

**COUNSELLING AS THE CENTRAL COMPONENT OF LEARNER SUPPORT SERVICES IN
OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION IN NIGERIA**

Etele, Valentia Anulika; PhD

E-mail: va.etele@unizik.edu.ng

Department of Guidance and Counselling, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria

Mokwe, Nwamaka Florence; PhD

E-mail: nf.mokwe@unizik.edu.ng

Department of Educational Management and Policy, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Nigeria

Okechukwu, John Ndubueze; PhD

E-mail: oj.ndubueze@unizik.edu.ng

Educational Management and Policy, Nnamdi Azikiwe University; P.M.B 5025, Awka, Nigeria

Joseph, Ayodele Abiodun; PhD

Email: aj.ayodele@unizik.edu.ng

Department of Educational Management and Policy, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka,
Nigeria

Abstract

This theoretical study examines counselling as a central component of learner support services in open and distance education (ODE) in Nigeria, anchored on Tinto's Student Integration Theory. The paper conceptualized learner support services and explores the pivotal role of counselling in enhancing learners' academic, social, and psychological integration within ODE environments. It discusses major forms of counselling relevant to ODE, including information provision, personal and social counselling, academic counselling, orientation services, career counselling, research and training, referral, and remedial services. The study further analysed critical issues and challenges confronting counselling in ODE, such as inadequate institutional support, limited professional counsellors, technological constraints, learners' diverse needs, and poor awareness of counselling services. Drawing from theoretical insights and existing literature, the paper concluded that effective counselling is indispensable for improving learner retention, engagement, and success in ODE programmes. It therefore suggested strengthening institutional frameworks for counselling, integrating technology-driven counselling platforms, enhancing professional capacity, and promoting policy support to ensure sustainable and responsive learner support systems in Nigeria's ODE institutions.

Keywords: Counselling, Learner Support Services; Open and Distance Education

Introduction

The history of distance education is a rich and complex narrative that spans several decades, reflecting significant global and local transformations in teaching and learning modalities. Initially, distance education was largely synonymous with correspondence programmes, where learning materials and assignments were exchanged through postal services. These programmes



offered an alternative to traditional classroom instruction; which provide educational opportunities for individuals unable to participate in face-to-face learning due to geographic, economic, or social constraints (Ahimie et al., 2020). Over time, the advent of digital technologies and the Internet has revolutionized distance education, introducing online learning platforms, virtual classrooms, interactive multimedia resources, and blended learning approaches that enhance accessibility, flexibility, and learner engagement. In Nigeria, the evolution of distance education can be traced to the recommendations of the Ashby Report of 1960; which underscored the urgent need to expand educational access in the country and led to the establishment of the Examination Success Correspondence College in the same year (Ezeribe, 2019). This initiative marked the beginning of structured distance learning in Nigeria, paving the way for several institutions to introduce correspondence courses designed to prepare learners for the Ordinary and Advanced Level London and Cambridge General Certificate of Education (GCE) examinations, as well as for the award of certificates, diplomas, and degrees. These early programmes, while innovative, faced significant challenges, including limited instructional resources, poor communication between facilitators and learners, and a lack of structured support services.

The 1980s witnessed further innovation with the Institute of Management and Technology (IMT), Enugu, pioneering the “University of the Air” programme. This initiative offered National Diploma (ND) and Higher National Diploma (HND) courses in disciplines such as marketing, business administration, mass communication, and public administration, utilising a combination of radio and television broadcasts supplemented by weekend face-to-face facilitation. Although these programmes were ambitious and forward-thinking, their effectiveness was curtailed by the absence of adequate learner support structures, including counselling, which at the time was not widely recognised as a crucial element of distance education. Negative perceptions among educational stakeholders regarding the value of counselling further limited the ability of learners to navigate the academic, personal, and psychosocial challenges associated with independent study. Over the subsequent decades, there has been a paradigm shift in the conceptualization and practice of distance education in Nigeria. Contemporary models now recognize the critical role of counselling and other learner support services in promoting student success, retention, and satisfaction. Counselling in this context encompasses academic guidance, career planning, personal development, and psychosocial support, all of which are essential for learners who often study in isolation. The increasing emphasis on learner support reflects an understanding that distance education is not merely about content delivery, but also about fostering a holistic learning environment that addresses diverse learner needs.

