

**Assessing the Effectiveness of the Counselling Services at the Namibian College of Open Learning
(NAMCOL)**

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Abstract

The Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL), a state owned Open and Distance Learning (ODL) introduced counselling services as part of its learner support system in 2017. NAMCOL appointed counsellors in the northern, southern, central and northeastern regions to offer both individual and group counselling sessions. Each counsellor was assigned to one Block tuition centre. The academic tutoring and counselling sessions are offered during the school holidays. This study was conducted to assess the quality and effectiveness of the counselling services NAMCOL provides to its learners.

Focus group interviews was held with 9 learners during the tutorial sessions. Individual interview sessions was held with seven counsellors and three Head of Centres. Activity theory was used as a framework to analyse the collected data from the perspectives of the learners, counsellors and Head of Centres.

While the findings of the study showed that the learners who received counselling found the services helpful, a number of factors which hindered its effectiveness were identified. Firstly, not all the counsellors that were appointed were adequately qualified and trained to be professional counsellors. The counsellors were further not provided with a private office to conduct the counselling and that hindered learners from attending the sessions. Counselling sessions were allocated the same time slots as the classes which resulted in learners choosing to attend the classes instead of the counselling sessions. The limited time set aside for counselling prevented the counsellors from following-up with the learners to determine their progress after their first session. Some learners were not aware of the counselling sessions that were offered indicating that the marketing of the services was not adequate. A level of mistrust between learners and counsellors was identified. Learners indicated that unless they were reassured that what they shared would be kept in confidence, they would not be comfortable attending the sessions. A lack of understanding of the value of counselling and the cultural stigma of seeking counselling was also identified as a barrier to learners seeking counselling.

Since the psycho-social support that counselling provides is as critical as the academic support learners need to be successful, it is the recommendation of this study that NAMCOL provides regular counselling services to its learners and not just during the block tuition sessions. This study further recommends that learners be made aware of the counselling services that NAMCOL provides and the role counselling plays in their academic performance, appoint professional trained and experience counsellors, and allocate designated private spaces for the counselling session and ensure learners that information shared during a counselling session will be treated strictly confidential.

Keywords: *counselling, counsellors, activity theory, open and distance learning*

1. Introduction and Background

The Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) a state owned Open and Distance Learning (ODL) educational institution created by an Act of Parliament (Act 1 of 1997) was established to address the educational needs of adults and out-of-school youth in Namibia. The College offers programmes in three different categories namely: Secondary Education, Vocational and Tertiary Education. Secondary Education, as the core activity of NAMCOL allows learners who cannot attend formal schools to study for their Junior Secondary Certificate (JSC or Grade 10) or the Namibia Senior Secondary Curriculum (NSSC or Grade 12). The programmes at NAMCOL allow these learners to study at their own pace and convenience to complete their JSC and NSSC certificates.

For learners to perform academically in an ODL environment, quality-counselling services are essential (Tapfumaneyi, 2013). Counselling for the purposes of this study follows the definition put forth by Musika and Bukaliya (2015) which states that, "it is an interpersonal communication which has an objective of assisting learners to understand their problems individually and to restore them according to their ability without external advice." (p.86). To this end, NAMCOL introduced counselling services as part of its learner support system in 2017. NAMCOL appointed 6 counsellors in four regions and offers both individual and group counselling sessions. Each counsellor is assigned to one Block tuition centre. The academic tutoring and counselling sessions are offered during the school holidays. The feedback from the counsellors during the May-June 2017 report shows that only a few learners who attended the academic tutorials made use of the counselling services. The feedback further shows that there is a stigma attached to seeking counselling, and there was a lack of adequate facilities for individual counselling to take place.

For NAMCOL to achieve its mandate, it needs to ensure that the counselling service it provides meets the needs of the learners, and promotes their successful academic achievement. The aim of this study is to collect empirical evidence that would allow NAMCOL to assess the quality and effectiveness of the counselling services it provides to its learners. The findings of this study will allow NAMCOL to ensure that it provides a holistic learner support system that excels in not only its cognitive and systemic functions but also its affective function.

2. Problem Statement

Learners at secondary schools are vulnerable to problems that affect their mental health and wellbeing which in turn may affect their performance at school (Rickwood, Deane, Wilson and Ciarrochi, 2005). According to Dzakirira, Idrus and Atan (2005), learners who come from a conventional form of education may find the transitional period of studying through ODL challenging. While ODL provides the flexibility that learners need to study, the physical and psychological separation of the learner from the institution creates problems that hamper the academic performance of the learners (Tapfumaneyi, 2013).

Thus, ODL learners not only need academic support to have an in-depth understanding of the course materials but psycho-social support in the form of counselling to be successful (Musika and Bukaliya, 2015). A study conducted at NAMCOL to assess the quality of learner support system, recommended the need for counselling which supports student to be successful in their studies (Haufiku, 2005).

