AVAILABILITY AND UTILIZATION OF E-COUNSELLING PLATFORMS FOR QUALITY DISTANCE LEARNING IN NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA

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Abstract: The emergence of technology has made it possible for counsellors all over the world to reach their clients in distant locations without compromising the principle of confidentiality. This study examined the availability and utilization of e-counselling platforms in counselling students for quality distance learning in the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). Through purposive research design using 56 professional counsellors in the university, five research questions and two hypotheses were formulated to guide the study. Data collection was through a self-structured questionnaire that sought information from the respondents on the availability, utilization, challenges and possible solutions to e-counselling platforms in NOUN. Both descriptive and inferential statistical tools were used to analyse the data using the SPSS platform. The results of the study showed that most of the modern social media platforms for e-counselling are not available for use in the university. In effect, there are challenges that face the utilization of e-counselling platforms, which include inadequate power supply and lack of ICT facilities. The study recommended the provision of alternative power supply, free data for students and counsellors as well as computerized counselling laboratories with internet connections for students and counsellors in all the study centres of the university.
Keywords: *availability; utilization; e-counselling; distance learning*.

INTRODUCTION

The introduction of open and distance education all over the world came as a means of providing learning processes otherwise monopolized by conventional institutions. This, to a large extent, was aimed at providing easy access to education for people that yearn for quality education especially at the tertiary level but were hitherto denied the opportunity. Thus, the globalization of distance education provides many opportunities for the realization of educational goals of nations especially the developing countries (UNESCO, 2002). Nigeria is one of such developing countries that has embraced open and distance education as a way of providing quality education to people. Hence, the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) was statutorily established to provide open and distance education in Nigeria with a view to ensuring that a vast majority of Nigerians, who were hitherto denied higher education for one reason or the other, acquire qualitative education at affordable cost (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004).

The emergence of ICT facilities has given birth to the emergence of contemporary means of imparting knowledge to the people especially in e-education and other human endeavours (Apagu & Wakili, 2015).It has also *revolutionalised* the operations and processes of delivering teaching and learning processes. In Nigeria, distance education is gradually gaining upper hand due to the failing in pedagogical methods occasioned by poor training received by most teachers and overemphasis on teacher-pupil interaction at the expense of pupil-pupil and

pupil-material interactions (Odeleye, 2009). This has led to several conventional universities in Nigeria transforming themselves into dual mode universities in order to provide students with the best and most up-to-date educational resources. Today, the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) and the National Teachers' Institute at Kaduna are the only institutions that provide single mode distance education while seven conventional universities have been given the approval to operate as dual mode institutions. These dual mode universities are the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, University of Lagos, Akoka-Lagos, University of Maiduguri, Maiduguri and the Modibbo Adama University of Technology, Yola. The National Universities Commission (NUC) accredits courses and programmes undertaken by these universities to ensure quality and uniformity.

A vital component of open and distance education all over the world is the learner support services with counselling as a major tool for students' retention and academic achievement (Ukwueze, 2016). Learner support services via counselling in open education provides intervention to students on academic programmes, adjustment to family life for better performance, reinforcement of confidence, self-esteem and progress, eradication of social vices, vocational information, and study guide (Tai, 2003; Nnaka & Ezekannagha, 2013). Counselling ensures that learners are well-adjusted to face their studies and avoid the temptation of dropping out of their programmes. Tahir (2016) asserts that counselling in open education aims at covering learners in their diverse locations through course registration, registration for examinations, facilitation of courses, study guide, interpersonal relationships, missing scores and results and general enquiries about the scope and acceptability of open education.

As a result of the spatial and diverse location of learners in open education, the traditional face-to-face counselling is becoming obsolete in the face of the current revolution in technology. Okopi (2010) opines that the present face-to-face counselling is inadequate to meet students' inquiries, complaints and counselling needs in the face of the present evolution of Internet based technology. Consequently, modern life has changed what students should learn, how learning should happen, where and when learning can happen (Ayiro, 2013). This calls for online counselling, which allows for virtual interactions where counsellors interact with more learners simultaneously at different locations (Ojo, 2013; & Okopi, 2010). Similarly, Tahir (2016) posits that open education is a technology-driven and student-centred programme where learners should not be left to their devices alone as they often need assistance in tackling problems that may ensue in the process. Despite these benefits of online counselling, it is unfortunate to observe that the traditional method of face-to-face counselling is still in vogue in most of the institutions that operate distance education. Perhaps, this could be as a result of lack of ubiquitous access to the Internet and university resources at home, school or at work in Nigeria. Therefore, having established that e-counselling or online counselling is imperative in achieving accessible, flexible and quality education as seen in the literature so far, it is desirable to state that e-counselling must be utilized for quality learning in open and distance education.

