

## **Capacity Building Counselling Strategies for Sustainable Students' Success in Distance Education**

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### **Abstract**

Distance education is a lifelong endeavour designed for students desirous to acquire education they hitherto missed as youths or improve on their present academic status. Students study on their own with counselling as a major support service. It is reasoned that infrastructural, institutional and human resource capacity building strategies are required for counselling students towards attaining sustainable support and success in distance education. This study investigated the capacity building strategies which can be used for counselling students towards sustainable success in distance education in Nigeria. The study employed simple survey research design with a sample of thirty-eight student-counsellors purposively drawn from the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). A self-structured questionnaire entitled Capacity Building Questionnaire for Counselling (CBQC) was developed by the researcher and validated for data collection. Three research questions and two hypotheses guided the study. Findings of the study revealed that well-furnished counselling offices, fortified e-counselling, provision of career information, social and psychological counselling services, and training and re-training of counsellors among others, are appropriate counselling services that can sustain students' support and success.

**Keywords:** Capacity building, counselling, distance education, students, success, support.

## **Introduction**

People enrol in distance education programmes for a variety of reasons. These include acquisition of lifelong learning to update knowledge and skills in discipline of choice or for those who dropped out of school as well as people that did not have the opportunity to be educated when they were young (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004). Distance education is a technology-driven system of providing education to a large number of people who are not necessarily located in the same environment. Kumani, Kara, Njagi and Ruinge (2012) postulate that distance education provides systematic teaching-learning process to persons living in isolated areas where facilities for traditional form of classroom teaching cannot be developed and also address the needs of specific target groups with great variation in the range of programmes offered.

Thompson in Gibson (1998) opines that students in distance education are likely to be older, female, employed on full-time basis and married, which requires appropriate understanding of who they are and what their needs might be. To cater for this category of learners, counselling services via learner support services on general academic matters and monitoring of students' progress during a study period are necessary (NOUN, 2003). Some of these services which could ensure effective learning, success and retention as posits by Simpson (2002) include orientation, group tutorial, assignment feedback, tutorial letters, radio broadcast, individualized help, study skills and motivational seminars. These are counselling activities that will no doubt ensure effective learning process, success and retention of students in chosen programmes.

Counselling is a process of communicating with a trained person in order to solve a problem. It is a personalized relation and interaction between a professionally trained counsellor and an individual seeking help in the process of self-understanding, decision making and coping with problems relative to his or her developmental needs and life aspirations (Eduwen, 2015). Similarly, Agboola and Abikwi (2015) assert that counselling is the process of professional assistance and guidance in solving personal or psychological problems of an individual or a group of clients by enabling such people to re-examine their thoughts and feelings

and create awareness on skills required to attain optimal level of social, educational and economic development. Counselling is therefore, a professional support offered to students to enable them maximize the benefits of engaging in academic and other life endeavours.

Counselling in distance education involves helping, guiding, motivating, supporting, enabling learning, and creating dialogue with learners to realize their dreams (Kishore, 2014). Furthermore, Kishore (2014) asserts that counselling provides comprehensive information to create quality culture in the delivery of programmes; it helps learners out of isolation to devote time to study; and it enhances success and retention rate among distance learners by infusing confidence in their minds. Counsellors in addition, assist in providing support services to students in the areas of administration and registration, tutorial support and library support services. There is no doubt that to achieve these laudable objectives requires sustainable capacity building strategies for counselling especially in open and distance education institutions.

In Nigeria, distance education has evolved and is gaining ground with institutions like the National Teachers' Institute (NTI), National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) and six conventional universities providing dual modes. In all of these, the old, young, and the working population are target students. This may explain UNESCO's (2002) view that since interest in distance education has grown in stature within national policy debates, there should be a growing need to build a greater capacity to develop and implement effective supporting policies. This highlights the need to focus and expand student support services to provide support for learners in the most efficient manner using approaches drawn from service management like counselling. One of the effects of this may impact human capacity building and development.