Several higher education institutions have embraced distance education as a strategic tool for expanding access to education and professional skill acquisition. The National Teachers’ Institute (NTI), Kaduna, has been at the forefront of these efforts, providing flexible learning opportunities for in-service teachers and other learners across Nigeria. Similarly, the establishment of the National Open University (NOU) on 27 July 1983, as cited by Jegede in Aigbovo and Akpon-Ebiyomare (2025), represented a significant milestone in institutionalizing open and distance education in the country. Despite an initial suspension of operations on 25 April 1984,



the university was revitalized on 27 March 2002 as the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), with an expanded mandate to provide inclusive and equitable educational opportunities to Nigerians from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. The transformative potential of open and distance education has been formally recognized in Nigerian educational policy. The Federal Republic of Nigeria (2013) incorporated distance education into the National Policy on Education, emphasizing its role in promoting access to quality education, addressing educational inequalities, and facilitating lifelong learning. Through this policy framework, distance education has evolved into a dynamic system that integrates technology, pedagogical innovation, and comprehensive learner support services, positioning it as a critical instrument for national development and human capital formation. Today, distance education in Nigeria continues to grow in scope and sophistication, with universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education leveraging digital technologies, online learning management systems, and interactive platforms to enhance teaching and learning. The integration of counselling as a central component of learner support services has further strengthened the effectiveness of these programmes, ensuring that learners receive guidance not only on academic matters but also on personal and professional development, ultimately contributing to improved educational outcomes and broader social impact.

Distance education is a distinctive mode of learning specifically designed to bridge the gap between learners and educational institutions when geographical distance presents a barrier. Ukaigwe et al. (2025) conceptualized distance education as an approach that emphasizes access and flexibility, ensuring that learning opportunities are available regardless of the learner's physical location. This model of education is particularly relevant in contexts where conventional, face-to-face instruction is impractical due to distance, professional obligations, social responsibilities, or other limiting factors. Aina and Tanimola (2024) similarly described distance education as a structured system of delivering educational content and training to learners who are remote from the institution, thereby expanding access to lifelong learning for a broad spectrum of individuals, including working adults, out-of-school youths, and children unable to attend regular schools due to economic, social, or personal constraints. In this framework, learners are empowered to acquire knowledge and develop skills that are meaningful within their personal, professional, and societal contexts, fostering both individual growth and broader societal development. A key characteristic of distance education is its inherent openness and flexibility. Open learning within this system is defined as any instructional method that grants learners autonomy in making decisions about various aspects of their learning experiences, including the pace, timing, and sometimes the content of their studies (National Open University of Nigeria [NOUN], 2025). This flexibility allows learners to temporarily pause their studies without penalty, accommodating professional, family, or personal obligations, and to resume their educational activities at a later time. Such adaptability is essential in promoting continuous engagement, particularly for adult learners who often balance multiple responsibilities alongside their educational pursuits.

