

E –Counselling For Quality and Sustainable Blended Learning in Higher Institution

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Abstract— The outbreak of COVID – 19 and the consequent lockdown of commercial activities in 2020 put many developing nations like Nigeria amid sporadic ICT knowledge revolution, as new vistas in communication technology that had hitherto been neglected emerged. The closure of schools created challenges that almost eroded the three major purposes of tertiary institutions vis à vis education, advancement of knowledge, and outreach. Many students became idle with sharp rise in social vices and cybercrimes. Concerted effort were made to ameliorate this problem through online lessons but findings revealed that students’ inability to access e – learning platforms and learning materials, poor attendance of students, social isolation and distraction from home inhibited the effectiveness thus the reopening of schools for physical learning. Recently there are advocacy for Blended learning (BL) as Post - Covid strategy to enhance quality and sustainable education as well as to maintain ‘new normal’. This paper, therefore, examines the concept of quality and sustainable education as well as the concept and challenges of blended learning. Challenges relating to the use of technology, social cohesion, mental health and wellbeing of students and lecturers were identified as possible hindrances to effective blended learning. The use of E-Counselling technologies was recommended to counsellors as strategies for deploying counselling services to assist the students and lecturers in achieving quality and sustainable blended learning.

Index Terms— Quality Education, Sustainable Education, Blended Learning, E- Counselling.

I. INTRODUCTION

The importance of quality education and the use of technology as a veritable instrument towards achieving sustainable development in any nation cannot be undermined. The emergence of COVID – 19 pandemic and the consequent introduction of measures to curtail the spread of the coronavirus resulted in the total closure of commercial activities, religious centres and schools; this posed serious challenges towards maintaining quality and sustainable education most especially among the government - owned institutions. The process tagged “the new normal” implies that people now have more time away from work, no regular school routines, and less time spent bonding in person - to – person relationships; a trend which may result in heightened feelings of loneliness and anxiety (Bradley, 2020). Studies revealed that idleness is a strong factor in the prevalence of

social vices and this often end up in breakdown of law and order (Oteje, et.al, 2020) example of which was witnessed during the EndSARS# protest across states in Nigeria. To meet the educational needs of students, the Nigerian government at State and Local levels like other nations introduced sponsored lessons on radio and television for primary and secondary school students, while some heads of tertiary institutions encouraged their lecturers to commence online lectures through technological applications like Google Meet, Google Classroom, Zoom, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, video - conferencing just to mention few as an alternative teaching approach. The new trend of e-Learning confirmed that man is surrounded by diverse forms of media resources without being aware of the potentials these resources hold in learning and instructional delivery (Akpale, 2016). Although online lesson is not a new trend in teaching/learning process in the developed nations, even some private institutions in Nigeria who can afford internet facilities have been practicing online lectures before the pandemic but it was a new learning approach in public schools. However, personal experience of the writer, complaints from both students and lecturers on online lectures deployed to students during the lockdown revealed gross challenges that limited the effectiveness as alternative method of lecture delivery. Many students complained of poor internet connectivity in their areas, erratic electricity supply, limited resources to purchase data, lack of internet services in some remote areas, some students mostly complained of not having android or iphone that can browse the internet, distractions and boredom in learning, lack of commitment among participants etc. Further interviews among students also showed low knowledge of computer usage among some lecturers and students. Thus, the need to have face – to – face lectures to compliment the online lectures upon resumption, despite the noticeable challenges, there is no gainsaying that e-Learning is trending like wildfire and fast becoming alternative method of instruction (Matheos, 2018, Naresh & Bhanu, 2015, Odelewe&Agomuo, 2016). It has come to stay as many tertiary institutions are adopting the blended learning approach (Forbes, 2016) and many institutions of higher learning in Nigeria (Public and Private) are now using it as a form of Post – COVID strategy to ensure quality and sustainable education. The implication is that there will be drastic reduction in the formal day – to – day classroom interactions between lecturers and students. Students can learn and write assignments without the formal classroom setting. If measures are not taken to address the challenges attributed to online lectures, many students may

feel neglected, frustrated and depressed in teaching – learning process; some may see education as not worthwhile and tend towards social vices thus the need for E-Counselling as a support service to assist students and other relevant stakeholders in achieving the desired goals.