Capacity building connotes planned actions to enhance both human and material resources in order to achieve desired developmental goals. Azikiwe (2008) describes capacity building as a process of planning for people to acquire knowledge and advanced skills that are critical to individual empowerment, country's economic growth and its standard of living. According to Nwokolo, Oraegbunam and Anyamene (2009), capacity building is a programme that could transform goals and services, individual capacity and better investment climate into effective learning

outcomes. Thus, capacity building encompasses efforts put in place to improve human resources development, organizational or institutional development, and infrastructural development in order to achieve a desired goal. Therefore, capacity building strategies for counselling as conceptualized in this study focus on a series of counselling activities or actions, knowledge, skills and understanding directed towards assisting students/clients in open and distance education in order to sustain support and success. This implies policy choices and modes of implementation among development options, understanding of environment potentials and needs as prescribed by stakeholders in counselling.

Again, Idiong (1991), Nwokolo, Oraegbunam and Anyamene (2009) are of the opinion that capacity building strategies for counselling such as arranging rewards for students, encouraging group studying and peer tutoring, good environment and creating time to attend to students' problems can enhance students' support and success in schools. Capacity building strategies involve infrastructural, institutional and human resource development variables aimed at achieving set goals. In particular, these main areas of capacity building strategies for counselling are closely knitted and mutually inclusive. For instance, the infrastructural and institutional counselling capacity building strategies are what counsellors need to provide effective counselling services to students. Also, a well-developed human resource capacity building is an asset as managers of infrastructural and institutional capacity building strategies for counselling in order to achieve sustainable students support and success in distance education. Hence, there is need to ascertain the appropriate capacity building strategies for counselling required in distance education. Thorpe (2002) maintains that students in open and distance education require learner support essentially through support roles and supportive people, together with support structures and environment to achieve their goals. Tait (2003) asserts that student guidance and tutor support with effective information and administrative systems will impact on teaching for academic success and reinforce students' sense of confidence, self-esteem and progress, which provide avoidable drop-out strategies. There is no doubt, therefore, that adequate capacity building strategies for counselling as an integral part of learner support will address these issues to ensure students' support and success in open and distance education.

**Statement of the problem**

The 31<sup>st</sup> session of the General Conference of UNESCO held in 2001 drew attention to capacity building in Open and Distance Education with particular reference to carrying out cross-cutting projects for accessible quality distance education tools. Strategies needed include improvement in management and administration, student support systems, materials and course production as well as training of personnel (UNESCO, 2002). Despite these arrangements, it is observed that many students find it difficult to combine their jobs with their studies, which to some extent, has resulted in poor performance and high dropout rate.

In the midst of poor academic performance and frustration occasioned by consistent academic disruptions, cultism, poor study behaviours, negative use of social media, incessant strike actions by faculty staff, poor teaching facilities, lack of counselling awareness and various social vices in tertiary institutions, there is little or no attention paid to counselling as a means of solving such problems. For instance, the Federal Government of Nigeria is yet to provide a legal framework that will recognize counselling as a profession. Perhaps, this accounts for the lukewarm attitude of people towards counselling in schools as well as the issue of overlap in discharging counselling functions where available. This also affects the availability and quality of infrastructural, institutional and human resources needed for counselling in schools.

It is observed that one of the distance education providers in Nigeria, the National Teachers' Institute (NTI) does not have counselling outfits for students. The administrative officers, some of whom are not even educationists handle students' support services in the Institute's state and zonal offices. It is on record that the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) was besieged by young students below 22 years of age between 2012 and 2014 for enrolment but gradually dropped when they learnt that arrangement had not been concluded with the Federal Government on their participation in the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) scheme on graduation. This probably happened because the students were not properly informed by counsellors due to inadequate counselling services.

In institutions where there are counselling services for students and staff, counsellors are confronted with the challenges of inadequate human

resource development, infrastructural and institutional inadequacies. Several students often complain of lack of information with regards to course registration, accessibility of course materials and matters relating to examinations. Consequently, students are faced with the problems of poor performance in examinations, missing results, and technical challenges during computer-based assessment without appreciable assistance or support. It is in realization of these challenges that this study sought to examine the capacity building strategies in human development, infrastructural and institutional areas for counselling towards students' success and retention in distance education in Nigeria.