Critical to the success of distance education is the provision of comprehensive learner support services. These services are designed to ensure that students are not isolated in their

learning journey, offering guidance, counseling, mentoring, academic advising, and technical assistance. Akande (2024) noted that addressing both academic and psychosocial needs, learner support services would enhance motivation, reduce attrition, and improve overall learning outcomes. Furthermore, National Open University of Nigeria (2025) remarked that modern distance education leverages various technologies; including online learning platforms, multimedia resources, interactive forums, and mobile applications to facilitate communication, collaboration, and timely feedback between instructors and learners. This integration of technology not only enhances accessibility but also supports a learner-centered approach, where students can tailor their learning paths to their individual needs, preferences, and local contexts. However, distance education represents a paradigm shift from traditional, campus-based instruction to a more inclusive, flexible, and adaptive educational model. It embodies principles of accessibility, lifelong learning, and learner autonomy, ensuring that education is no longer confined by geographical, temporal, or social limitations. Through the combination of flexible learning structures with robust support systems, distance education fosters both personal and professional development, equipping learners with the knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary to thrive in a rapidly changing global environment (Okafor et al., 2021).

Theoretical Framework

The study was anchored on Tinto's Student Integration Theory, proposed by Vincent Tinto (1975) and later revised in 1993. The theory explains students' persistence, retention, and academic success as outcomes of the extent to which they are academically and socially integrated into the educational system. Tinto argues that students who are effectively integrated into the academic structures of an institution, through meaningful interaction with instructors, access to academic guidance, and clear understanding of institutional expectations are more likely to remain committed to their studies. Similarly, social integration, which involves supportive relationships, a sense of belonging, and emotional connection to the institution, plays a critical role in sustaining students' motivation and engagement over time. Central to Tinto's theory is the assumption that students enter educational institutions with varying backgrounds, personal characteristics, goals, and external commitments; all of which influence their initial level of commitment. These pre-entry attributes interact with institutional experiences to determine whether students become sufficiently integrated. When students encounter academic difficulties, emotional stress, or feelings of alienation without adequate support, the likelihood of being withdrawn or poor performance increases. Conversely, when institutions provide structured support mechanisms that address both academic and non-academic needs, students are better positioned to adapt, persist, and succeed.

In the context of open and distance education (ODE), the relevance of Tinto's Student Integration Theory becomes even more pronounced. ODE learners often study in isolation, with limited physical contact with peers and instructors, while simultaneously managing work, family responsibilities, and other social obligations. These conditions can weaken both academic and social integration, increasing the risk of disengagement, attrition, and delayed programme

completion. As a result, intentional support systems are required to compensate for the absence of traditional campus-based interactions. Within this framework, counselling emerges as the central mechanism for promoting student integration in ODE. Counselling services serve as a vital bridge between learners and the institution by providing academic advising, psycho-social support, career guidance, and personal development assistance. Through academic counselling, learners receive guidance on course selection, study skills, time management, and assessment requirements; which strengthens academic integration. Psycho-social counselling helps students cope with stress, anxiety, motivation challenges, and personal issues; thereby enhancing emotional stability and social connectedness. Career counselling further reinforces students' commitment by helping them align their educational pursuits with long-term goals and aspirations. In Nigerian open and distance education institutions, particularly the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), counselling plays a crucial role in mitigating the challenges associated with distance learning. Through facilitating regular communication, providing personalized support, and fostering a sense of belonging, counselling services help learners feel connected to the institution despite geographical separation. This aligns directly with Tinto's emphasis on integration as a determinant of persistence and success.

The Concept of Learner Support Services

Learners in open and distance education (ODE) require comprehensive, continuous, and well-coordinated support systems to function effectively as independent adult learners. This necessity arises from the unique characteristics of ODE learners, who are often mature individuals juggling multiple responsibilities and life roles alongside their academic pursuits. Many learners contend with challenges such as job changes or demanding work schedules, marital and family responsibilities, financial constraints, social adjustment difficulties, academic pressures, health concerns, and other societal engagements. These competing demands can significantly affect learners' motivation, persistence, and academic success if adequate support mechanisms are not provided. In recognition of these realities, the philosophy of open and distance education is fundamentally learner-centred. Unlike conventional face-to-face institutions, ODE places a greater responsibility on learners to manage their learning independently, often without regular physical contact with instructors or peers. Consequently, it becomes mandatory for all ODE providers to establish effective learner support services units that can bridge the gap created by distance, isolation, and limited institutional contact. Learner support services are therefore designed to humanize the distance education system, enhance learner engagement, and reduce dropout rates by addressing learners' academic, administrative, personal, and social needs. Arhin et al. (2025) operationalized learner support as the totality of assistance provided by a distance education or e-learning system to replicate, as closely as possible, the academic and social support available in conventional face-to-face institutions, with the ultimate aim of ensuring learners' success. According to Arhin et al., learner support services are not restricted to a single stage of the educational process; rather, they operate across several critical phases of the learner lifecycle. These phases include the information phase, during which prospective learners receive guidance