Kolog (2014) defines e-counselling as an electronic way of receiving supportive counselling through various forms of social media such as e-mail, webcam, telephone and digital games. Ukwueze (2016) states that e-counselling could be referred to as online counselling, Internet counselling, computer-based counselling, automated counselling or virtual counselling, which makes use of ICT facilities to aid people who are separated geographically and over a

period of time like in open education situation. There are several platforms through which trained counsellors can reach their students. Brown (2012) categorizes online counselling platforms into asynchronous and synchronous modalities. The asynchronous modalities are e-mailing, message boards, and web logs where the counsellor and the counsellee need not to be at the computer at the same time but may consider how and when to respond to the counselling interaction (Yaphe & Speyer, 2010). The synchronous online counselling interactions involve written or spoken dialogue in "real time" where the counsellor and the counsellee have access to a computer engaging in instant messaging and videoconferencing (Derrig-Palumbo, 2010). Other platforms include e-mail, videoconferencing, web-based messaging, twitter, telephone services, chat, short message system (SMS), Face book, optical video disk, g-mail, WhatsApp, Google talk, Skype, and blogs (Zamani, 2009; Shiller, 2009; Okoregbe, 2013; Kolog, 2014; Apagu & Wakili. 2015; & Ukwueze, 2016).

In a study by Green and Yallow (2002), it was observed that counsellors use ICT facilities in e-counselling to generate high level of enthusiasm and commitment during the counselling process as well as increased reasoning ability of learners, increased attention and concentration. Shiran (2001) earlier found that investment in the e-counselling facilities during counselling is a big boost in counselling and other support services. Anyamene, Nwokolo and Anyachebelu (2012) assert that counsellors utilize ICT facilities for e-counselling and general education in Japan, Malaysia, Spain and Israel, which has shown great impact on students' education. However, these researchers found that ICT resources are not often used in counselling students to improve their learning in the conventional universities in Southeast Nigeria as only 10% of the population used for their study could engage in online counselling. This study found that inadequate telecommunication, lack of stand by generators, constant power failure, limited number of computers and lack of Internet services in schools affect the implementation of ICT facilities in counselling. The result of the study further shows that ICT counselling could be enhanced through alternative power supply, provision of Internet outlet, adequate computers and furniture.

Brown (2012) in a study on the attitude and potential utilization of online counselling by college students found promising student interest with 28.9% of them utilizing online counselling. He also found gender differences consistent with counselling literature which emerged for face-to-face counselling but not for online counselling. In all, Brown (2012) found that online counselling is easily available for students in colleges; and that many students often use face-to-face counselling to complement online counselling.

In a study on the use of ICT facilities in teaching and learning, Apagu and Wakili (2015) observed that ICT facilities are not adequate for use with irregular power supply as a major challenge facing their application. Similarly, Ukwueze (2016) identified unsteady power supply, poverty, poor network coverage and outright outage, problem of confidentiality, poor attitude towards the use of computers and inadequate computer literacy as major challenges facing the use of e-counselling in open education. In a recent study, Omeje, Eze and Egeonu (2016) found that e-counselling facilities are available for career information dissemination in the Federal Universities in Southeast Nigeria with students using social networks in sourcing and disseminating information than their counsellors. They found significant convenience in the use and easy accessibility to information via e-counselling.

The literature reviewed so far indicate inconsistency on the availability and utilization of e-counselling in the school system. Literature is either scanty or non-existent on this issue in Africa and other developing parts of the world where distance learning has been embraced. Besides, none

of the studies was particular about the extent of availability and utilization of e-counselling platforms in open and distance education in Nigeria. It is in realization of this gap that this study sought to investigate the availability and utilization of e-counselling platforms for quality distance education in Nigeria. It is quite uncertain about the extent of the availability and utilization of e-counselling platforms in counselling students in the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) despite the imperativeness and universal acceptance of the platforms all over the world.

