Guidance and Counselling Internship Experiences of ODL Students in Zambia

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Abstract

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions face challenges offering quality tertiary education. A notable area of interest is guidance and counselling. It is common knowledge that a practising counsellor ought to be grounded in both theory and practice. Providing practical experience to attain quality guidance and counselling tertiary education can be challenging in an ODL institution for students do not learn in a face-to-face manner. The aspect of ‘on-training’ or ‘hands on’ experience for ODLs to guide and counsel a real client in a real situation is elusive. In Zambia, private ODL Universities neither house counselling clinics at their main campus nor at their regional centres. The study purpose was to explore open distance learners’ internship experiences in Guidance and Counselling programmes with a view of improvement. The objective of the study was to establish whether learners undergo practical experiential learning. The study was a case study by research design and was qualitative in approach. A population of 60 fourth-year Guidance and Counselling degree programme learners was targeted with a sample size of 50 respondents sampled using the simple random sampling method. The findings show that learners undergo practical experience beneficial and supportive of their knowledge base and practical application.

Key words: Counselling; experiences; student, Open and Distance Learning (ODL), Internship

Introduction

This paper is anchored on findings of a study that sought to investigate the internship experiences of fourth year guidance and counselling students at Zambian Open University (ZAOU) with a view to derive lessons on improving internship systems through their lived experiences. The paper covers the following: the background of the study, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, objective, research questions, methodology, and results and discussion.

Background of the study

Internship is a term that is used by many institutions of higher learning offering practical subjects. It accords students a chance to practise what they learn, for a specific period of time. It is often undertaken by students in their third year of study following a degree programme in guidance and counselling. The primary goal of internship is to develop the skills of counsellor trainees to undertake individual and group counselling in a professional setting. In guidance and counselling, internship accords students a rare opportunity to practice as counsellors, have a feel of the reality in the field and strive to strike a balance between theory and practice.

The synergy of theory and practice being promoted through internship enriches students experiences and solidifies what they learn, thus enabling them to offer counselling service professionally when they graduate. Oftentimes, students on internship are
monitored by internal (lecturers from the university) and external (practising counsellors at the institutions where they undertake their internship) supervisors. In undertaking internship, students are exposed to natural counselling environment.

The Zambian Open University (ZAOU) predominantly offers various courses and programmes through open, distance and e-learning (ODeL). The Bachelor’s Degree in Guidance and Counselling is one of its degree programmes. It is a requirement that students enrolled in the Guidance and Counselling degree programme undertake internship. Before undertaking internship, students make necessary arrangements with prospective organisations and institutions. Thereafter, the Department takes an inventory of each student internship location and mutual understanding with supervisor at the institution. Internship accords students the opportunity to come face-to-face with real life experiences as they meet clients of different disposition (age, gender, occupation and social status).

In Zambia, the Ministry of General Education does not recognise the Diploma and the Degree in counselling that teachers pursue. Despite having school establishments for guidance teachers (formerly known as careers masters) in both primary and secondary schools, the majority of teachers who take those positions are merely seconded or volunteer (have no formal training in guidance and counselling). In isolated instances, trained personnel assume the position. This disadvantages students who work within these government ministries.

Prior to going for internship, students learn theory and practical subject areas. The department makes every effort to ensure that students have a range of counselling experiences that enhances their personal and career development. For example, during the second and third years, students are required to attach themselves for not less than a month to counselling institutions close to where they work from or stay with a view to observing practising counsellors in session and compile an assignment (practical task).

**Areas of internship and clientele**

The majority of the student counsellors (85%) enrolled under the Guidance and Counselling programme at ZAOU go for internship at their places of work. The remaining minority (15%) of the respondents, who are pre-service learners go for internship to the police service while some are attached to social work places and clinics.

The clientele often includes learners, families in communities, patients in clinics and hospitals, prisoners, accused persons and other afflicted persons. Given this diverse clientele, the Learner Counsellors goal is to develop expertise and uphold not only their institutional portrait but their knowledge, skill and image. This collaborates with researchers’ contention (Bernard and Goodyear, 2004; Eschbach, 2009) that the primary goal of the counselling practicum course is to develop the expertise of counsellor trainees to do individual counselling in a professional setting.

**Internship observer (supervisor)**

There are two categories of supervisors who observe students during internship. These are classified into internal (the students’ lecturer, from the University) and external (within the institution were the student is undertaking the internship) supervisors.