about programmes and admission requirements; the guidance phase, where learners are helped to make appropriate programme choices; the registration phase, which involves assistance with enrolment and course selection; the integration phase, where learners are supported to adjust academically and socially to the ODE system; the final results phase, which focuses on academic outcomes and feedback; the accreditation assistance phase, where learners receive support related to certification and recognition of qualifications; and the guidance on further study phase, which helps graduates plan future educational or professional pathways. Similarly, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL, 2023) defined learner support as a broad and inclusive concept encompassing all interactions between institutional personnel and students. These interactions are designed to help learners achieve their educational objectives from the point of initial inquiry and admission through graduation and, in some cases, throughout their lifetime as alumni and lifelong learners. This definition underscores the holistic and continuous nature of learner support services, emphasizing that effective support extends beyond academic instruction to include administrative guidance, emotional encouragement, technical assistance, and career development. The overarching goal of learner support services, therefore, is to enable learners to maximize the benefits of their studentship, progress smoothly through university education, and complete their programmes with minimal difficulty and frustration National Open University of Nigeria [NOUN], 2025).

In Nigeria, the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), as a legally recognized and leading provider of open and distance education, conceptualized learner support through the Directorate of Learner Support Services (DLSS). The DLSS is a specialized unit responsible for coordinating and delivering various support services aimed at enhancing learners' academic success and personal development. The counselling-oriented goals of the DLSS include facilitating effective learning experiences, organizing workshops and seminars on study skills and learning strategies, assisting learners with time management and effective study habits, and promoting self-understanding and self-directed learning. In addition, the DLSS provides advocacy services by serving as a bridge between the university administration and learners, ensuring that students' concerns are communicated and addressed appropriately. Furthermore, the DLSS offers psychological counselling and guidance services to help learners cope with stress, anxiety, and emotional challenges associated with distance learning and adult life responsibilities. Vocational and career development counselling is also provided to support learners in making informed career decisions and enhancing their employability. Special attention is given to learners with disabilities or other special challenges, ensuring inclusiveness and equal access to educational opportunities. The DLSS also helps students develop complementary skills, such as communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills, which are necessary for academic success and lifelong learning (NOUN, 2025).

Counselling in Open and Distance Education

Counselling constitutes a vital component of learner support services in open and distance education and has been defined in various ways by scholars. Obiero (2025) described counselling



as a professional relationship between a trained counsellor and a client, designed to help the client understand and clarify their life situation in order to make meaningful and informed choices consistent with their essential nature. This definition highlights the relational and developmental aspects of counselling. Ukaigwe et al. (2025), on the other hand, viewed counselling as a helping relationship between a professionally trained person and an individual who is experiencing challenges beyond their coping capacity, with the aim of promoting normal development and preventing frustration, anxiety, and stress. Broadly, counselling may be seen as a structured helping relationship between an expert and a non-expert, intended to resolve personal, academic, vocational, or social problems and enhance overall life satisfaction and well-being. Within the framework of learner support services, counselling occupies a central and strategic position in open and distance education. It may be regarded as the “engine room” or driving force of the ODE system because it directly addresses the diverse needs of learners and supports their holistic development. Counselling helps learners navigate the complexities of distance learning, fosters self-confidence, and promotes persistence in the face of academic and personal challenges. Ahimie et al. (2020) emphasized that counselling in open and distance learning should focus on improving learners’ reading and comprehension skills, effective planning and execution of assignments and projects, understanding subject conventions, identifying key lesson points, revising effectively, and developing sound study habits.

