Academic Counselling in ODL: Experiences of the Zambian Open University

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Abstract

The Zambian Open University (ZAOU) aims to produce graduates who are equipped with critical innovative thinking, knowledge and skills to become the leaders that bring a prosperous and positive future. With the addition of face-to-face residential schools, ZAOU students have the opportunity to access expert academic staff, quality learning resources and support services, plus meet and collaborate with other students. But how much do these professionals know about academic counselling? What are the students’ views of the academic counselling provided at ZAOU? Unquestionable, the ODL model provides students with personal control allowing them to study anywhere, anytime and at their own pace. But the question is to what extent? Is it embrace? The University has regional offices in all the ten provinces in the country manned by competent officers; one wonders whether they are well grounded in academic counselling. The study adopted a qualitative research design, employing a case study approach. The study targeted a population of all students at Zambian Open University (ZAOU), the directorate of quality assurance and extension studies (DQAES) and academics at ZAOU. 40 undergraduate students and 15 academics were sampled using the simple random sampling method. Focus group discussions (FGDs) and interviews were the main tools used to collect data for the study. Findings were analysed thematically. Findings of the study reveal that academic counselling is not systematically executed at ZAOU, seven academics have no training in academic counselling and said were incapable of helping students in an ODL institution, while eight academics rated themselves averagely. The study recommends that ZAOU strengthens existing academic counselling initiatives.

Keywords: Open and Distance Learning (ODL); Zambian Open University; academic counselling; counsellor.

Introduction

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Zambia, dates back to the 1940s, a period in which many Zambians studied as correspondence students in various institutions offering education through distance learning. These institutions included those in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Zambia (South Africa Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE, 1999).

The Zambian Open University (ZAOU) was launched in 2005 and pioneered ODL. The distance system of education had become a very powerful, sophisticated and rich medium of instruction for supplementing the mainstream face-to-face teaching and learning process. Students opted for programmes the University introduced predominantly because of flexibility (they could study and work at the same time). ZAOU is the largest Private University that has embarked on egalitarianising education and establishment of a just society in Zambia. Since its launch, its student population has grown from 369 in the first intake (2005) to...
In ODL, academic counselling is characterised by a mixture of general counselling and tutoring. Research shows various qualities (such as warmth, acceptance, genuineness, empathy) and skills (such as selecting, listening, structuring, how to make academic counselling effective) expected to be exhibited by an academic counsellor in an ODL institution (Koul, 1989; Das & Ghosh, 2011; Srivastava & Reddy, 2002).

In its real sense, academic counselling is fundamentally learner-centric unlike teaching which is largely course-centric and includes non-academic areas of a learner’s concern, that is, particularly difficulties relating to the learner in the course of his/her studies.

Academic counselling at ZAOU is silent and implicitly rooted in all academic and non-academic members of staff, who to a great extent have minimal exposure to ODL. ZAOU has 10 regions staffed with competent people. However, their expertise in academic counselling is not clear enough. Yet, with ten years expertise in open and distance learning (ODL), ZAOU has created a unique high calibre community of academic and administrative staff, dedicated to assisting students achieve excellence in their professional careers. It is expected that in an institution of learning like ZAOU, this ought to have been clear enough as they can influence student success. Young-Jones, Burt, Dixon and Hawthorne (2013) found that academic advising influences student development of basic requirements for academic success.

Suffice to say, academic counsellors (ACs) play a pivotal role in every institution, ODL inclusive. In an ODL institution, the ACs provide a linkage between the institution and the distant learners, especially that the institution is predominantly ODL. Habley (2004) contends that the quality of interaction between an institution of learning and the learner often through academic advising, is a key contributor to college retention. Thus, it is the institution’s mandate to ensure that academic counselling offered is timely, contemporary, multi-dimensional, development oriented and adheres to acceptable norms in ODL solely tailored at supporting isolated distance learners. Hawthorne and Young (2010) stress the significance of faculty-student connections and showed that satisfaction with instructors and satisfaction with faculty support significantly influenced overall satisfaction, and this contributed to student intentions to complete a bachelor’s degree.

