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Programmes on offer, their market value and recognition</li> <li>• Entry requirements</li> <li>• Application procedures.</li> <li>• Registration procedures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Programme coordinators</li> <li>• Student advisor/counsellor</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Face-to-face</li> <li>• Telephone</li> <li>• Cell-phone</li> </ul>
<b>Induction meeting</b>	<p>Students receive information on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• structure, functions, rules and regulations of the institute</li> <li>• the best way of achieving their goals and objectives without disturbing their daily routine activities.</li> <li>• Features of Open and Distance Learning</li> <li>• Role of the Regional Centre</li> <li>• Study skills in Open and Distance Learning</li> <li>• How to write assignments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regional Director</li> <li>• Programme coordinators</li> <li>• Student advisor/counsellor</li> <li>• Registry clerk</li> <li>• Accounts clerk</li> <li>• Librarian</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Face to face</li> <li>• Student Handbook</li> <li>• Study guides</li> <li>• Written notes</li> <li>• Handout papers</li> <li>• Telephone</li> <li>• Cell-phone</li> </ul>
<b>During the course of the programme</b>	<p>Students receive information on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the process of dealing with the assignments,</li> <li>• their progress,</li> <li>• assignments grades,</li> <li>• weekend schools/tutorials</li> <li>• Research projects,</li> <li>• In class tests,</li> <li>• improving study skills,</li> <li>• overcoming personal and technical problems</li> <li>• difficult units,</li> <li>• revision work,</li> <li>• preparation for term-end examinations,</li> <li>• payment of fees</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Programme coordinators,</li> <li>• Course Tutors,</li> <li>• Student advisor/counsellor</li> <li>• Regional Administrator</li> <li>• Librarian</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Face to face</li> <li>• Student Handbook</li> <li>• Study guides</li> <li>• Written notes</li> <li>• Handout papers</li> <li>• Time tables for tutorials and examinations</li> <li>• Telephone</li> <li>• Cell-phone</li> <li>• Notice Board</li> </ul>

<b>Exit Stage</b>	Students receive information on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Graduation ceremony</li> <li>• Certification</li> <li>• Degree transcripts</li> <li>• Further studies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regional Administrator</li> <li>• Programme coordinators</li> <li>• Student Advisor/counsellor</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Telephone</li> <li>• Cell-phone</li> <li>• Face to face</li> <li>• Letters</li> <li>• Notice Board</li> </ul>
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The present study revealed that ZOU provides guidance and counselling services to students at all the three stages: 1) as the students join the college, 2) during the course of study and 3) at the completion of their programmes. Although ZOU has appointed professional student advisor/counsellors, the present study found that academic guidance or advisement is also provided by other members of staff that include the tutors, programme coordinators, regional directors, regional administrators, accounts staff, registry staff and the librarians. Most of the counselling is done face to face and through the phone. The findings from the present study indicate discrepancies between the officially declared provision of student counselling services and the accessibility and use of these services by students.

**Research question 3: Students’ Perceptions on the Quality and Effectiveness of Guidance and Counselling services provided at the ZOU**

After establishing guidance and counselling services provided at the ZOU the present researchers proceeded to establish perceptions of students, on the quality and effectiveness of the guidance and counseling services provided by ZOU at pre-entry, during the programme and exit stages. Respondents were asked to rate the services provided by ZOU from very poor to excellent using a likert scale ranging from 1 to 6 (1=very poor; 2=poor; 3=satisfactory; 4= good; 5 very good; 6= excellent)

**Table 4: Perceptions of students on the quality and effectiveness of guidance and counseling services provided by ZOU at pre-entry, during the programme and exit stages. N= 200.**

Guidance and counselling services	Effective		Ineffective	
	No	%	No	%
<b>Guidance and counselling at pre – entry stage:</b>				
<b>1. Programmes on offer</b>				
2. Entry requirements	180	90	20	10
3. Application procedures.	200	100	0	0
4. Payment of fees	178	89	22	11
5. Registration process	90	45	110	55
6. structure, functions, rules and regulations of the institute	98	49	102	51
7. Features of Open and Distance Learning	64	32	136	68
8. Role of the Regional Centre	188	94	12	6
9. Role of the District Centre	120	60	80	40

<b>Guidance and counselling during the programme</b>				
10. Study materials (modules)	22	11	178	89
11. Study skills in Open and Distance Learning	110	55	92	46
12. Weekend schools/tutorials	50	25	150	75
13. Individualised counselling	82	41	118	59
14. Management of assignments	16	8	184	92
15. Management of semester examinations	118	59	82	41
16. Library services	80	40	120	60
17. Communication	98	49	102	51
<b>Guidance and counselling at the exit stage</b>				
18. Examination results	94	47	53	106
19. Certification	112	56	88	44
20. Degree transcripts	136	68	64	32

According to the present study, guidance and counselling services at the ZOU are quite effective at the pre - entry stage. Prospective and newly enrolled students are well provided with information and advisement on programmes on offer, entry requirements, application procedures, payment of fees, the roles of Regional and District learning Centres. However, students indicated that they were not satisfied with guidance and counselling and general academic support in the following areas: distribution of learning materials (modules), management of coursework (assignments), tutorials, the processing of examinations, communication, and individualised counselling.