Counselling also plays a crucial role in inducting new learners into the academic culture, expectations, and demands of distance education, thereby reducing feelings of isolation and uncertainty. The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN, 2025) categorized the functions of counselling within learner support services into administrative, academic, and social domains. These domains reflect the multidimensional nature of counselling in ODE and underscore its importance in ensuring learners’ success. Accordingly, counselling in open and distance education performs several key functions, which are discussed below.

Provision of Information: One of the traditional and foundational roles of counselling is the dissemination of accurate, timely, and relevant information. In the context of open and distance education, counsellors provide learners with comprehensive information on admission procedures, registration requirements, fee payment processes, course offerings, facilitation methods, availability and distribution of course materials, assessment schedules, and examination modalities. Counsellors also provide information related to career opportunities, health care services, advocacy, and personal or social issues. In addition, counsellors often serve as liaison officers between ODE institutions and their host communities, helping to foster positive relationships and enhance institutional visibility and acceptance.

Personal and Social Counselling: Learners in open and distance education are predominantly adults who may face a wide range of personal and social challenges. These challenges include financial difficulties, inadequate time management, family and marital pressures, workplace conflicts, fatigue, stress, and health-related issues. Such challenges can negatively affect learners’

concentration, motivation, and academic performance if left unaddressed. Counsellors are therefore responsible for assisting learners in coping with these challenges, developing effective coping strategies, and achieving a healthy balance between academic, work, and family responsibilities. In addition to learners, staff members of ODE institutions who experience psychological or emotional challenges may also benefit from counselling services, thereby promoting overall institutional well-being.

Academic Counselling: Academic counselling is a core function of learner support services in open and distance education. Counsellors assist learners in understanding course requirements, developing effective study skills, and addressing learning difficulties. They help learners overcome academic challenges such as poor study habits, examination anxiety, and difficulties with independent learning. Academic counsellors also support learners by organizing facilitation activities, coordinating examination arrangements, monitoring academic progress, and providing feedback on performance. By reminding learners of course unit requirements for graduation and guiding them on appropriate course loads, academic counselling enhances timely programme completion and reduces dropout rates.

Orientation Services: Orientation services are organized primarily for newly admitted learners to familiarize them with institutional facilities, personnel, rules and regulations, course requirements, and available support services. Given that ODE institutions are largely non-residential, learners are expected to become acquainted with libraries, study centres, facilitation venues, and information and communication technology (ICT) facilities used for learning and communication. Orientation programmes also introduce learners to effective distance learning strategies and expectations. Newly recruited staff members similarly benefit from orientation programmes coordinated by counsellors, which help them understand institutional policies, roles, and responsibilities.

Career Counselling: Career counselling is particularly important in the context of open and distance education in Nigeria, where access to conventional university education is limited and unemployment rates are high. Many youths and working adults turn to ODE as a means of improving their qualifications and career prospects. Career counselling assists learners in identifying their interests, abilities, values, and competencies, and in making informed career choices aligned with labour market realities. It also helps learners adjust meaningfully to their occupational roles, plan career progression, and develop employability skills (Edmore & Nhlanhla, 2023).

Research and Training: Counsellors in open and distance education engage in research activities aimed at evaluating issues relevant to learner welfare, institutional effectiveness, and community development. Such research provides empirical evidence that informs policy formulation and improvement of learner support services. Counsellors also assess local demand for non-credit, continuing, and professional education programmes (NOUN, 2025). In addition, they organize



seminars, workshops, refresher courses, and orientation programmes for learners and staff. For instance, at NOUN, the Regional Training and Research Institute for Open and Distance Learning (RETRIDAL), in collaboration with the Learner Support Services Unit, conducts training and orientation activities to enhance capacity building and quality assurance.