### **Purpose of the study**

The study was conceptualized to investigate the capacity building strategies for counselling towards sustainable students' support and success in distance education in Nigeria. Specifically, the study examined the infrastructural capacity development of counselling in Learners' Support Services of the National Open University of Nigeria with a view to enhancing students' learning outcomes on sustainable basis. Secondly, the study examined the institutional capacity development of counselling as an integral part of Learners' Support Services. Finally, the study investigated the human resource capacity development of counselling in open and distance education.

### **Significance of the study**

It is hoped that with adequate capacity building in human development, infrastructural and institutional strategies for counselling in distance education, students would improve in their learning outcomes and cases of drop out would also be minimized. Specifically, students would benefit immensely from the study as required personnel, infrastructural and institutional strategies that can provide necessary support in distance education were suggested. In addition, distance education providers would be abreast with required human resource development, infrastructural and institutional requirements needed for counselling students in order to achieve institutional goals and objectives.

### **Research questions**

The following research questions guided the study.

1. What are the infrastructural capacity development strategies required for counselling to improve and sustain students' support and success in an open and distance learning environment?
2. What are the institutional capacity development strategies required for counselling to improve and sustain students' support and success in an open and distance learning environment?
3. What are the human resources capacity development strategies required for counselling to improve and sustain students' support and success in an open and distance learning environment?

### **Hypotheses**

The following hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level.

H<sub>0</sub>1: There is no significant difference in the ratings of counsellors on capacity building strategies for counselling based on years of working experience in ODL.

H<sub>0</sub>2: There is no significant difference in the ratings of counsellors on capacity building strategies for counselling on gender basis.

### **Methodology**

This study employed simple survey research design using all the 67 counsellors who were purposively drawn from all the study centres of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). However, only 38 of them that filled and returned the instrument were used. A self-structured questionnaire entitled Capacity Building Questionnaire for Counselling (CBQC) was developed, validated and used for data collection. This instrument (CBQC) was designed using a four-point scale of strongly agree (SA), agree (A), disagree (D), and strongly disagree (SD), which were rated 4, 3, 2, and 1 respectively. The CBQC was divided into four sections. The first section (Section A) sought for information on the personal data of the respondents. Section B with ten items sought for information on the infrastructural capacity building strategies required for counselling students in open and distance education. Similarly, Section C with twelve items sought for the respondents' information on institutional capacity building strategies while the last section (Section D) with ten

items sought for the respondents' information on human resource capacity building strategies that can enhance counselling in distance learning for students' success and retention. In all, thirty-two item statements out of forty-five were used for the final version of the instrument after careful scrutiny by two experts in counselling psychology during validation. The final version of the questionnaire was administered to twenty faculty members of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) who were not part of the study on two occasions after an interval of two weeks. A correlation coefficient ( $r$ ) value of 0.91 for the two sets of scores attested to the reliability of the instrument. Research questions were answered using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) while hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level using two-tailed t-test and ANOVA.

In the analysis, any item rated above 2.5 was accepted while an item rated below 2.5 was rejected. The ANOVA technique was also used in this study to test the first hypothesis. This is because the years of working experience of the student counsellors of NOUN were grouped into three: 0-5years (inexperienced counsellors), 6-10years (young counsellors), and 11-15years (experienced counsellors). This is equally because NOUN is a 15-year old institution. It is on this basis that ANOVA was used to compare the means of the three groups. This is in line with the assertion of Kothari and Garg (2014) that ANOVA technique is used to compare the means of more than two populations.

## Results

Table 1

### *Infrastructural counselling capacity building strategies*

Item	No.	Mean	SD
Provision of well-furnished counselling office	38	3.55	0.66
Provision of Internet services for e-counselling	38	3.18	1.03
Establishment of central communications channel for counselling	38	2.73	0.75
Development of counselling mechanism to allow exchange of ideas	38	2.91	0.79
Funds for procurement of psychological	38	2.64	1.15



tests and computer sets			
Centrally located and good ventilated counselling office	38	3.00	1.21
Democratic allocation of counselling resources	28	2.00	1.48
Provision of conspicuous information centre	38	3.36	0.77
Upgrading and expansion of counselling infrastructure	38	3.00	1.04
Provision of data bank for research activities	38	3.00	0.85

No. = Number, SD = Standard deviation

The data on table 1 show that only one item: democratic allocation of counselling resources (Mean=2.00, SD=1.48) was rejected as infrastructural counselling capacity building strategy. All others were accepted with mean scores ranging from 2.64 to 3.55. Provision of well-furnished counselling offices ranked first (Mean=3.55, SD=0.66). Also, the standard deviation of 0.66 indicates that the respondents were not far from each other in their agreement on provision of well-furnished counselling offices for effective counselling in open and distance education.