ZAOU has regional offices in all the ten provinces of the country. It also has a Directorate of Quality Assurance and Extension Services (DQAES) that houses a Learner Support Officer.

Statement of the problem

ZAOU has been a predominantly ODL institution yet being serviced by lecturers trained to handle full time, face-to-face learners. Against this background, this study explored the current academic counselling services offered at the Zambian Open University.

Purpose of the study

The research was undertaken to explore the current academic counselling services offered at the Zambian Open University and propose innovative and progressive ways of offering this service.

Objectives

The two objectives of the study were:
1. To determine the type of academic counselling services offered at ZAOU.
2. To establish counselling services offered to students.
Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research design, employing a case study approach. This research adhered to a case study format where an in-depth study of a limited number of cases was conducted. Bassey (1999) describes an educational case study as an empirical enquiry conducted to investigate interesting aspects of an educational activity - in this instance, academic counselling. Its purpose is usually to inform the judgements and decisions of practitioners or policy makers. This educational case study explores significant features of the case (academic counselling), to create plausible explanations of what is obtaining at Zambian Open University, establish the trustworthiness of these interpretations, form a valuable informative argument that can be related to any relevant research in the literature and to relay to an audience (Bassey, 1999).

The study targeted a population of all students at Zambian Open University, the directorate of quality assurance and extension studies (DQAES) and academics at ZAOU. The academics comprised regional managers and regional coordinators manning the University’s provincial centres. Using simple random sampling technique, specifically purposive sampling approach, 40 undergraduate students (year 1-4) and 15 academics (from five faculties: Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, Agriculture, Law and Business Studies) were selected to participate in the study. Focus group discussions (FGDs) and interviews were the main tools used to collect data for the study. The narrative information collected was analysed thematically. The research focused on deriving an accurate description of academic counselling at ZAOU rather than providing explanations for academic counselling at the University.

Findings and discussion

The findings are discussed according to the research objectives categorised into the major themes. Themes from the focus group discussions and triangulated with the narratives from the interviews are presented below.

Learners at ZAOU that were part of the study were grouped under the following demographic characteristics:
1. people living in remote areas;
2. people who are working but wanting to upgrade their knowledge and skills;
3. students with appeal to parallel learning;
4. semi-literates; and
5. those who had previously dropped out and who now seek to further their education after a long break.

Theme One: Counselling

Findings reveal that at ZAOU, the majority of learners (82%) experienced both academic and non-academic difficulties of one sort or another throughout their studies. 91 percent of the students need wide-ranging counselling to a large extent together with tutoring. Despite being ‘mature students’, the majority of students (90%) needed academic counselling services. Findings from focus group discussions mirror this viewpoint.

In the regional centre where I am, I hardly get help when registering courses at the beginning of a semester. Each time I ask, I am told to telephone Lusaka (the headquarters) for specialised help. Being in the remote areas of the Eastern Province, the regional centre should have been of great help [Female, Agriculture Degree Student, Chadiza, Eastern Province].

I always buy talk time for the regional manager to enable him to telephone the headquarters in Lusaka to consult whenever I request for clarification on various matters
pertaining to my school [Male, Special Education Student, Shangombo, Western Province]. I registered for a wrong course this semester after I was wrongly advised by the regional manager [Female, Civic Diploma Student, Namwala, Southern Province; Female, Law Student, Mansa Province; Male, Adult Education Degree Student, Mporokoso, Northern Province; Male, Primary Degree Student, Kalabo, Western Province].

This theme points out the importance of academic counselling to learners. Literature (Hunter and White, 2004) asserts that academic advising does not only help students build meaningful learning experiences but encourage achievement of educational, career and life goals as well.

The findings showed that psychosocial services do not exist in a formalised manner. Consequently, learners approach anyone for help. For example, Ntwala (not real name) stated:

I travelled all the way from North Western Province, Zambezi to be specific, to register for the second semester in that year. It takes one day and half to reach the university’s regional centre in the Province. When I arrived at the centre, I was informed that only two of the four assignments were ready; my previous semester results were not among the results the centre had received from the headquarters; only one module (study material) was available. I was neither given attention nor told why they were missing and when they would be ready [Female, Public Administration Degree Student, North Western Province].