Referral and Remedial Services: Not all learner challenges can be effectively addressed through routine counselling services. Learners with severe psychological disorders, chronic health conditions, or other complex challenges beyond the counsellor's professional scope are referred to appropriate medical, psychological, or social service agencies. Counsellors also direct learners who require remedial academic support, such as extra tutorials or skill development programmes, to relevant institutional units for intervention. Through effective referral and remedial services, learner support services ensure that learners receive comprehensive care and assistance, thereby promoting academic success, personal well-being, and overall satisfaction with the open and distance education system.

Issues and Challenges of Counselling in Open and Distance Education

Counselling in open and distance education (ODE) occupies a central position in the overall learner support framework because it addresses the academic, psychological, social, vocational, and personal needs of learners who are separated from their institutions by distance and time. ODE learners are predominantly young adults and mature learners who combine their studies with work, family responsibilities, and other social obligations. These learners often face multiple pressures arising from role conflict, inadequate study skills, poor time management, financial constraints, career uncertainty, social maladjustment, and emotional stress. Such challenges, if not properly managed, can negatively affect learners' persistence, academic performance, and programme completion rates. For young learners, counselling is crucial in helping them cope with academic adjustment, peer relationships, identity formation, and career decision-making. Adult learners, on the other hand, frequently require vocational and career counselling due to limited access to conventional education, late entry into higher education, or engagement in occupations for which they lack adequate preparation or professional satisfaction. Counselling therefore becomes indispensable for fostering self-understanding, personal development, informed decision-making, and lifelong learning among ODE learners (Ukwueze, 2020).

Effective counselling services in open and distance education contribute significantly to the development of learners' cognitive, affective, and psychomotor capacities. Through counselling, learners acquire appropriate study habits, time management and self-regulation skills, emotional resilience, stress management techniques, and career awareness. Counselling also enhances learners' motivation, self-esteem, and sense of belonging to the institution, which are critical factors for retention and successful completion of ODE programmes. These benefits underscore the recognition of counselling as the hub of learner support services in open and distance education institutions. Despite its acknowledged importance, counselling in open and distance education faces numerous challenges, particularly in developing countries such as

Nigeria. These challenges hinder the effective delivery of counselling services and limit their impact on learners' academic success and personal development. Ihuoma (2024) identified several factors that constrain counselling practice in educational institutions, many of which are evident in ODE contexts. Key among these challenges are role conflict, inadequate funding, poor office accommodation, cultural diversity of learners, large student population, lack of psychological tests, inadequate counselling time, and the limitations associated with e-counselling. Each of these issues is discussed in detail below.

Role Conflict: In many open and distance education institutions, especially the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), counsellors function within an administrative structure where they are directly under the authority of study centre directors. While this arrangement is intended to promote coordination and administrative efficiency, it often leads to role ambiguity and conflict. The duties of counsellors are sometimes poorly defined, resulting in counselling-related responsibilities being assigned to non-counselling staff or counsellors being burdened with excessive administrative tasks that detract from their professional roles. This lack of clear role delineation can create tension, rivalry, and suspicion between counsellors and other staff members, particularly when counsellors are perceived as encroaching on administrative authority or competing for influence within the study centre (Mohangi & Olivier, 2023). Such conflicts undermine collaboration, reduce professional autonomy, and negatively affect service delivery. Given that role conflict has long been identified as a major challenge in Nigerian secondary schools, deliberate efforts must be made to avoid its replication in ODE institutions. Clear job descriptions, well-defined reporting lines, and institutional recognition of counselling as a specialized professional service are essential for enhancing counsellors' effectiveness and ensuring harmonious working relationships.

