Exploring the Use of ICT in Delivering High Quality Counselling: A Challenge for the 21st Century Nigerian Academic Counsellors

Shehu Yahaya Tsagem

Department of Educational Foundations
Usmanu Danfodiyo University Sokoto
shehu.yahaya@udusok.edu.ng

Introduction

In the current state of affairs, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has permeated almost all aspects of our lives. It is found in sports, health, business and trade, personal life and of course, education. For example, in educational sector, virtual classrooms are available where the traditional method of face to face teaching and learning is not necessary. Likewise in health, ICT has now made it possible for a doctor to interact with his patient who is somewhere else; the possibility of operating on the patient remotely from somewhere has also been delved into. Thus, proving that spatial difference is no longer a barrier to any successful interaction; what is more, it has been proven to be effective, less costly and easily accessible.

With time, counsellors then explore the possibility of using ICT get ways like in the past when guidance was offered face-to-face or by telephone, letter, book, video or audiotape or by free standing computer-assisted guidance systems (CAGS). Now, a range of information and communications channels is available: web chat, email, on-line discussion forum or message board, and even text message from, and to, a mobile phone. Even the CAGS, are increasingly on-line. More people than those who visit the careers centre in person can now be reached - even when that centre is closed or the audience is far away, and cannot (or do not want to) come in. New audiences altogether may be reached or old ones in new ways. This is the era of remote counselling or better referred to as e-guidance. A term seen as an opportunity to give more

guidance to more people, more often, at a distance (Offer, Sampson and Watts, 2001; Madahar, 2003).

The e-guidance as newer forms of intervention can be integrated by intelligent use of a careers service's web site. This can form the hub of an on-line intervention and resource system, and a new gateway to the careers centre's off-line resources and services (Offer, Sampson and Watts, 2001). For example, first contact with users may be on the web rather than at a physical reception desk. It matters where they go next and in what order, and the site must be designed with this in mind. Professional and managerial judgements can ensure that both on-line and off-line pathways are open and properly sign-posted. It is important that none leads to a cul-de-sac, or forces the user back to trial and error to find the right resource or service (Offer, 2004)**.**

At A Glance

E-guidance is not just about email or chat, though to be fully effective these tools need to be part of a system of delivering guidance at different levels to meet different needs – a whole which is more powerful than the sum of its parts. E-guidance should be as coherent a system as its off-line equivalent, with an equally integrated range of activities -informing, assessing, advising, enabling or teaching, as the need requires, and providing clear progression between these activities (Offer et al, 2001).

An effectively-functioning e-guidance web site has many potential functions, including on-line guidance, distance learning, discussion between users or users and advisers, or appropriate referral to other sources of help (Offer et al, 2001). Web sites, once just adverts for off-line services, nowadays increasingly reflect the full range of careers service resources - the hub of the service in cyberspace. The web site home page acts as a reception point for the first-time user in particular, and must also be designed with such in mind. This means the needs of the most common

target groups must be anticipated and the structure of the site should reflect professional judgements about how such identified needs are most appropriately met, with links to appropriate resources or services (Offer, 2003). Ideally, all members of the staff team should be involved in such judgements because e-guidance services involve management decisions about how they are framed, presented and positioned within the total service offered (Offer et al, 2001, Madahar and Offer, 2004).

These then require a professional identification of needs. Thus, a needs-based site and resource-based sites were identified. A **needs-based site** according to Offer (2004b) has at least three levels: it first identifies its target group(s), then, through the layout of its content and menus, prompts them to identify their needs, and finally matches these needs to relevant resources and services. But, **resource-based sites** have a shallower structure, and provide quick access to a comprehensive range of resources and services, on the assumption that users already know what they want or can work it out if shown what is available. There are advantages and disadvantages of either approach. The needs-based site is about effective use of resources, not comprehensive access to them. It aims to get users to the resources that meet their needs, even if they are unclear at the start what these are. Most valuable for first time or undecided users, it is an attempt to translate traditional guidance principles into the format of a web site. Resource-based sites are most effective with repeat or fairly decided users, but may not serve others so well. These formats are not mutually exclusive - even on a needs-based site, indexes, site maps and search facilities will allow quick access to resources for those who do not need a more supportive structure.

The way the service is framed, presented and integrated within the progressive use of other resources may help to decide if it is indeed "guidance" or not. Management decisions about team versus personalised approaches will also have a bearing on this. The latter may make it easier to

close the gap with face-to-face guidance services. Advisers who felt that email services could only offer information and advice, not "guidance", appeared to do so because they experienced the services as lacking dialogue and interactivity, especially where a strict team approach was used, as well as the obvious reduction in non-verbal communication. To some extent this was a self-fulfilling prophecy: some advisers funnelled users to off-line services if there was any sense that they might need "guidance" in the sense of help to clarify or identify the issues, or some sort of dialogue with the adviser over a longer period. This is a defensible professional judgement but not the only possible solution, especially if enquirers have no obvious access to a face-to face service. Enquiries should develop into dialogue with an exchange of emails between adviser(s) and client leading to development for both the enquiry and the enquirer. Experiences in related therapeutic and counselling e-services suggest that emotional issues far beyond those released by the average guidance intervention, can be handled effectively. "Guidance" is not intrinsically more demanding in this respect.