Table 2

*Institutional counselling capacity building strategies*

Item	No.	Mean	SD
Partnership to support synergies and counselling opportunities	38	3.18	0.72
Creation of counselling timetable for students	38	2.73	0.45
Building external networks to provide technical assistance	38	2.55	0.66
Enhancing students' skills, dispositions and motivations	38	3.18	0.83
Providing graduating standards to students immediately	38	3.73	0.45
Provision of career information and vocational guidance	38	3.73	0.45
Displaying information on course requirements and registration	38	3.82	0.39
Rewarding students' performance with scholarships and recognition	38	2.64	0.88
Encouraging interpersonal relationships through group studying	38	3.45	0.66

Use of advocacy and public outreach for counselling	38	3.00	1.21
Strengthening relationships between counselling centres and other units	38	3.64	0.64
Recruitment of more counsellors to match students' population	38	3.09	1.39

No. = Number, SD = Standard deviation

The data on table 2 indicate that all the items were accepted as institutional counselling capacity building strategies that can ensure students' support and success in open and distance education. It was observed that building external networks to provide technical assistance (Mean=2.55, SD=0.69) was the least accepted as institutional counselling capacity building strategy while the strategy of enhancing students' skills, dispositions and motivation (Mean=3.82, SD=0.39) was rated the highest. Interestingly, the subjects were not far from each other on the two occasions as their standard deviations were 0.66 and 0.39 respectively.

Table 3

*Human resource counselling capacity building strategies*

Item	No.	Mean	SD
Setting professional development and training standards for counselling	38	3.91	0.29
Recruitment of only qualified counsellors for counselling services	38	3.89	0.27
Inclusion of qualified counsellors in the scheme of things	38	3.55	1.16
Use of seminars and workshops to equip counsellors	38	3.36	1.15
Allowing counsellors unlimited access to internet services	38	3.45	1.16
Membership of professional associations	38	3.91	0.28
Supporting professional services meant for counsellors	38	3.73	0.45
Enhancing counsellors' attitudes through motivation	38	3.82	0.39
Training counsellors in community services to reach the grassroots	38	3.18	1.34
Training counsellors in quality assurance mechanisms of ODL	38	3.45	1.16

No. = Number, SD = Standard deviation

The information in table 3 show that all the items were significantly accepted as human resource development capacity building strategies for counselling that can ensure students' support and success in open and distance education. Their mean scores range from 3.18 to 3.91. Among the items, the ones rated highest are setting professional and training standards for counsellors (Mean=3.91, SD=0.29) and membership of professional associations (Mean=3.91, SD=0.28).

Table 4

*ANOVA analysis of ratings of counsellors on capacity building strategies for counselling based on years of working experience*

Groups	N	Mean	SD
0-5 years (inexperienced counsellors)	19	3.08	0.95
6-10 years (young counsellors)	12	3.13	1.02
11-15 years (experienced counsellors)	7	3.12	0.56
Total	38	3.11	0.85

  

Groups	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1.894	2	0.2011	1.109	0.384
Within Groups	6.121	35	0.1891		
Total	8.015	37			

The data in table 4 show that the observed differences in the ratings of the capacity building strategies for counselling in open and distance education by counsellors with different years of working experience was not significant at 0.05 level. Therefore, the hypothesis of no significant difference in the ratings of counsellors on capacity building strategies for counselling based on years of working experience in open and distance education is accepted.