Inadequate Funding: Adequate funding is fundamental to the successful operation of counselling services in open and distance education. Counsellors largely depend on financial allocations from learner support services at institutional headquarters to organize orientation programmes, workshops, seminars, career talks, and other counselling-related activities. However, delays in fund release and insufficient budgetary provisions often hamper the planning and implementation of these programmes. Inadequate funding also limits the procurement of essential counselling resources such as office furniture, psychological testing materials, stationery, computers, and internet-enabled devices. Without these basic facilities, counsellors are unable to provide comprehensive and effective services to learners (Amrane-Cooper, 2024). Furthermore, lack of funds restricts counsellors' opportunities for professional development through conferences, workshops, and in-service training. To address this challenge, ODE institutions must prioritize counselling in their budgetary allocations and ensure timely disbursement of funds to learner support units.

Poor Office Accommodation: Many open and distance education study centres operate in temporary or borrowed facilities that were not originally designed for academic or counselling



purposes. As a result, counselling offices are often poorly located, inadequately furnished, and difficult for learners to access. In some cases, counsellors are required to share office space with administrative or support staff, which compromises privacy and confidentiality—two core ethical principles of counselling practice. The absence of a private and conducive counselling environment discourages learners from seeking help and undermines the trust necessary for effective counsellor–client relationships. Learners may be reluctant to discuss sensitive personal, academic, or psychological issues in spaces where confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. It is therefore imperative that ODE institutions provide dedicated, well-equipped, and easily accessible counselling offices that promote privacy, comfort, and learner confidence (Bozkurt & Kocdar, 2023).

Cultural Differences among Learners: Open and distance education institutions draw learners from diverse cultural, ethnic, religious, and geographical backgrounds. This diversity enriches the learning environment but also poses significant challenges for counselling practice. According to Kalita (2025), behaviours and values considered acceptable in one cultural context may be viewed as inappropriate or delinquent in another. Counsellors must therefore navigate complex cultural dynamics when addressing learners’ problems and designing appropriate interventions. Counsellors posted to study centres outside their geo-political or cultural zones may initially struggle to understand local norms, beliefs, communication styles, and value systems. Such cultural gaps can affect rapport building, accurate problem diagnosis, and the effectiveness of counselling interventions. To mitigate this challenge, cultural competence should be emphasized in counsellor training programmes, and cultural sensitivity should be considered in the recruitment, deployment, and continuous professional development of counsellors in ODE institutions.

Large Population of Learners: A defining feature of open and distance education is mass enrolment, which enables institutions to provide access to education for large numbers of learners. While this expansion enhances educational access, it poses serious challenges for counselling services. Counsellors are often overwhelmed by the sheer number of learners requiring academic, personal, and career guidance, especially when the counsellor-to-student ratio is grossly inadequate. In some study centres, a single counsellor may be responsible for attending to several thousand learners, making individualized counselling practically impossible. The Counselling Association of Nigeria (CASSON) recommends a counsellor-to-student ratio of 1:2,500, a standard adopted by the National Universities Commission (Yakobi, 2025). Compliance with this recommendation is essential for ensuring effective service delivery. ODE institutions should therefore recruit additional qualified counsellors and adopt innovative group and online counselling strategies to complement face-to-face services.

Lack of Psychological Tests: Psychological tests are vital tools in counselling for assessing learners’ abilities, interests, personality traits, study habits, and adjustment patterns. However, many counsellors in ODE institutions lack access to standardized psychological tests, while others experience difficulties in administering and interpreting test results (Simpson, 2025). The non-residential and geographically dispersed nature of ODE learners further complicates test



administration and follow-up. As a result, some institutional administrators regard the acquisition of psychological tests as unnecessary or impractical in ODE contexts. This perception undermines the quality of counselling services and limits evidence-based decision-making. ODE institutions should therefore invest in relevant standardized instruments such as Bakare's Study Habit Inventory (SHI) and Vocational Interest Inventory (VII), as well as emerging computer-based and online assessment tools. Counsellors should also be regularly sponsored to training programmes to enhance their competence in psychological assessment and interpretation.