On ethics, security and standard, Offer (2004) cautioned that all involved should be aware of the issues of security and confidentiality raised by such services, and check their understanding of existing professional and legal codes and standards, including the Data Protection Act.

The most important question here is to find out to what extent do the academic counsellors (Tsagem and Batagarawa, 2016) in Nigeria utilizes the ICT opportunities in providing efficient and qualitative counselling experiences? Thus, this study utilizes a sample of counsellors to conduct this descriptive survey.

Statement of the Problem

Counselling will always play a vital role in the lives of people and as a result of changes that are inevitable, people are utilizing avenues to access it. It is apparent in Nigeria that in recent

years there is a marked growth in the use of ICT facilities but alas, it has been detected that many counsellors are not utilizing such provisions in carrying out their profession. This is despite the fact that such avenues are ready at hand thus, still necessitating the use of the old ways in counselling. Furthermore, it has been discerned that majority of the counselling are not so much ICT inclined as such frustrate efforts to modernized counselling to embrace such ICT provisions. Thus, this study sought to find the extent to which counsellors in Nigeria utilize ICT in carrying out their activities and also which of the provisions they use the most.

Research Objectives

It is the objective of this study to:

i.   find out the extent to which counsellors in Nigeria utilize ICT in carrying out counselling activities and

ii. to ascertain which ICT facility/facilities or offering(s) counsellors in Nigeria mostly make use of.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the conduct of this study:

i.   To which extent do counsellors in Nigeria utilize ICT in carrying out counselling activities? and

ii. Which ICT facility/facilities or offering(s) counsellors in Nigeria mostly make use of?

Design

The study utilizes the survey approach to collect data from counsellors in Nigeria. This is as result that data was sought from counsellors and the study also aimed at finding out the extent to which counsellors in Nigeria utilize ICT in carrying out counselling activities and also to ascertain which one(s) they mostly make use of.

Population, Sample and Sampling Technique

The population of the study were all academic counsellors in Nigeria. Thus, counsellors in other sectors other than institutions of learning were not included. As for the sampling, random sampling technique was used in contacting the target sample; in this regard, five hundred (500) counsellors were sampled for the study. This was done by randomly selecting e-mail addresses of authors in counselling based Journals in Nigeria and sending them the instrument to respond to; care was taken in sending the instrument to only those with an academic institution affiliation. Journals were decided to be used as there is no yet comprehensive database of practicing counsellors in Nigeria to be used. Thus, the sampling cut across all geo-political zones of the country, therefore satisfying adequate coverage of the country.

Instrumentation

Instrument used for collecting data for the research was an online form version of a researcher designed instrument tagged ICT Resources Utilization for e-Guidance Inventory (IRUeI). The instrument was adjudged to possess both content and face validities by some experts in the field of guidance who went through it. When the instrument was subjected to a split-half reliability analysis, it yielded an index value of 0.68. Thus, both the validity and the reliability of the instrument were considered satisfactory for use in this study.

Procedure for Data Collection

ICT Resources Utilization for e-Guidance Inventory (IRUeI) was an online form directly sent to the target samples' e-mail. The form is designed in such a way that it will be responded to and also sent back through the e-mail automatically. This is considered appropriate as the whole idea of the study centered on use of ICT facilities.

Data Analysis Technique

The responses received are automatically scored and stored in an excel file thus, at the end results were collated and analyzed. Spearman Rank Order was used in ascertaining the degree to which responded utilize the ICT facilities. Likewise, average means were also used to strengthened decisions taken based on the rank order results.

Results

It should be pertinent to note here that though five hundred copies (500) of the instrument was sent for data collection but, only one hundred and sixty-two (162) were returned and thus were used in data analysis.

Table 1:

Items	Mean	Rank
I used my phone to browse and connect with my clients	2.28	1st
I used text messages in communicating with clients	2.25	2nd
I used phone calls to interact with my clients	2.17	3rd
I have a valid and active e-mail	2.07	4th
I used social web sites in promoting counselling services	2.05	5th
I disseminate information of my services using mobile phone	2.03	6th
e-Mails cannot contain all I needed to provide for my client	2.00	7th
I used my e-mail in contacting my client	1.89	8th
Through e-Mails, large materials are accessible	1.75	9th
I use e-Mails because they have the same advantage as face-to-face	1.72	10th
I am keen in using chat room services	1.64	11th
I used web chat to interact with clients	1.40	12th
I like to interact with my client through message board	1.38	13th
I used message board in disseminating information to clients	1.36	14th
I encouraged my clients to use web services	1.36	14th
I asked my clients to register on such online services	1.34	16th
I am very conversant with using online forums	1.35	17th
I am an avid user of discussion/message board	1.23	18th
I relied on discussing with clients online	1.12	19th
I used video conferencing to interact	1.09	20th

A look at table 1 shows that there was a very low utilization of ICT facilities among academic counsellors in Nigeria because none of the items in the instrument has the required average mean of 3.00 that serves as the cut-off point. This shows that academic counsellors in Nigeria are not utilization ICT offerings as they ought to.