II. CONCEPT OF QUALITY AND SUSTAINABLE EDUCATION

Quality education is a kind of education that focuses on the social, emotional, mental, physical and cognitive development of each child irrespective of sex, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background or geographical location (Slade, 2017). To enhance quality in any educational setting, teaching and learning should not be for mere passing examination but that which prepares an individual child for life during and after school. It must be sustainable in nature, content and must encourage growth and development of the individual at present and in future. No wonder the introduction of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000 which aimed at tackling the indignity of poverty by 2015. As part of the effort to achieve the Millennium Development Goals MDGs, the Federal government of Nigeria like any other developing nation had brought the ICT innovation into our educational system in form of school Net, National Open University, National Virtual Library Project, Tech Net etc., and the emergence of Global System for Mobile Communication devices in 2001 transform Nigeria into a global village where people can use technologies to collect, store, process and disseminate information electronically. However, research report revealed that many nations failed to achieve the set goals Nigeria inclusive, thus the introduction of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by United Nations and Head of states of the 193 member nations as a new developmental strategy to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that people enjoy peace and safety by 2030 (Ugwuegbe, Urama and Iloh 2018), (UNDP, 2021). In a nutshell, sustainable development goals are universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and improve the lives and prospects of everyone, everywhere through a 17point agenda with the SDG-4 focusing on Quality Education. The target of which is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nation, 2021). The Sustainable Development Goal 4 also stipulates that all learners must,

Acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among others through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non – violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and culture’s contribution to sustainable development by year 2030.(UN 2015, 19).

Therefore a quality and sustainable education must be anchored on three key points viz: access to quality teachers; provision of quality learning materials and provision of conducive learning environment.

III. CONCEPT AND CHALLENGES OF BLENDED LEARNING

Blended learning is an approach that provides innovative educational solutions through an effective mix of traditional

classroom teaching with mobile learning and online activities for teachers, trainers and students (Chandra Sekhar Rao, 2019). It is a formal education programme in which a student learns at least in part through delivery of content and instruction via digital and online media with some element of student control over time, place, and path or pace (Friesen and Norm, 2012). It involves engaging all types of learners i.e, those who learn better in a structured environment of face – to – face with the instructor and those who learn better with semi – autonomous or computer – based training (Elm Learning, 2020). Blended learning entails that both the teacher and the learners are both present at the virtual classroom irrespective of the geographical separation (Averlez Jr, 2020) and the face-to- face meeting. To be precise blended learning is just a mix of online learning and face – to – face or traditional learning where the teacher and the learners are physically present (Rasheed, Kamsin and Abdullah, 2020). The method gives room for individual students to learn at their pace. Blended learning broadens the learner’s experience and reshapes the role of the instructor; it encourages students learning to result in a higher level of engagement (Macharia and Pelsler, 2012). It is also time – saving, cost – effective and gives room for many students to be met at the same time (Naresh and Bhanu, 2015). Blended learning also allow learners to complement offline lessons by practicing online learning through varieties of ICT applications thus making learning a real fun. Lately in Nigeria, digital and social media are becoming more and more prevalent and the knowledge of digital applications are growing higher in the life of learners, it is obvious that in a matter of time learning will tends towards ‘blended’ by necessity. Studies have also revealed a positive perception of lecturers to the integration of blended learning to educational instructions (Qasem and Viswanathappa, 2016) and the positive contribution of ICT to educational development. If sustainability must be addressed in developing worlds like Nigeria, attention should therefore be given to human development through a quality education for all and sundry irrespective of gender, disability, most especially the youth who forms the energy and the workforce for nation- building. This can only be done by determining the essential needs of the nation and the limitations imposed by our level of education, technology know - how, social organization, security and we must then find means of resolving the challenges towards meeting the present and the future needs of the nation.