Inadequate Time for Counselling: Time constraint is another major challenge confronting counsellors in open and distance education. Counsellors attend to prospective, newly admitted, and continuing learners throughout the year due to the open and continuous nature of admissions in ODE institutions. In addition, counsellors are often assigned administrative responsibilities and required to shuttle between study centres and headquarters, particularly in institutions like NOUN. These competing demands significantly reduce the time available for professional counselling activities such as individual counselling, group counselling, follow-up sessions, and programme evaluation. To improve effectiveness, institutional schedules should be structured to allocate sufficient time for counselling services, and administrative burdens on counsellors should be minimized.

Challenges of E-Counselling: Open and distance education (ODE) is a technology-driven mode of learning designed to serve a diverse population of learners drawn from different geographical locations. It provides flexible access to education at a relatively affordable cost. The effective delivery of ODE programmes therefore relies heavily on the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to bridge the physical distance between learners and institutions. As noted by Leach and Moon (as cited in Tait & Mills, 2023), the quality of learning can be significantly enhanced when ICT is utilized as an intellectual multi-tool that is appropriately adapted to learners' needs. Within this technological context, e-counselling has emerged as an essential learner support service in open and distance education. Smith (2023) defined e-counselling as an electronic form of counselling in which a qualified and experienced counsellor interacts with clients across geographical distances, provided the clients have access to the internet and are sufficiently motivated to engage in the counselling process. In recognition of its relevance, some counsellors in open and distance education institutions have begun to utilize available ICT facilities to reach learners through e-counselling platforms. However, despite its numerous advantages, the implementation of e-counselling in ODE is confronted with several challenges. Many learners are unable to afford personal computers such as desktops or laptops, as well as internet modems, thereby compelling them to depend on cyber cafés where internet access is often costly. In addition, a considerable number of learners lack adequate computer literacy and the technical skills required for effective internet use. These challenges are further aggravated by the problem of epileptic power supply, as many learners are unable to provide alternative sources of electricity. Given that open and distance education is fundamentally technology-based, it is imperative that counsellors are provided with adequate opportunities to acquire computer literacy



and relevant ICT competencies to enable them to function effectively irrespective of distance. Furthermore, study centres should be sufficiently equipped with reliable internet connectivity and uninterrupted power supply to support the effective delivery of e-counselling services for the benefit of both counsellors and learners.

Conclusion

Counselling is undeniably the cornerstone of learner support services in open and distance education (ODE). It plays a vital role in addressing learners' academic, vocational, social, and psychological needs. However, the effectiveness of counselling in ODE is often constrained by several structural and operational challenges that undermine its strategic importance. These challenges include role conflict among counsellors, inadequate funding, poor office accommodation, cultural diversity among learners, large enrolment populations, limited availability of psychological testing instruments, and insufficient time allocated for counselling activities. If left unaddressed, these issues can significantly weaken the capacity of counselling services to support learners effectively. Therefore, there is an urgent need for the establishment and strengthening of well-resourced counselling units in every ODE institution and study centre. Such measures will enhance the delivery of comprehensive learner support services and ultimately promote improved learning outcomes, learner retention, and overall academic success.

Suggestions

Based on the critical analysis conducted in the study, it was suggested among others that Open and Distance Education institutions should:

1. Create fully functional counselling units to provide integrated support that fosters learners' academic, social, and psychological development.
2. Implement structured induction programmes to familiarize learners with study skills, institutional support services, and the ODE environment, thereby enhancing engagement and retention.
3. Leverage ICT tools, including virtual sessions, emails, and messaging platforms, to deliver accessible, timely, and continuous counselling for remote learners.
4. Invest in ongoing professional development to equip counsellors with advanced skills in academic, career, and psychosocial guidance tailored to ODE learners' diverse needs.
5. Establish systematic feedback and assessment mechanisms to measure the effectiveness of counselling services and inform continuous improvement.

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