External supervisors play a dual role, as mentors and help student counsellors blend theory and practice. They provide vital information about the intern, the environment, the intern’s execution of duties and overall performance. Besides, they provide insight into the guidance and counselling programme offered by the university that students follow.
Challenges faced during internship

Literature (Bernard and Goodyear, 1992; Fitch and Marshal, 2002) documents many challenges students face when undertaking internship or other related practicum in guidance and counselling. These range from self-defeating thoughts and anxieties; fears and worries about their initial counselling experiences. These are challenges students experience in general, but this study sought to establish whether the same challenges are faced by students in ODL institutions in Zambia.

Challenges faced during internship also hinge on institutional, structural and unprecedented happenings. Field experiences of the authors while observing students during internship reveal that some institutions do not have counselling rooms, qualified counsellors to guide students attached to their institutions and worse still to be mentors.

Statement of the problem

In Zambia, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions face challenges in their endeavour to offer quality and contemporary tertiary education. There are a number of institutions that offer guidance and counselling. These are expected to groom student counsellors in both theory and practice. The nature of the Guidance and Learning programme requires learners to be exposed to ‘hands on’ experience. ODL private institutions offering guidance and counselling programmes neither have physical infrastructure on campus nor in their regional centres to house counseling clinics to facilitate learners’ needed exposure to practical counselling experience. The aspect of ‘on-training’ or ‘hands on’ experience in guiding and counselling real clients in a real practice thus remains elusive. Against this background the study sought to explore how learners undergo and benefit from internship in guidance and counselling.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to explore student’s internship experiences in Open and Distance Learning with a view to improve, through insights, acquired and learnt lessons.

Objective

The main objective of the study was to explore the internship experiences of fourth year Guidance and Counselling students at ZAOU with a view to derive lessons on improving internship systems through their lived experiences.

Research questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:
1. What are the experiences of fourth year students during internship?
2. What were the lived strengths and challenges during internship practices?
3. How can the existing internship systems in counselling be improved?

Methodology

The study used the mixed research with a bias towards the qualitative approach. Since the study required an in-depth study of students’ experiences through collection of detailed information the case study research design was deemed suitable (Creswell, 2003). Being a case study by research design allowed the researchers to explore the phenomenon under study in detail. The study involved describing multiple meanings of individual experiences, socially constructed
with the intention of developing improved internship systems from students’ lived experiences (Creswell, 2003). This was done in two ways: firstly, by asking students to tell (narrate) experiences in the various institutions they were attached to; and secondly, by reviewing their internship reports submitted to the department (document analysis).

Semi-structured interview guides and focused group discussions (FGDs) were used to collect data. In addition, document analysis was undertaken to review students’ internship reports. The study targeted a population of 60 fourth-year students doing internship and 10 supervisors. Simple random sampling was used to sample 50 fourth-year-students.

Thematic analysis was the primary mode of data analysis used in the study. Thematic analysis was preceded by data coding and establishment of patterns. Thereafter, findings were categorised into themes as they emerged. These were a combination of findings from students and supervisors obtained through focused group discussions and questionnaires. The next subsection presents the results.

**Results and discussion**

The results are presented in the order of the research questions. The qualitative findings were organised into themes that emerged from the data which illustrates the commonalities among the participants. These findings were reported verbatim so as to obtain viewpoints of participants.

**Types of clients and institutions students were exposed to**

During internship, student counsellors saved clients ranging from pupils, students, accused people, convicted people, abused (children and adults) people, the afflicted (disease, stress, divorced, widowed/widower, school drop outs, duped, abandoned). What dictated students’ clientele was the organisation a student went to pursue their internship. For many, they went to their work places.

Findings revealed that the majority of students (83%) often undertook their internship at government institutions that included local clinics, hospitals, police offices and schools where they were members of staff. Meanwhile, quarters (17%) of the students were accepted at quasi-government and private organisations such as Young Women Christian Association (YWCA), Forum for the Advancement of Women Education in Zambia (FAWEZA).

All supervisors revealed mixed views about the guidance and counselling degree programme offered through ODL. According to their observations there are more people who are happy with the services offered by students who have trained through ODL and thus do not see any difference with those who pursued the same studies through face-to-face (FTF) than those who are not. The few who are against pursuing guidance and counselling through ODL contend that the contact time with lecturers is too short to be meaningful. They criticised the two-week residential school period and the one internship allocation. Thus, their recommendation was for institutions of higher learning offering guidance and counselling at degree level to have two slots for internship and increase the period of their residential schools to enable students have enough time with lecturers. These reasons advanced made them hold the assumption that counselling students lack hands-on experiences in the area.