As it is, the table shows that the respondents mostly used their phone to browse and connect with their clients as indicated by a mean of 2.28 and this ranked as the highest. It also revealed that the respondents used text messages in communicating with clients as indicated by a mean of 2.25, this ranked as the second highest. Likewise, the table further shows that the respondents used phone calls to interact with their clients as designated by a mean of 2.17, this ranked as the third highest. The table also shows that the respondents have valid and active e-mails as indicated by a mean of 2.07 and this ranked as the 4th highest. Furthermore, the table shows that the respondents used social web sites in promoting counselling services as indicated by a mean of 2.05 and this ranked as the 5th highest. Likewise, the table shows that the sixth highest ranking by the respondents is of disseminating information of their services using mobile phone as indicated by a mean of 2.03. Nevertheless, the respondents indicated that e-mails cannot contain all they needed to provide for their clients as ranked the seventh with a mean of 2.00.

All the rest i.e. ranked from eighth to the twentieth have means range of 1.89 to 1.09 which indicated that respondents were not utilizing such presented ICT facilities. Thus, it is noted that academic counsellors in Nigeria are not utilizing ICT facilities/offerings as they are supposed to.

Summary of Findings

From the result, the following findings were summarized:

i.   Respondents mostly used their phones to browse and connect with their clients, used text messages in communicating with clients, disseminate information of their services using mobile phones and make phone calls to interact with their clients.

ii. Respondents have valid and active e-mails, used social web sites in promoting counselling services, and believed that e-mails cannot contain all they needed to provide for their clients.

iii. Above all, respondents usually don't utilize ICT facilities in carrying out counselling activities.

Discussion

It is clear and glaring that academic counsellors in Nigeria do not yet embrace ICT facilities in promoting their counselling services despite it is identified advantages as seen in literatures across the world. For instance, Dowling (2015) pointed out that there is increasing evidence to suggest that some psychological services provided online are as effective, or almost as effective as, similar services provided face-to-face (Barak et al., 2008; Gainsbury & Blaszczynski, 2011; Griffiths et al., 2010; Kaltenthaler et al., 2004; Newman et al., 2011 as cited in Dowling, 2015). In a comprehensive meta-analysis of 92 studies examining internet based therapeutic interventions, Barak et al. (2008) reported the overall medium treatment effect size to be 0.53, which they argued is comparable with the effect sizes of traditional face-to-face interventions.

Ideally, seeking additional treatment should improve client outcomes (Brent, Kolko, Birmaher, Baugher, & Bridge, 1999 as cited in Dowling, 2015). Previous studies have found that using e-mail as an adjunct to face-to-face psychotherapy has been an effective method of providing therapy (Peterson & Beck, 2003 as cited in Dowling, 2015) and mobile phones are now recognised as a useful tool for extending therapy (Boschen & Casey, 2008 as cited in Dowling, 2015).

On the other hand, it has been observed by Dowling (2015) that while online chat may potentially reduce some of the major barriers to help-seeking for young men, such as the stigma related to seeking help for mental health problems, it may not address others, such as a lack of awareness of resources and lack of social support or encouragement from others (Gulliver et al., 2010; Timlin-Scalera, Ponterotto, Blumberg, & Jackson, 2003 as cited in Dowling, 2015). Despite the proliferation of online mental health services, there is a lack of overall organisation and the services are only weakly integrated with the broader mental health system (King, Bickman, Shochet, McDermott, & Bor, 2010 as cited in Dowling, 2015).

Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that:

i. Academic counsellors in Nigeria should embrace ICT facilities/provisions in improving their services to become easily accessible to many. Counsellors should understand many aspects of the internet can be utilized for such purposes and also that there are dedicated sites and soft wares for such purposes. Likewise, special programmes can be designed to suit special purposes.

ii. The government should also improve, or provide where necessary, policies that will give counsellors the leverage to operate in this regard and also ensure provisions for clients' accessibility and safety.

iii. Awareness should be given to all as to the utilization of such avenues for easier access and confidentiality. This can be done by advertisement on the internet and on online social media outlets.

Conclusion

From the foregone, it is apparent that academic counsellors in Nigeria are not utilizing ICT facilities in promoting their services despite the numerous advantages highlighted. The few who

does that have limited themselves to the use of phones and e-mail services but, the other aspects have been greatly ignored and relegated to the background.

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