Table 5

*Two-tailed t-test analysis of ratings of counsellors on capacity building strategies for counselling on gender basis.*

Gender	Number	Mean	SD	t-value	df	Sig. Level
Male	12	3.50	0.80	0.488	36	0.296
Female	26	3.17	1.04			

The data in table 5 show that at 0.05 level, there was no significant gender difference in the ratings of the capacity building strategies for counselling on gender basis. Therefore, the hypothesis of no significant difference in the ratings of counsellors on capacity building strategies for counselling on gender basis is hereby accepted.

### **Discussion**

This study expresses the views of counsellors on the capacity building strategies needed for sustainable students' support and success in open and distance education. It was observed that effective use of infrastructural, institutional and individual or human resources development capacity building strategies for counselling will bring about students' support and success in open and distance education. Specifically, some of the infrastructural counselling capacity building strategies are well-furnished counselling offices for students' relaxation, and confidence during counselling sessions. Also, provision of conspicuous information centres for displaying of information on notice boards such as information on course registration, facilitation, assignment, course materials and tests and examinations was also rated high. Other strategies here include provision of Internet services for e-counselling, centrally located and well-ventilated counselling offices, periodic upgrading and expansion of counselling infrastructure, and provision of data bank for research activities by practicing counsellors. These observations are in line with the assertions by Thorpe (2002) that effective learners support via counselling is essentially about roles, structures and environment as embedded in infrastructural, structural and human resource variables of counselling services.

Similarly, institutional counselling capacity building strategies include closer coordination with other partners to support synergies and opportunities in counselling; creation of counselling timetable; building external networks for technical assistance; enhancing students' skills, dispositions and motivation; availing students of information on graduation standards; and provision of career and vocational guidance to students. Others include appropriate display of information, use of advocacy and public outreach, encouraging positive interpersonal relationships, collaboration, and recruitment of more counsellors to match students' population and growth. These capacity building strategies are in tandem with the findings of Idiong (1991) and Nwokolo, Oraegbunam and Anyamene (2009) that provision of rewards, collaboration via group studying and peer tutoring, good environment, and allotting time to attend to students' problems would significantly enhance students' support and success.

On individual or human resource capacity building strategies for counselling, there are professional development and training standards, recruitment of qualified personnel, use of seminars, workshops and professional conferences, accessibility to Internet services and membership of professional associations. Others are supporting professional services, counsellors' attitudes and motivation as well as training in community services and quality assurance mechanisms of open and distance education to reach the grassroots and enthrone validity and reliability in the system. It is reasoned here that with these conditions in place, counsellors will be capable of identifying weak students, failing students and gifted students to encourage them to work hard for better learning outcomes; and discuss with students, various classes of degree that they can achieve depending on the efforts they would make. Hence, these interventions as observed in this study will be targeted on the failing students mostly from entry qualification and progress made so far. These observations are in line with the assertion by Tait (2003) that such interventions will also target weak students that need encouragement and motivation, gifted students as well as students prone to dropping out and truancy due to work load and domestic issues in order to improve their study behaviours for better results, which can enhance the status of distance education worldwide.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Distance education is a worthwhile venture for the purpose of educating people irrespective of age or gender barrier. One of the safest means of achieving this is through the learner support service, where counselling plays a significant role. To strengthen this requires some measures in form of capacity building mechanisms, which is all about assembling appropriate infrastructural, institutional and individual or human resource strategies in order to achieve desired objectives. Achieving students' support and success in open and distance education requires capacity building strategies for counselling. These strategies are for the weak, the failing and gifted students. It is in realization of this that this study recommends that:

- i. Infrastructural capacity building strategies for counselling such as well-furnished counselling offices, Internet services, central communication channels, data bank for research activities, among others should be provided to improve and sustain students' support and success in open and distance education.
- ii. Institutional capacity building strategies for counselling such as creation of counselling timetable, synergies for collaboration, technical assistance, students' motivation, graduation standards, display of requisite information, recruitment of more counsellors, and use of advocacy and public outreach for counselling among others should be put in place to improve and sustain students' support and success in open and distance education.
- iii. Human resource development capacity building strategies for counselling such as recruitment of qualified counsellors, training, membership of professional associations, and setting standards for counsellors should be put in place to enhance students' support and success in open and distance education.

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