The study further revealed that ZAOU does not have a counselling centre. This creates a gap in learners. Lotkowski Robbins and Noeth (2004.p. 10) assert that without quality advising, students may master course content, but be at risk of dropping out if they “fail to develop adequate academic self-confidence, academic goals, institutional commitment, achievement motivation, and social support & involvement”.

**Theme Two: Academic Support Services**

All academics were of the view that academic counselling is essential at ZAOU but revealed the services can hardly be said to be offered. Seven of the fifteen academics clearly expressed inadequacy to handle students in ODL learning setup, noting the huge differences in student needs and expectations among face-to-face (FtF) or regular students and those that learn through ODL. Meanwhile, the remaining eight academics rated themselves averagely equipped to provide the services (academic counselling). This view agrees with what Kuh (2001 p.25) established that “while faculty-student interactions are related to students’ academic goals and outcomes, student development is influenced by a variety of overlapping institutional efforts outside of course-related connections with faculty.” Academic counselling establishes an environment that is conducive for learners in ODL.

ZAOU does not capitalise on the benefits of quality advice to improve learner achievement. However, ZAOU has structured programmes to promote advising as a way of helping learners stay in school. For example, at the University the Directorate of Quality Assurance and Extension Services (DQAES), houses a learner support officer. Findings further revealed a huge gap between the DQAES and the learners they serve and service. Learners do not receive the required help.

All academics were of the view that academic advising provides a ready opportunity for learners to explore participation in co-curricular activities that align active engagement with personal aspirations. The inability to integrate academic counselling in all University activities clearly brings about the many challenges learners face at ZAOU. Findings
revealed that seven of the ten regional managers and coordinators constantly refer students to academic staff at the main campus for advice. This corroborates with what students said during focus group discussions, evident in the following revelations:

* I am in my third year now, this regional manager always refers me to the head office in Lusaka whenever I have a query [Male, Guidance and Counselling Degree Student, Mongu, Western Province].

* I don’t remember this regional coordinator helping me resolve my academic issues [Female, Secondary Education Degree Student, Mpongwe, Copperbelt Province].

* Modules are not available at this centre and this regional manager does not talk to us properly, he shouts, ignores. He has an attitude, I have come to notice [Male, Business Studies Degree Student, Chibombo, Central Province].

Regarding this scenario, Keegan (2000) contends that there is little value in advocating distance learning and teaching as an important sector in higher education, if students cannot achieve excellence.

The DQAES revealed that learners are more likely to persevere, prosper, and complete their studies in an environment that provides clear and consistent information about the University. Findings from focus group discussions, however, indicate that learners were dissatisfied with service provision at regional centres; while all academics participants observed that regional managers and coordinators operated seemingly like untrained academic counsellors and purported that they were not trained. For example, the academics said:

* If they were well trained as academic advisors, regional managers and coordinators could interpret institutional expectations and convey them to learners in practical terms that would help them complete their studies, thereby meeting learner and institutional goals.

**Theme Three: Learner Support Services**

Findings of the study point to how ZAOU espouses learner support services and how the institution takes it as a key mechanism of the ODL system and as an integral part of academic counselling. Both learners and lecturers at ZAOU contended that there is a notable geographical separation of learner and teacher, yet they progress in their academic pursuits. However, half of the students revealed that socio-psychological factors affect their learning and completion. All the academic participants further contended that ODL learners need an assortment of support services to help them to be successful learners. One academic notes:

* Our students are mature, some very old, others in their mid-life stage and a small number of youths. The wide spectrum of learners clearly entails a variation in how we handle them, help them cope with their school, maintain being students and lifelong learners.

At ZAOU, learner support services are designed to consider challenges of distance learners at pre-entry stage, in the course of studies and at the course completion point. The components are put up into the system to help the learner manage with learning and
to help them continue their initial motivation. These include: self-instructional learning materials; academic support services; assignments; and media and technology.