**Students’ internship experiences**

After the first cohort of interviews with students, internship was said to be very beneficial to them in many ways. In addition, the majority of the students expressed joy at seeing their lecturers (internal supervisors) travel to their far-flung areas to observe (supervise) them. The mere presence of the internal supervisors, according to the students
gave them confidence and boosted their moral to undergo the practicum. This was primarily because many of the areas where they come from are rural and remote, thus hard to reach.

The key question posed to students was “what are your experiences of internship?” It brought out interesting views. Each participant described their experiences given their internship environment and as guided by the theory part of the course.

All the student participants contended that they enjoyed both observing counselling sessions in reality and the experience they had whenever they were given the opportunity to counsel clients. Unanimously, students revealed that observing provided a new experience that did not require them to attend to the affective facets of the counselling relationship with attentiveness.

Findings from the focus group discussions revealed that students, when observing their friends in session as counsellors, sometimes felt nervous. One respondent, Musala (not real name) stated, “I watched others from a one way mirror window in counselling sessions, doing it this way and that way, and began wondering whether I would be able to do what they did…. I felt inadequate, incapable and, ill-prepared.”

Fifty per cent of the interviewed students shared Musala’s view point. Meanwhile, the other 50% of the students courageously and willingly chose to go first (active counselling), as other peers observed them. Describing their experience, they unanimously said it was ‘the best thing that had ever happened to them’. Their tempo while in counselling room was one full of anxiety but with determination to do the right thing (procedure).

**Student as counsellor (during internship)**

Captivating revelations were made by students, detailing their feelings and views of the role of counsellor they played during internship.

The following statements are illustrative of respondents’ experiences during internship while in the role of being the counsellor.

**Inonge:** training to be a counsellor has always been my dream career, but now that I am doing it, I find striking challenges, hopeful situations and worst situations that pull me down. Even though I have said all this, when I am in a counselling room (as a trainee counsellor) I feel very proud. This internship is helping me strike a balance between the many theories I learnt and what actually happens in the field.

This is a unique feeling and experience every student goes through in learning. Misigo (2014) observes that ‘sometimes students feel confident and in control, while at other times they feel completely lost.’

**Pala:** counselling is an interesting field of study, I am enjoying it. As a police officer, this skill being learnt during internship is beyond compare. How I wish the department could introduce two internship times in the degree programme. That way, theory and practice would blend very well. As the saying goes, ‘practice makes perfect’. The few weeks I have been attached to the victim support unit have proved very helpful to me and built my counselling skills.

The revelation by Pala mirrors the unanimous view of all the supervisors and the majority of student counsellors aired during the focus group discussions. According to the supervisors, a student counsellor reaches this stage when he/she accepts the profession, is knowledgeable about it and has acquired the skill (of counselling).
Mwale: I had wrong views of being a counsellor, especially in school set up. Prior to enrolling, I thought counsellors just sit and drink tea, since they have far less work to do than teachers. But I was wrong. Internship is making me realise that is far from being true. They actually carry other people’s burdens and have trouble helping people resolve them. In a school like where I work, both teachers and learners have unique challenges that a school counsellor has to handle. Besides, a school counsellor follows a distinct counselling programme that is challenging too. I am learning a lot.

This revelation by Mwale underscores the significance of internship and highlights how internship is held in high esteem in an ODL institution.

Rita: During this internship I have realised that I did not know anything about counselling. Learning in the classroom and practising are two different things. By and large, I am very happy to practice. Getting into the counselling room lifts my spirit, even if I make several mistakes, I keep practising.

The expression by Rita is in line with the viewpoints of all supervisors. They underscored the role internship plays in guidance and counselling programme, which agrees with the revelation by Borders (1990) that at the end of a practicum period, students feel less dependent on supervisors, more aware of their motivation in therapy and less anxious or worried about performance in therapy.

Evident from the narratives of the respondents is the rich description of the immense benefit they derive from internship. Albeit to say, these revelations are compounded with feelings of fear and excitement about the counselling skill they were practicing.

According to all the supervisors interviewed, employing ‘self-talk’ helped student counsellors on internship release their deep emotions. Students provided valuable insight into their internship when they swapped roles and acted as clients, mainly during the feedback role play. Amidst such revelations, they displayed protracted emotional states. These hinged on the conflict within themselves of trying to come to terms with the field experience (during internship) and the significance of an open discussion about their expectations, the need to review a counselling session and provide feedback. The protracted emotional states, evident in one of the respondents below, Walusungu, were shared by the majority of the students interviewed:

I am naturally a loner. I often want to keep to myself. To be asked to engage into ‘self-talk’, feels like I am in prison. The feedback time made me feel out of place. The exercise of providing feedback was very important, no doubt…it’s just me, yah. I felt like my weaknesses were being exposed and had just scored a few successes in my internship. I just need to change and adapt to the norm if I am to excel as a counsellor, I guess.