### **Distribution of Study Materials (Modules)**

One of the fundamental principles of distance education is the provision of opportunity for students to study according to their own learning pace or speed (Keegan, 1990). For this reason, a distance education system presupposes that every student receives all the course materials at the beginning of the program so that she/he can design his/her own study timetable in the light of the overall schedule of the program. At the ZOU, the production of study material is done at headquarters and they are distributed to registered students at the regional centres. However, findings of the present study revealed that some students (15%) did not receive all the modules and even sat for exams in courses which had no modules. In general, the inconsistencies regarding the delivery of modules seemed to have a negative impact upon learners' confidence and their performance in the overall. For example in one course which had no module the failure rate was 62%. Our investigations uncovered discrepancies between the number of students registered for courses and the total number of course modules received in the Regional Centers. Consequently, the fundamental opportunities which a distance education system provides for each student to study the course materials independently (Willis, 1993) and in accordance with his/her own learning pace (Keegan, 1990) and also to receive tutorial support pertinent to his /her own learning problems (Gibbs and Durbridge, 1976) have been disregarded in the present system of ODL education.

## Management of Assignments

Although at the ZOU assignments are regarded as a critical component of student support, the present study found that 80 percent of the students did not receive immediate feedback on the assignment papers which they submitted to their respective tutors. Most undergraduate programmes require students to submit two tutor- marked assignments (TMA) in each of the courses they are registered (normally four). The two assignments constitute 20% of the final grade and the examination is 80% for each course. Students submit their written assignments at the Regional Centre from which they are distributed to tutors for marking. The turnaround time for marking and returning assignments to students is two weeks. Tutors are expected to give students feedback on their first assignment before students attempt the second assignment. Students must receive all their marked assignments before they sit for semester examinations. Assignment data is used for:

- General institutional and course evaluation.
- Assessing students' academic progress
- Students' feedback
- Final assessment.

Our findings revealed a number of shortcomings in the way assignments were managed. A significant number of students 80% indicated that in some courses assignment questions were not available at registration and were received well after the due date for submission. This resulted in students submitting their assignments late. Tutors failed to meet the turnaround time (two weeks) for returning marked assignments to students. In some extreme cases, students wrote the second assignment before receiving the first marked one and even sat for their examinations without getting their marked assignments back.

A review of ODL literature shows that assignments are considered an important element of student support services. At Singapore Open University, students are encouraged to keep in close touch with tutors who also mark assignments, grade them, provide detailed and constructive feedback and encourage student interaction (Aggarwal, 2004). At Hong Kong University continuous evaluation of students is done through assignments (Fan, 2004). The turnaround time on assignments is kept to a minimum and specified to the learners so that they can use feedback to inform their learning on an ongoing basis. Delays in marking and returning marked assignments to students, therefore, denies students much needed feedback and academic support. According to Willis (1993) distance learners' dropout is the result of various factors, including limited student advising and counseling, inadequate feedback, late return of assignments, and lack of personalized teacher-student and student-student interaction.

## Tutorials

In distance education tutoring complements the printed correspondence text. A tutor serves as the primary and sometimes the only instructional contact for the isolated distance learners. The tutor guides, advises and sometimes coaches the learner. At the ZOU the main functions of a tutorial are well outlined in the *ZOU Guide for Tutors*. According to Ndeya-Ndereya, Mhlanga and Chikuya (2003) the functions include the following activities:



- Helping students understand course materials through discussions
- Answering students queries about the system
- Helping students plan their work
- Conducting face-to face or telephone discussion
- Giving a lecture
- Giving feedback on course materials and student problems to the course coordinator or counselor
- Commenting on students written work

The primary purpose of tutorials is to provide academic and counseling services that enable the students to solve the problems which they encounter in the course of their independent study (Holmberg, 1989). At the ZOU each module is delivered in three -2hour tutorial sessions. In the present study, a significant number (75%) of the respondents had negative perceptions of this aspect of the program. Students said there was inadequate period of time between the delivery of the modules and the tutorial sessions. Students attended the tutorials without completing the preparation required by the program. This forced tutors to fall back on the conventional teacher dominated instructional approach that leads students to be passive recipients of tutors' verbal explanation of descriptive facts drawn from the course materials. In addition to tutorials offering counseling opportunities, it helps students in that it creates opportunities for contact and dialogue, which goes a long way in overcoming the isolation and loneliness of distance learning.