Based on the literature review above, this study focus into five research questions as follows: (1) Which e-counselling platforms are available for counselling students in the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN)?; (2) What is the extent of utilization of e-counselling platforms for counselling students in NOUN?; (3) To what extent are instant messaging and chat platforms used in e-counselling platforms for counselling students in NOUN?; (4) What are the challenges facing the use of e-counselling platforms in counselling students in NOUN?; (5) What are the possible solutions to the challenges facing the use of e-counselling platforms in counselling students in NOUN?

Furthermore, this study has two hypothesis which is formulated to guide this study, they are: (1) There is no significant difference between the mean scores of male and female counsellors on the availability of e-counselling platforms for counselling in the NOUN; (2) There is no significant difference between the mean scores of young and experienced counsellors on the utilization of e-counselling platforms for counselling in NOUN.

METHOD
The study was carried out in the Study Centres and the Department of Educational Foundations of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), using purposive research design. Thus, the population of the study comprised all the 69 student

counsellors in the study centres of the NOUN across the country and the academic counsellors of the Department of Educational Foundations, NOUN. However, 56 of the counsellors at the study centres and the Department of Educational Foundations who returned their completed questionnaires were used for the study. An instrument entitled: Availability and utilization of e-counselling facilities inventory (AUEFI) was constructed and validated for data collection. A total of 50 items out of 68 survived the careful scrutiny undertaken by two experts in guidance and counselling, which were used to construct the final instrument. The instrument sought for information from the respondents on their bio-data, availability of e-counselling platforms, utilization of e-counselling platforms, extent of usage of instant messaging and chat facilities, challenges of e-counselling and possible solutions to e-counselling challenges. The items in the second part of the instrument after the bio-data were placed on two-point rating scale of *available* and *not available*. Four-point rating scales of strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree were used for the remaining clusters of the instrument with assigned weight of 4, 3, 2 and 1 points respectively. The instrument was further administered to 30 counsellors in secondary schools who were not part of this study on two occasions after an interval of three weeks. Thereafter, the two sets of scores obtained were subjected to correlation coefficient analysis, which yielded a result of 0.97 to ascertain the reliability of the instrument.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
E-counselling platforms available for counselling students in the National Open University of Nigeria
The analysis showed that the e-counselling platforms available for counselling students in the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) are e-mail, internet connections, cellular phones, computers for internet services, audio recorder and free data for counsellors. The respondents did not differ

in their opinions as the standard deviation ranges from 0.25 to 0.50. The details can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. *Availability status of e-counselling platforms in NOUN*

S/N	Items	Mean	Std.Dev.	Remarks
1.	e-mail	1.73	.44	AV
2.	Videoconferencing network	1.27	.44	NA
3.	weblogs	1.07	.25	NA
4.	Internet connections	1.60	.49	AV
5.	Java	1.01	.03	NA
6.	CD-ROM	1.47	.50	NA
7.	Cellular phone	1.73	.44	AV
8.	Computers for Internet services	1.53	.50	AV
9.	Free Data for counsellors	1.67	.50	AV
10.	Audio Recorder	1.62	.47	AV
11.	Counselling Data Base Management System	1.33	.47	NA
12.	Computerized Counselling room	1.07	.25	NA
13.	Blogs	1.07	.25	NA
14.	Microcomputers for students	1.20	.40	NA

AV = Available; NA = Not Available

The extent of utilization of e-counselling platforms for counselling students in NOUN

The analysis indicated that counsellors in NOUN utilize WhatsApp, facebook, android phones, chatting devices, SMS, audio recorder and e-mail as e-counselling platforms to interact with their students online. Thus, counselors and students often chat using the above platforms. The overall data is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. *Utilization of e-counselling platforms*