Benefits from internship experiences

Findings from focus group discussion indicate that during internship, students greatly benefited, though in diverse ways. One of the ways was that students’ self confidence increased. They further revealed the immense knowledge and skill students gained from the internship experiences in the varied institutions they were attached.

An interesting finding from the focus
group discussions, student counsellors and supervisors indicates that students at ‘victim support units’ immensely benefited during internship. They benefited from the counsellors’ pre-counselling sessions, exchange of counselling experiences and ideas (in practice). According to the students, this helped them sharpen their counselling skills and build personal issues avoidance strategies.

External supervisors also revealed that students on internship progressed in a normal way, exhibiting acquisition of empathy and self-efficacy and resiliency. Though not developed to greater heights, these qualities were manifesting. This finding collaborated with that of internal supervisors, who noted that internship experiences of students were progressive in nature.

Findings from both external and internal supervisors also revealed the difficulties students faced in dealing with clients from diverse backgrounds whom they were faced with. For instance, students attached to feminist non-governmental organisations (NGOs) had challenges counselling young couples, divorced couples who often were in touch with their former spouses, divorced men and women, widows and widowers who engaged into prostitution to earn a living. In like manner students who were attached at ‘victim support units’, indicated that they were exposed to many problems people bring to that wing of the police, which they appreciated. Merely working as police officers did not make them be privy to the environment and situations they handled. This experience was valuable to student counsellors who are faced with clients who do not willingly volunteer to be counselled but are often referred. Above all, their superiors and clients gladly appreciated their efforts during internship. Merely being recognised as students from Zambian Open University resulted in uplifting their morale and recognition. The majority of the supervisors (both internal and external) noted that the internship experiences greatly benefited students shown by their acquisition of practical experience on how to establish and maintain rapport and manage counselling sessions.

According to supervisors, students flouted counselling ethics and client confidentiality in many ways in the initial stage of internship. Thus, internship helped put them in the right perspective. Notwithstanding this learning point, through internship, students acquired extra skills in counselling as they related theory to practice. The internship provided ‘hands-on-practice’ to students and taught them how to write the internship report. Through the internal and external observers (supervisors), students were guided on the norms of counselling and how to counsel. In addition, internship provided an opportunity for students to gain familiarity with experiential learning and cognitive learning.

Overall, the supervisors and students interviewed indicated that internship guidelines and expectations were met satisfactorily. Students exhibited knowledge and skill in guidance and counselling, which was a clear reflection of how much they were schooled and had gained from the internship.

I am able to identify and classify issues
[Male, aged 37, Solwezi].

It is not easy to choose a therapeutic style given the complexity of situations clients present [Female, aged 40, Lusaka].

There are times I get stuck in the middle of my counselling session, [Male, aged 42, Lusaka].

According to lecturers who observe students on internship, students’ work-in-practice reveals considerable mastery of both theory and practice. They also hinted that their drills while observing intern students focus on how they minimise obvious errors in counselling practice in the face of changing client needs.
Challenges students face during internship

This part presents challenges students faced in the various institutions they undertook internship. These were structural while others were experiential, whirling and circumstantial.

Predominantly, all students who did their internship at ‘victim support units’, feminist NGOs and schools reported having had daunting encounters with their superiors who, in many cases were advanced in age, did not have the qualifications the students were almost getting (were pursuing). According to them (students), this was the greatest challenge they faced. The superiors felt threatened. They thought the juniors would displace them when they finally complete their studies. Recalling the actual words the supervised used, the students put it this way:

Young man, young woman, take it easy, don’t rush your time will come. Those that rash don’t end up well; don’t get to see the good of their education. So, don’t think you can come and bring changes in one day. After all, we got here after many…many years.

This collaborates with the findings by Chaminuka and Kaputa (2014) that students who carried out their practicum at schools had problems with elderly staff members who were not qualified counsellors but were assigned the guidance and counselling posts to lessen their teaching loads. Findings from all the supervisors coincide with those from both focus group discussions and student counsellors indicating that students were very threatened and intimidated.

Findings from focus group discussions revealed that confidentiality was one of the major challenges students face during their internship. Students attached to ‘victim support units’ faced the challenge of maintaining confidentiality. According to them, it was difficult to keep victims’ cases in camera when fellow officers and officers in charge demanded to be briefed. Meanwhile, students attached to schools bemoaned the rampanty of fellow teachers seeking information on children’s health. The majority of focus group participants felt that in the advent of the HIV and AIDS, such revelations can be detrimental to the academic and social welfare of learners. Subsequently, student counsellors were forced to break confidentiality.