### **Individualised Counselling**

The primary reason for having tutors is to provide students with individualized academic support in their courses (Gibbs and Durbridge, 1976). Fifty-nine percent of the students said they received inadequate individualized support. It seems that learners were disappointed about the absence of individualized academic support they presumed would be arranged. In most instances the learners interact with their study materials alone and they perceive tutorial sessions as time when they should be provided with guidance on how to effectively interact with their instruction study materials. However, the prevalence of teacher-dominated whole-class instruction in the tutorial sessions of the current distance education program seems to pay little or no attention to the diverse learning needs of individual students.

### **Examinations**

Examinations for most diploma and degree programmes are written twice per year at the end of each semester in June and December respectively. At the end of each semester students are required to take examinations for three courses. *Since its inception in 1999, the Zimbabwe Open University has continued to experience a number of challenges particularly in managing tutorials, marking of assignments and processing examinations (Izuagie, 2000).* Writing for the Zimbabwe Open University International Journal of Distance Learning, the Po Vice Chancellor of the university, Professor M. Izuagie (2000) criticized the Zimbabwe Open University for failing to effectively manage student academic records, student bio-data, continuous assessment and the compilation of examination results, the absence of effective communication channels between the regions, the departments, faculties and the academic registry and its inability to effectively and timeously prepare and publish examination results.

## **Communication**

Effective counselling requires the counsellor to understand the effects of distance on the choice of technology so that you can choose the right delivery method for the message, and design messages to make the best use of the technology (UNESCO 2002). The most commonly used media of counselling at the ZOU include face to face individual/group counselling, tutorial letters, handbooks and to a little extent telephone counselling. The study centres serve as the first contact point between the students and the university and coordinate the activities of the university. All support services especially counselling, information and advice are rendered to the students at the study centres.

### **Research Question 4: How can ZOU improve the Quality and effectiveness of Guidance and Counselling it provides?**

Based on the findings of the present studies, ZOU needs to improve the quality and effectiveness of guidance and counselling services in the following areas: Management of assignments, tutorials, distribution of study materials, examinations, communication and individual counselling.

## **Management of Assignments**

Support should be available on how to study, how to do assignments, and how to manage time. Feedback must be given to the learner as soon as possible and include specifics for improvement. The feedback should cover both course content and the learning process.

## **Tutorials**

Increasing individual tutorial sessions by using the telephone and email could provide a higher level of counselling support. Some respondents recommended that increasing the frequency of tutor contact with learners would contribute to an improvement in the support service. It is suggested that five tutorial sessions with extended time duration could improve student performance. Tutors are indispensable factors in the achievement of education goals and objectives (Cwikla 2004). Distance learning tutors should develop and acquire innovation skills and strategies of teaching in distance mode to obtain meaningful learning. For this purpose, active monitoring by programme coordinators in the teaching process at tutorial centres are highly recommended. The institution must provide support for learners in a variety of areas such as study skills, personal counselling and in the case of distance education, on site support in the form of a coordinator who is available to help learners with content, as well as, delivery issues.

## **Study Materials**

The distribution of the course modules during (or very close to) the actual dates of the tutorial sessions deprives learners of the chance to study the course materials independently and to work on the assignment questions and exercises on their own before they attend the tutorials. Therefore, ZOU needs to prepare all the course modules well in advance before the beginning of each semester. In addition, study centers must distribute the materials promptly so that students can collect them during the period of registration. In a distance education system, where print medium is employed as the sole means of content delivery, students should receive the learning materials long before the dates fixed for tutorial programs. The intention here is to

give students a reasonably sufficient amount of time to study the materials independently, work on the assignment questions and areas of difficulty before the actual date of the tutorial session.

### **Examinations**

Proper registry functions should be carried out in the maintenance of accurate student records. The university needs to maintain and manage normal student academic records, student bio-data, continuous assessment and the compilation of examination results.

### **Communication**

There is need to improve communication between the National Centre and the Regions and between the Regional Centres and students. Regular communication with the learner would improve the academic support. The use of modern communication technology would contribute to an improvement in the quality of academic sessions. More research work should be carried out in media of counselling in open and distance education. Counsellors should undergo constant training in the use of modern information and communication technologies in counselling especially computer and internet devices.

### **Individualised Counselling**

The institution must provide support for learners in a variety of areas such as study skills and personal counselling. An ODL tutor should be able to empathize with the learners' personal issues that may affect learning. He or she should counsel and be a friend to the learners providing them with the necessary information and giving the moral support. As a counselor, the tutor should be flexible, trustworthy, approachable and well organized and should also help learners with social challenges. According to Mapfumo (2001), counsellors are expected to be consistently empathic, genuine, accepting and respectful generally. They should be able to develop a more open and trusting relationship with students and facilitate the opportunity for students to develop more open and trusting relationship with each other, which usually results in a climate of collaboration and mutual exchange in the learning process (Poonwassie, 2001). This helping relationship could only be established through effective and efficient communication

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