S/N	Items	Mean	Std. Dev.	Remarks
1.	WhatsApp is used by counsellors and students to interact	3.60	.88	Accepted
2.	Interaction with counsellors is through Face Book	2.60	1.08	Accepted
3.	Android phones are often used for counselling	3.13	.88	Accepted
4.	Counsellors and students often engage in chatting	3.33	.69	Accepted
5.	SMS is always used for interaction	3.53	.81	Accepted
6.	Twitter is used for counselling	2.33	.94	Rejected
7.	Counsellors use Skype to counsel their students	2.00	.89	Rejected
8.	Microsoft messenger is often used for counselling	2.27	.99	Rejected
9.	Students use blogs to interact with counsellors	2.13	1.02	Rejected
10.	Counsellors use audio recorder in counselling	2.73	.99	Accepted
11.	Videoconferencing is used by counsellors and students	1.87	.88	Rejected
12.	Counsellors and students use e-mail to interact	3.40	.80	Accepted

Extent to which instant messaging and chat platforms used in e-counselling platforms for counselling students in NOUN

The data in Table 3 below indicated that chat, SMS, and WhatsApp are the major instant messaging and chatting platforms often used by counselors for counsellors in e-counselling interactions with students. Face book and Microsoft Messenger were used but not often or regularly in counselling students.

Table 3. *Extent of usage of Instant message and chat in NOUN*

S/N	Items	Mean	Std. Dev.	Remarks
1.	Chat	2.93	1.24	OU
2.	SMS	3.53	.72	OU
3.	Face Book	2.33	1.01	NOU
4.	Twitter	1.80	.91	RU
5.	WhatsApp	3.20	1.05	OU
6.	Skype	1.67	.87	RU
7.	Microsoft messenger	2.13	.96	NOU

OU = Often Used; NOU = Not Often Used; RU = Rarely Used

The challenges faced in using e-counselling platforms in counselling students in NOUN

The data in Table 4 below show that all the items were accepted as the challenges facing the use of e-counselling platforms in counselling students in NOUN. Besides, the standard deviation ranges from 0.40 to 1.02 to ascertain the close affinity of the respondents on their views about the challenges facing the use of e-counselling platforms in counselling students in NOUN.

Table 4. *Challenges of e-counselling in NOUN*

S/N	Challenges	Mean	Std. Dev.	Remarks
1.	Inadequate public power supply	3.60	.80	Accepted
2.	Irregular power supply	3.80	.40	Accepted
3.	Poor Internet services	3.67	.59	Accepted
4.	Inadequate computers for students' use	3.33	.60	Accepted
5.	Poor knowledge of computer application by students	2.93	.88	Accepted
6.	Poor knowledge of computer application by counsellors	3.07	.93	Accepted
7.	Lack of computer laboratories	3.20	.83	Accepted
8.	Expensive nature of computers	3.13	.72	Accepted
9.	Network outages	2.87	1.02	Accepted
10.	Lack of awareness of the availability of e-counselling facilities	3.0	.82	accepted

The possible solutions to the challenges faced in using e-counselling platforms in counselling students in NOUN

From the data presented in Table 5 below, it was observed that all the items were possible solutions to the numerous challenges facing the application of e-counselling services in NOUN. The standard deviation ranges from 0.44 to 1.05 to indicate the close affinity of the respondents on their opinions.

Table 5. *Possible solutions to e-counselling challenges in NOUN*

S/N	Possible Solutions	Mean	Std. Dev.	Remarks
1.	Provision of stand by generators	3.73	.44	Accepted
2.	Training of counsellors on the use of computers	3.60	.61	Accepted
3.	Provision of ICT laboratories with Internet facilities	3.27	.99	Accepted
4.	Provision of free data to students and counsellors	3.67	.60	Accepted
5.	Scholarship awards to indigent students	3.20	1.05	Accepted
6.	Awareness about computer usage during orientation	3.47	.62	Accepted
7.	Provision of adequate computers for students' use	3.27	.77	Accepted

Table 6. *The t-test analysis of the mean scores of respondents on gender basis*

Gender	Number	Mean	Std. Dev.	df	t-cal.	Sig.	
Male	17		1.29	.45	54	.46	NS
Female	39	1.37	.48				

The data in Table 6 indicate that the t-calculated (0.46) is not significant at 0.05 probability level. Thus, the hypothesis of no significant difference between the mean scores of male and female counsellors on the availability of e-counselling platforms for counselling in NOUN is hereby accepted. The implication of this result is that gender did not influence the opinions of the respondents on the availability of e-counselling platforms for counselling in NOUN.