While NAMCOL has introduced the counselling services, no study to date has been conducted to assess its quality and effectiveness. Such a study needs to be conducted from the perspectives of the learners, counsellors and the administration. This is because the effectiveness of any counselling service depends of the skills and the characteristics of the counsellors (Musika and Bukaliya, 2015), willingness and openness of the learners to use the service (Musika and Bukaliya, 2015) and support from administration (Boit, 2016).

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Activity Theory

This research report uses Activity Theory as a framework to achieve the research objectives. Activity Theory which has its roots "in the former Soviet Union and was first developed by the Russian psychologists L. Vygotsky, S. Rubinstein, A. Leontiev and others" (Kaptelinin, Kuutti & Bannon, 1995, p.189) was chosen as the theoretical framework because "it is a general theoretical framework for the analysis of human and communal action in the world and it provides accounts where both individual and collective activities could be seen to flow into one another by operating with a number of different units and level of analysis" (Kaptelinin, et al., 1995, pp.189-190). The unit of analysis in Activity Theory is defined as "object-oriented, collective and culturally mediated human activity or activity system" (Engeström & Miettinen, 1990, p.9).

By depicting the counselling service as an activity system, it can be studied to understand how the learners, administration, and counsellors interact and work with each other and use the different tools to achieve their objectives. Furthermore, Activity Theory would allow the study to be grounded in the broad context and capture the counselling as socially situated rather than simply evidenced in actions or performance. The choice of this framework was further influenced by the emphasis placed on studying the dialectical relationships between the actors and artifacts compared to other theories (Kaptelinin, et al., 1995).

3.2 Application of Activity Theory to depict the activity systems

The model of the activity system used in this study based on the definition of the unit of analysis is the expanded activity triangle conceived by Engeström (1987).

According to Engeström (1999), the critical components of the activity system are depicted as nodes on the triangle. The author uses arrows to indicate the reciprocal relationship among the components. There are three mutual relationships between the subject, object and the community and according to the author the relationships are found between the :

1. subject and object is mediated by the tools;
2. subject and community is mediated by rules; and
3. community and the object is mediated by the division of labour.

To fully comprehend the quality and effectiveness of the counselling services, the context in which the phenomenon under study i.e. the counselling system, and the dialectical relationships between the various actors i.e. learners, Head of Centres, and counsellors , and how they use the various tools to achieve their goals within the rules and regulations that the counselling system operates are critical.

3.3 Application of Activity Theory using the principle of contradiction to analyse the activity system

In addition, to providing the lens and vocabulary, Activity Theory also provides the tools of analysis. The principle of contradictions (Engeström, 1987) was used to analyse and identify the aspects of the tutorial support system which prevent the actors from achieving the outcomes of the activity system. Contradictions are one of the key principles of Activity Theory. According to Engeström (1987), such contradictions happen when a new element is introduced into the activity system. He sees the role of contradictions in activity systems as agents of change and development (Engeström, 1987). Contradictions are identified “when the results of the activity analysis do not match with desired outcomes” (Mwanza, 2009, p.107). They also occur when problems emerge whilst the subjects are interacting with the tools or other members of the community (Mwanza, 2009). Contradictions further occur as a result of rules and regulations that restrict the subjects from achieving their objective (Mwanza, 2009).

Data collected through interviews for each activity system was analysed by applying the principle of contradiction to identify barriers that the three subjects faced in achieving their objectives. This relationship was examined in terms of the mediators, namely, tools, rules and division of labour. The contradictions further identified areas of improvement in the activity system which are laid out as recommendations for NAMCOL to implement to ensure that their learners receive the psychosocial support needed to be successful.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Importance of counselling in ODL

Student counselling allows an ODL institution to bring in the human element that is essential to effective distance learning (Trivedi and Gupte, 2010; Musika and Bukaliya, 2015). Counselling allows learners deal with academic, financial, and psycho-social problems which affect their academic performance (Tapfumaneyi, 2013; Bolu-Steve and Oredugba, 2017). An ODL system that does not provide adequate counselling or none at all stands to have demotivated learners or worse dropouts (Musika and Bukaliya, 2015). An effective counselling system on the other hand allows ODL institutions to reduce drop-outs, improve student retention and academic performance (Tapfumaneyi, 2013). Counselling is thus an essential part of any ODL’s student support system (Kangai, Rupande, and Rugonye, 2011).