Now that schools have reopened and there are advocacy for blended learning as a Post – Covid strategy to stay safe while the pandemic last and to forestall future problems and with the innovation of online teaching and learning in the educational system, it is crystal clear that there will be pressure on Nigerian students and other relevant stakeholders like, parents, teachers and government for effective utilization of blended learning. Some challenges may range between ensuring the availability and accessibility to relevant infrastructures, ability of the participants (lecturers and students) to successfully use the digital devices (Namyssova et.al, 2019, Tshabalala et al., 2014). There would be challenges on how to ensure that learning goes on well when

groups of students or teachers are not into face – to – face contact, how to support staff on how to reorganize or readjust their curriculum, contacting students and parents to ensure regular attendance, taking additional teaching responsibilities and how to assist families that are afraid of sending their children back to school to avoid contact and how to ensure that no one is left behind (ECNAIS, 2020). Therefore, there is the need for education planners and relevant stakeholders to enhance the proper delivery and proffer solutions to the likely challenges that students might face in the course of trial and error of blended learning thus the need for e- counselling as support service to meet with the changing demands of merging e – teaching/ learning with face – to – face interaction and to close the gap between the strata.

IV. THE PLACE OF E-COUNSELLING

Although counselling as a support service in the school system is not meant for counsellors to provide or dictate solutions to clients but a service that seeks to guide students on how to resolve, cope or deal with life challenges that may obstruct the achievement of their educational, vocational and personal –social goals, it helps to guide and lead individual students towards making decisions that affects their current situation in relation to self-management and self –development (Bada, 2013, Oboh, 2020). E-Counselling also known as e- therapy, tele –therapy, online counselling, or cyber-counselling, it involves providing mental health services and support over the internet. Studies revealed that the first online counselling was demonstrated between computers at Stanford and University of California, Los Angeles in International Conference on Computer Communication (Wardell 2008). Since then, the rapidly expanding field of the e-counselling raises concerns among practitioners about the efficiency of the traditional face-to-face counselling in relation to the emerging new method of e-counselling (McHugh 2009, Wang et al. 2010) as many doubt the ability of counsellors at ensuring adequate rapport, confidentiality, and showing emphatic understanding to clients. The dream of Nigeria at entering the global village, her state of e-readiness and the effectiveness of online counselling most especially in tertiary institutions is very limited. A research study showed that some lecturers and students had little knowledge about the use of ICT in counselling with email as the most commonly used digital tool for counselling delivery (Kolog, Sutinen and Vanhalakka -Ruoho, 2014). The limitation in the use of E-Counselling in a developing nation like Nigeria may be linked to factors such as poor power supply, financial constraints, limited internet services, poor computer literacy, compulsory professional demand, lack of counselling awareness (Nwachukwu et.al, 2014). Other challenges include meeting the professional ethics of empathic understanding, confidentiality, genuine warmth, ensuring trust and lack of control of the counsellor during the therapeutic sessions. However, studies have shown that online therapies are effective and satisfying as face – to – face therapy (Attridge, 2011).

V. BENEFITS OF ONLINE COUNSELLING

The place of e – counselling cannot be overemphasized, the usefulness is as highlighted below:

- The anonymity of the client may make communication through internet easier for students who are socially awkward but nonetheless eager to connect to others. Research reports show that issues that students discuss online are more severe and complex concerns of child abuse, suicide, mental health problems, sexual assault, emotional and behavioural management (Nwachukwu, et.al 2014). In Nigeria where most students are timid and afraid of talking freely with an elderly person, the use of e-counselling will be of tremendous help.
- E- Counselling brings about less stigmatization as nobody will know whether a particular student is accessing help, since there is no need of dashing in and out of counsellor’s office.
- Many Students believed that deeply personal issues and sensitive topics are easier to write than to discuss verbally.
- E – Counselling is less intrusive as students who are reluctant to seek help for fear of losing control of their emotion in the presence of the counsellor can do so unnoticed.
- E- Counselling is of greater flexibility as students can access the counsellor at a more convenient time rather than missing lessons in order to keep appointment with the counsellor.
- It saves the counsellor the boredom of talking round the day. It will also save his time as he can reach many students than face – to – face counselling.
- Record keeping is made easy as email exchanges, chats, video-conferencing and interview during counselling session can be documented permanently in the cloud.
- E – Counselling gives room for both the counsellor and the client to improve on the use of computer devices and other ICT applications for utmost benefit.
- It gives room for counsellors to render assistance to client even when they are away from campus and those in remote areas at any time of the day.
- The psyches of clients are free from therapeutic self – reflection. The disinhibiting effect of not being seen gives the client an opportunity to present themselves in a naked way on core issues (Speyer and Zack, 2010).

VI. E –COUNSELLING TECHNOLOGIES

The While lecturers rose to the task that may emanate from the use of blended approach in teaching learning process, the counsellor as helping professional can use some of these digital devices to assist and counsel students to overcome the fears relating to blended learning and also help the lecturers to reduce their challenges or burden.

Video conferencing: This device transmits both visual and

sound it even allows chatting between a client and the counsellor. It is valuable for resolution of educational, vocational and psycho - social problems as information can be conveyed quickly why the counsellor can also observe some of the overt and covert behaviours of the client. It is also good for group counselling, thus allowed counsellor to attend to more clients at a time. Examples include Google Meet, zoom, WhatsApp video, Duo, skype etc.

E- Mail: This is a form of communication through electronic devices like computers, android or iPhones. It allows for client and counsellor to chat through writing. Clients who are afraid of face – to – face communication, those who wish to remain anonymous, and client who are not within the vicinity of the counsellor can seek help through the medium. It is fast, cost- effective, although it may be difficult for counsellors to guarantee strict confidentiality, materials can be encrypted for security assurance (Kolog et.al, 2014). However, it forms a good medium of follow – up and assisting the client in a period crisis.

Counselling games: Games are ways of building a therapeutic relationship towards assessing and determining the strength of clients and finding room for future growth. Playing games has been found useful in addressing clinical issues, rapport building, frustration tolerance, decision making and problem - solving skills. It helps in teaching social skills and to provide positive reinforcement which can propel learners to learn the more. Counsellors can present real – life situations or life – threatening issues to students/clients in form of games or puzzle and the more the students are playing such games the more they directly or indirectly learn conflict – resolution skills, self – regulatory coping strategies. The problem – solving skills can be transferred to learning some other subjects while counsellor can assist other lecturers to create real – life situation of some of their topics.

Other ICT facilities that can be used in disseminating information and providing counselling services include short message service (SMS) voice notes, podcast, WhatsApp, messenger, Multi Media Service (MMS) and the use of animation.

VII. CONCLUSION

The importance of school cannot be undermined not only for educational purpose but for the wellbeing, mental health and security. It is a place of knowledge advancement and outreach for resolving social challenges. The impact of COVID -19 pandemic created challenges that necessitated the use of online lessons and advocacy for blended learning. To fit into the global village and to ensure building a better education system that will sustain the present and the future, it is expedient to resolve the life perennial challenges that relate to mental health, attendance of online classes, cybercrime and other life – threatening issues thus the need for support service like e – counselling.

The following suggestions are made:

Counsellors should integrate the use of e-counselling into school's guidance and counselling services delivery.

Counsellors should improve their knowledge of ICT through in – service training, seminars and workshops.

School authorities should equip counselling centres with

relevant ICT devices that will assist in e – Counselling delivery; and

Finally students should be encouraged to explore and use ICT devices for positive educational development rather than using their computers and phones for fraudulent practices.

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