Table 7. *The t-test analysis of the mean scores of respondents on years of experience*

Years of Experience	Number	Mean	Std. Dev.	df	t-cal.	Sig.
Young Counsellors	36	2.72	1.03	54	.403	NS
Experienced Counsellors	20	2.81	1.11			

The data in Table 7 showed that the t-calculated (0.403) was not significant at 0.05 probability level. Thus, the hypothesis of no significant difference between the mean scores of young and experienced counsellors on the utilization of e-counselling platforms for counselling in NOUN is hereby accepted. By implication, counsellors' years of experience did not influence their opinions on the utilization of e-counselling platforms for counselling in NOUN.

The results of the study showed that very few social media platforms are available for e-counselling in the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). These e-counselling platforms for the online interactions among counselors and students were e-mail, internet connections, cellular phones, computers, audio recorder and free data for counselors. These discoveries were in consonant with the observations of Okoroegbe (2013) and Ukwueze (2016) that few of these platforms are available for online counselling. However, the results corroborated with the assertions of Apagu and Wakili (2015) and Anyamene, Nwokolo and Anyachebelu (2012) that ICT facilities are not adequately available for online counselling in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Another discovery of the study was the extent of utilization of some e-counselling platforms for counselling students in NOUN. The only e-counselling platforms utilized by counselors in interacting with students are WhatsApp, face book, android phones, audio recorder and e-mail. This discovery agreed with the findings of Zamani (2009), Shiller (2009) and Kolog (2014) which state that these mentioned platforms were actually used in online counselling. The instant messaging and chat platforms used in e-counselling are chats, SMS, and WhatsApp as discovered by this study. Face book was used for e-counselling but not as often as in other cultures. This was in agreement with the assertions of Okoroegbe (2013) and Kolog (2014) that instant messaging and chat platforms were used to facilitate online counselling for better learning in distance education.

The challenges of e-counselling in NOUN as identified by this study include inadequate public power supply, poor internet services, inadequate computers, poor knowledge of computer application by students, lack of computer laboratories for counselling at the study centres, expensive nature of computers, network outages, and lack of awareness of the availability of e-counselling facilities by students. To alleviate these challenges, the study found that the problems could be surmounted through the provision of alternative power supply using stand by generators, provision of adequate computers, provision of adequate internet outlets, training of counselors and students on the use of computers, provision of ICT laboratories, provision of free data to students, scholarship awards to indigent students and creation of awareness about computer usage in counselling during students' orientation. This discovery was in tandem with the observations of Anyamene, Nwokolo and Anyachebelu (2012), Apagu and Wakili (2015) and Ukwueze (2016).

Also, the study revealed no significant gender differences in the opinions of

counsellors on the availability of e-counselling platforms for counselling in NOUN. This agrees with the assertion of Brown (2012) that online counselling was easily available for students irrespective of gender differences in Colleges. Similarly, both the young and the experienced counsellors in NOUN agree on the extent of utilization of e-counselling platforms for counselling in the institution.

CONCLUSION

The use of social media in online counselling is yet to permeate into counselling practices in NOUN. From the results of the study, most of the recent or modern e-counselling platforms used in other countries especially the advanced world are yet to be embraced by Nigerian counsellors and other workers in NOUN and perhaps other tertiary institutions in the country. With the inconsistency on the literature reviewed for this study, it became imperative to embark on this study. Several e-counselling platforms are not available for counsellors to interact with their students. E-counselling is fraught with inadequate power supply, inadequate computers, network outages and poor knowledge of computer applications among counsellors and students. For effective e-counselling interactions, there should be alternative power supply, adequate computers and free data to students and counsellors. Therefore, there is need for counsellors and students to be exposed to modern e-counselling platforms like videoconferencing, counselling data base management system, web-based messaging, blogs, Microsoft messenger and subsidized android phones to students and counsellors. Similarly, there should be ICT laboratories with internet facilitiesin all the study centres of NOUN to ensure frequent student-counsellor interactions in all the regions of Nigeria and beyond. In particular, videoconferencing will enhance group counselling for career information, effective study behaviours and group study and facilitation.

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Augustine C. Ukwueze

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