Document analysis indicated that structural inadequacies in institutions incapacitated students during internship. Some institutions did not have supervisors trained in guidance and counselling. In addition, focus group participants revealed that unconcealed and undying hostility from administrators was strife and inhibiting.

Despite being on internship, less than a quarter of the students (17%) did not get cleared at their places of work. Some were denied study leave, and others opted to undertake internship alongside their usual work load. Other students (23%) regrettably revealed how they were over-worked on grounds that their internship was not involving, they had less work to do. According to them, this extra burden of workload and responsibility derailed and disturbed their guidance and counselling programme for the internship.

The majority of the students bemoaned the limited time they are supervised when in session (being observed). The majority of the students said that they were often rushed, asked to arrange counselling sessions to suit the observers’ timing. They consensually agreed that the students contended that such trends erode the real meaning of counselling and do not give a correct picture of the students’ knowledge and skill exhibited/acquired. This corroborates with the assertion made by Misigo (2014) that more time and attention should be given to the area of practice during training.
Learnt Lessons from ODL counselling internship experiences

Findings from focus group discussions mirrored how much students learnt from internship and the influence it has on their career. The learnt lessons from all the student counsellors and supervisors provide insight into internship in an ODL educational context.

Internship presented a chance for Open Distance Learners to develop their counselling skills and service delivery. This is evident from the revelations of students (Pala, Inonge, Mwale, Rita) and viewpoints obtained from focus group discussions. The findings indicate that student counsellors were managing to counsel clients, giving credit to the ODL education. These findings do not agree with Rebekah and Bradley (2013) who reported that student-counsellors found themselves struggling to counsel students.

Findings indicate that internship uplifted student counsellors’ morale and recognition. In-service student counselors themselves and supervisors (internal and external) attest to this.

Focus group discussions also revealed that internship helped student counsellors not only sharpen their counselling skills but also build personal issues avoidance mechanisms. This was said by the majority of student counsellors who conducted their internship at police victim support units.

Ways of improving internship

Ways of improving internship are many. Despite being many, much of the research in counselling practicum students’ focus on counsellor supervisors’ perception of practicum (Peace and Sprinthall, 1998; Peterson and Deuschle, 2006; Misigo, 2014) and very little on student counsellors’ perception of their practicum experiences. This study was different as it brought more of student perceptions of internship than supervisors.

The findings revealed the following ways of improving internship as offered at ZAOU made by students:

1. The university should house a counselling centre, which subsequently would help students learn and practice.
2. The guidance and counselling department should consider widening internship experience of students so as to make them function in other environments apart from their work places.
3. The guidance and counselling department should consider broadening the internship subject to embrace other stakeholders that can enrich the knowledge and skill base of the subject.
4. The guidance and counselling programme run by ZAOU should include a course on ‘psychotherapy’ and ‘abnormal psychology’.
5. Internship should be allocated more time; students should go for internship more than once in their four-year programme.
6. The guidance and counselling department should serve interests of the immediate and surrounding communities by conducting community service work and or community guidance clinics.
7. Zambian Open University, through the guidance and counselling department should encourage student counsellors to work as volunteer counsellors in government, private and communities.
8. The guidance and counselling programme should be redesigned to ensure that it has a balance between theory work and practical work.

Conclusion

Findings revealed that students at ZAOU are attached to many institutions which include: schools, private institutions, ‘victim support units’. Even though students immensely profited from internship, they face many challenges which need to be addressed by ODL institutions as well as service institutions (police, health, schools).
Findings conclusively revealed that internship accorded students pursuing their studies through ODL a rarest opportunity to scaffold their knowledge base, blend theory, skill and service delivery while still engaged in their professional work.

Overall, the supervisors and students interviewed indicated that internship guidelines and expectations were met satisfactorily. Students exhibited knowledge and skill in guidance and counselling, which was a clear reflection of how much they were schooled and had gained from the internship. Notwithstanding the diverse trepidations, internship afforded learners in guidance and counselling programmes the occasion to acquire unique hands on knowledge necessary for their role as counsellors.

Recommendations

1. Ministry of General Education should recognise the position of guidance teacher on the establishment in both primary and secondary schools.
2. The government should put district and provincial structures in place to recognise and implement guidance and counselling.
3. The ZAOU guidance and counselling department and other ODL institutions should consider recommendations made by students.

References