Findings from focus group discussions indicate that 84% of the learners revealed that they were often advised by heads of departments and faculty members on various assignments and other needs they consulted on. In addition, 67% of learners acknowledged that bulk messages (also known as bulk SMS) were often sent to them by the University notifying them of assignment due dates; examination dates and other announcements. Unanimously, the academics contended that bulk SMS is crucial for mass communication and it is faster than e-mail.

**Theme Four: Communication with learners**

According to all the academics who participated in the study, communication was central to academic counselling. They described it as a vehicle through which lecturers, students and others members of the University operate, interact, transmit and receive information. In line with this, Kishore (2014) posits that a comprehensive Information System is vital to capacity build academic counsellors so as to enable them support distance learners, on one hand, and on the other, for institutions of learning to smoothen the quality assurance process.

The findings from focus group discussions revealed that communication between students and the university is:

- problematic, especially for students in rural and remote areas;
- Erratic mobile network connectivity make some students not receive information from the University through mobile phones;
- Information & Technology modes of communication used at ZAOU:
  - Mobile cell phones [SMS]
  - Internet (email and Social Media [WhatsApp]
  - Written notification

In support of the above revealed modes of communication, Simpson (2004) posits that intervention should take place before the course starts, before the first assignment has to be submitted, giving reasons for failing an assignment, and before examinations start. According to the DQAES, communication is the backbone of an ODL institution and confirmed visible gaps in the institution in this area, albeit manageable. This finding was in line with the observation by all the academics participants during focus group discussions who unanimously note:

Students complain of communication lapses with the University and among themselves. It is a shared blame – due to load shedding, power failure, lack of mobile service provision in rural and remote areas, students face communication blues.

The use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has reshaped the ODL university culture. With ODL, this is the real challenge: to communicate effectively with students at a distance (Lockwood, 1995).

Findings from academics and focus group discussions also revealed that students demand individual attention and interaction. This viewpoint corroborates with the observation by Tatkovic, Ruvic and Tatkovic (2006) that it is necessary to incorporate the best multimedia options and teaching strategies with the necessary guidance on effective use of that technology in order to establish the best possible communication between lecturers and learners, as well as between learners themselves. Students demand for individual attention and interaction is evident through the complaints students registered:

I am not given time to explain whenever I have a problem that needs to be attended to by a lecturer, regional manager [Female, Law Degree Student, Kabwe, Central Province]. Some professors are too hard on us
students and unreachable, unapproachable. So, I fail to approach some of them when I have school-related issues I want them to help me resolve [Male, Secondary Education Degree Student, Maamba, Southern Province].

Interestingly, an extensive review of literature associated with campus-based retention initiatives conducted by Patton, Morelon, Whitehead, and Hossler (2006) holds that student-faculty interaction can improve student persistence. Improving academic counselling service provision in ODL institutions can therefore work towards increasing not only student enrolment but retention.

Conclusions

The study established that ZAOU offers academic counselling to students, but in a limited manner. Findings of the study indicate that academics at ZAOU lack competent skills to offer academic counselling to students, are not open to attend to them and have their own challenge on how to handle students in an ODL learning setup. The findings further reveal that academic advising impacts on student success among other things. In addition, the findings show gaps in ZAOU’s academic counselling services; and the need for improvements and innovations at ZAOU to explore, implement and scaffold its academic counselling system. The study also established that improving academic counselling service provision in an ODL institution does work towards increasing not only student enrolment but retention.

Future research should explore how much professionals in ODL universities know about academic counselling; and the students’ views of the academic counselling provided.

Recommendations

On the basis of the findings, the study recommends the following:

1. ZAOU should strengthen academic counselling by training the learner support officer, regional managers and academics.
2. The Guidance and Counselling Department at ZAOU should spearhead the formulation of an academic counselling system.
3. ZAOU and other ODL institutions should conduct periodic assessment of academic counselling.
4. ZAOU should set up a counselling centre at the main campus on which academic counselling shall thrive.

References