4.2 Barriers to counselling

Though counselling has been shown to help learners improve their academic performance, it is not as service learners readily seek out. A study conducted in UK identified the following factors which hinder learners from seeking formal counselling: fear that counsellors cannot be trusted to maintain confidentiality, avoidance of the stigma attached to learners seeking counselling, and discomfort in sharing personal problems (Chan and Quinn, 2012). The same study cited preference of assistance from family and friends over formal counselling services and being inclined to solve their own problems by themselves. Studies conducted in UK have also alluded to

female learners being more prone to seek professional counselling and have better network of support over male learners (Chan and Quinn, 2012; Rickwood et al., 2005; Glasheena, Shochet, Cambella, 2016).

4.3 Measures that promote effective counselling services

If counselling is a vital part of an ODL support system that ensures the success of learners, then it stands to reason that effective counselling rests on the skills and competence of the counsellor. In a study conducted by Musika and Bukaliya (2015), “approachability, counsellor competence relationship building, empathy, warmth, positive regard, genuineness, acceptance, respectfulness, trusting, and demeanor” (p.93) were identified as essential characteristics of an effective counsellor. These characteristics are also emphasized as essential for any ODL institution that is committed to providing quality counselling (Trivedi and Gupte, 2010). These characteristics along with the appropriate qualifications and experience will ensure that learners receive the needed support (Musika and Bukaliya, 2015).

It is argued that willing learners and capable counselors alone are not adequate for counselling in an ODL setup to be effective. An institution needs to put in place strategies that will ensure that the counsellors are able to perform their duties effectively. According to a study conducted in Kenya, insufficient time allocated in the timetable for counselling, learners’ negative attitudes towards counselling, and lack of support from parents and guardians can seriously hamper the effectiveness of the counselling services provided (Boit, 2016). The author also cites the shortage of qualified staff, heavy workload of counsellors, limited funds for counselling activities, inadequate facilities and lack of support from administration as factors that influence the successful implementation of guidance and counselling services.

Use of modern technology is another means to enhance the quality of counselling. Online counselling may allow learners to become more open to discussing personal sensitive matters and encourage male learners to seek counselling (Glasheen et al., 2016).

5. Research Methodology and Design

Thomas (2009) argues that the choice of approach to study depends on the purpose and the nature of the questions posed. As this study requires an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon from the perspectives of the different actors within its context to provide an accurate narrative, a descriptive case study was deemed as suitable. Case study is defined as “analyses of persons, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions or other systems which are studied holistically by one or more methods” (Thomas, 2011, p.23). Case studies are further supported in the use of studies where human activity can only be understood within the context in which it occurs (Gillham, 2000).

As the case study approach and Activity Theory both support the need to study a phenomenon (counselling) within the context (NAMCOL) and through the lenses of the actors (learners, counsellors and Head of Centres) who are part of the phenomenon, the complex interplay of the three activity system lends itself to a descriptive, embedded single case design (Yin, 2009). Furthermore, the particular unit of analysis in this study caters for the logical creation of sub-units that provides for extensive analysis that would not be possible through a single case (Yin, 2009).

6. Population and sample

This study used purposive sample and collected data using interviews from 19 participants.

- Focus group interviews for nine learners who received counselling was held at the northern region during the tutorial sessions.
- Individual interview sessions was held with seven counsellors. Two were from the Northern region, three from the North-Eastern region and two from the Southern region.
- Individual interview sessions were held with three Head of Centres. Two were from Northern Eastern region and one person was from the North-Eastern region.

7. Presentation of findings

The interview data were carefully analysed according to themes. The findings are presented according to the interview questions that were posed to the learners, counsellors and Head of Centres.

7.1 Awareness of counselling services

Regarding awareness of the services provided, responses varied from being aware to not being aware. The learners appeared to have confused motivational talks given by tutors to be the same as counselling as evidenced by the following comments

Yes, I am aware NAMCOL offer counselling, when I finished grade 12 I never knew there is life after grade 12. then I came to NAMCOL, I was given advice on how to do so I continue with my school and achieve a better future. (L4)

Two learners indicated that they were not aware of any counselling services. One Head of Centre indicated that the learners enrolled for 2018 were are aware because the Centre did not advertise the services due to a lack of interest by the learners who were enrolled in 2017. One counsellor indicated that counselling was not provided as a service for all, but only if a need arose for individual learners.

7.2 Encouragement to seek counselling services

One Head of Centre indicated the need to hire trained and competent counsellors to encourage the use of such services.

Learners indicated that they would seek counselling if they lived with the problem for a long time or had a problem and needed relief as evidenced by the following comments:

If I have kept or been with a problem for so long, it might force me to go to a counsellor and share my problem to gain advice to feel relieved. (L1)

I might think that if I happen to keep a lot of problems without sharing them with somebody I might go mad. (L2)

7.3 Role of counselling in academic achievement

All the learners felt that counselling could motivate them to perform well in their examinations. They felt motivating and encouraging words shared during counselling sessions will help them pass their examinations as evidenced by the following comments:

Am strongly confident that after I got my counselling, I hope and am confident that for the upcoming final examinations I will make it. (L3)

I think NAMCOL counselling is needed because if most learners happen to be encouraged, they will end up being strong enough to go further with their studies. (L5)

7.4 Effectiveness of counselling as experienced by counsellors

Counsellors felt that the environment in which counselling was conducted was not conducive. The Head of Centre felt that not all counsellors who were hired were qualified or professional enough to relate to the learners needs and to build their self-esteem.

One counsellor felt that NAMCOL focused more on motival talks than counselling services. More awareness and one-on-one sessions are needed before the service can be considered to be effective

I wouldnt say it was effective. On a scale i would put it 4/10, we mostly concentrated on motivational talks to give the learners hope again before we start with one-on-one sessions. I would say, with more awareness it was going to be more effective (C1).

Another counsellor complained that the duration was not enough due to only an hour being allocated for the sessions. Furthermore, there were no follow-up sessions due to the contract that ended before 3 months

It was not very effective as the time was too short. We were only allocated one hour as we were paid an hourly rate. As a result we did not really see many learners. People should understand that it takes time for learners to seek help and thereafter to open up and talk about their problems. As professional social workers we are trained to be patient with our clients, and by the time they open up it is time for us to stop the session. We were also supposed to do follow-up after three months, but it was again not possible because the contract came to an end. This resulted in many learners having pending issues but some followed us to the hospital where we work and we took it now at a different level under the Ministry of Health and social Welfare. (C2)

8. Discussion of Findings

8.1 Application of the principle of contradictions to analyse the activity systems

Activity Theory was used as a framework to understand the effectiveness of the counselling services provided to NAMCOL learners from the perspectives of learners, counsellors and Head of Centres.

The findings of this study were informed and analysed by principle of contradictions and used to enhance the understanding of the tensions that exist in the counselling system. Engeström (1987) identified four different types of contradictions:

1. **Primary contradictions** which occur within each node of the activity system, e.g. subject.
2. **Secondary contradictions** which occur between the nodes of the activity system, e.g. subject and rules.
3. **Tertiary contradictions** which occur between the object/motive of central activity and culturally advanced form of central activity.
4. **Quaternary contradictions** which occur between the central activity system and adjacent or juxtaposed activities.

This study focused only on identified primary and secondary contradictions. The findings of the contradictions in the three activity systems are discussed next.

8.1.1 Learner activity system

Primary contradiction in the tools node: Lack of awareness and understanding of the counselling services provided hindered the learners from benefiting from the counselling services provided. The lack of understanding of the counselling process could have also led to a lack of trust in the services provided

8.1.2 Counsellor activity system

Primary contradiction in the tools node: Lack of counselling facilities, inadequate time allocated to the counselling sessions and limited contract period, inhibited the counsellors from providing the support they were hired to provide to the learners.

Secondary contradiction between the community node (learners, parents and guardians) and object (learn and pass examination): Fear of stigma from peers and parents/guardians prevented learners from seeking help through counselling sessions.

Secondary contradiction between the subject node (counselors) and rules (follow up with learners): No records are kept of the learners to protect confidentiality. This created a challenge for counsellors to follow-up on the learners.

8.1.3 Head of Centre activity system

Primary contradiction in the tools node: One of the tools used by the Head of Centres is the advertisement to promote the services. Lack of awareness, and understanding of the purpose of counselling, lack of qualified counsellors, and ineffective counselling model hindered the counsellors from supporting the learners and learners from benefiting from the services.

9. Recommendations and Conclusion

The main objective of this study was to assess the effectiveness of the counselling services provided at NAMCOL. The findings show that while this is a much-needed initiative, the implementation of the counselling model is not effective mainly due to the lack of awareness and understanding of counselling services provided. The use of contract counsellors, limited time which prevent a trust relationship to be built between the counsellors and learners, lack of records which prevent follow-up and lack of venues which provide the comfort and security that

will allow learners to be comfortable and open up contribute to the ineffectiveness of the counselling model currently used at NAMCOL.

This study also showed the effectiveness of the Activity Theory framework as a suitable way to study such activity systems in a holistic manner. The principle of contradictions was a useful tool to analyze the weak areas in the counselling activity system that hindered the various actors from achieving their objective.

Namibia experiences a high failure rate of Grade 10 and 12 candidates every year. NAMCOL is the one of the few options that Namibian youth have to improve their performance and study further. Such learners are at-risk learners and need all the support and motivation they need to believe in themselves again and achieve academic excellence. This study has highlighted that there is a critical need for counselling service for the learners. It is strongly recommended that the Management work with other stakeholders to revise the counselling model of NAMCOL to ensure that all NAMCOL learners receive the psychosocial support that counselling services provide. Further research needs to be conducted to ensure that the revised counselling model proposed by NAMCOL meets the needs of the learners.

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