# The Effectiveness of Counseling on Students` Learning Motivation in Open and Distance Education

[1]**Farirai Musika**, [2]**Professor Richard Bukaliya**

[1]*Department of Psychology, Zimbabwe Open University, Chinhoyi, Zimbabwe*
[2]*Teacher Development, Zimbabwe Open University, Marondera, Zimbabwe*

## ABSTRACT

The present study was aimed at investigating the motivational impact of counselling on learning motivation of ODL student at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). Since the current study was all about ODL students and counsellors` perceptions, the major research design adopted was the descriptive survey in which a questionnaire and an interview schedule were adopted as data collection instruments. The population for study was 460 students at ZOU, Mashonaland East Region and the Student Advisor/Counsellor. The total population was therefore 461. Out of the 460 students only 100 were sampled through the convenience sampling method as there was no guarantee of getting access to the sampled students if other means of determining the sample were used. The study established that counsellor characteristics such as approachability, counsellor competence relationship building, empathy, warmth, positive regard, genuineness, acceptance, respectfulness, trusting, and demeanor paved way for effective counselling. A strong family support, honest, voluntary, openness, resistance, motivation, assumptions about the counsellor and acceptance of responsibility are some of the student variables that are important to an effective counselling outcome. It was recommended that for student counsellor to be effective he/she must be approachable, competent in relationship building, empathetic, warm, have positive regard, genuine, have acceptance, respectful, trusting and have demeanor. Student advisors should educate the students on their obligation to the counselling process through being honest, open, motivation and avoiding assumptions about the counsellor, among others as these are important to an effective counselling outcome on student learning motivation.

**Keywords:** Counselling, Students` Learning, Motivation, Open and Distance Education

## INTRODUCTION

Owing to the nature of Open and Distance learning (ODL) in terms of geographical dispersion of the students and the vast distances apart between the students and the ODL institution, the ODL students have faced a lot of challenges resulting in low learning motivation. Frequently, this has led to negative effects on the student's perceptions of the ODL mode. In extreme circumstances ODL has experienced low retention rates, low attrition rates and low completion rates among other negative phenomenon. Governments the world over have invested a lot in the establishment of the ODL institutions with the realization that the countries need a lot of educated manpower. While the benefits of ODL are there to see in a number of countries including Zimbabwe, India, Turkey and South Africa, Open and Distance learning can be brought to naught if the students are deprived of the much needed effective counselling in an attempt to have them motivated to learn through the ODL mode. However, the study of counselling processes and learning motivation of university students has focused mainly on on-campus students (Chi-hung Ng, 2000) thus sidelining the ODL students.

Although more flexible, the fact remains that ODL demands a great deal of personal sacrifice on the part of learners. It requires students to have effective learner self motivation and good study skills, discipline, and attributes needed to attain learner autonomy (Collis, 1996). If the students do not receive effective counselling to motivate them in learning, they may not learn well, if they progress at all. There are incidents reported in several research studies of students dropping out of the learning system, thereby being labelled failures. ODL students have many roles to play, for example, there is a general belief that ODL is for family and the employed folk (Keegan, 1996). These roles bring with them a lot of challenges that will negatively affect students' studies. Faced with inadequate or no

counselling students may fail to cope with studies resulting in low motivation to learn. They may therefore opt to dropout or suspend studies. However, dropping out or suspension of studies has a negative social connotations as the students are regarded in low esteem by peers. They may be regarded as failures by the society in which they live. On the other hand, faced with a scenario in which students are failing to complete studies, the ODL institution loses credibility as it is blamed for its failure to deliver. Distance education is therefore regarded inferior to the conventional systems where completion rates are higher (Perraton, 1998). Socially, such students have become targets of ridicule in the institutions where they work or stay, for example, in schools, colleges, banks among others (Chakwera, 2008). When counselling is not provided or is inadequate, student learning is curtailed resulting in low motivation to learn. This results in economic waste as students either fail to perform or in worse off situations decide to terminate their learning after having invested huge amounts of money and time towards their personal development.

It is against this background that ZOU felt it necessary to establish a Students Management Centre for the purposes of student counselling/advice. However, the existence of this subsystem in the university may not mean that counselling processes are carried out as expected hence the need to establish the perceptions of students and the Student Advisor/Counsellor on the effectiveness of these counselling systems on learning motivation in Open and Distance Learning.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

With the development of specialized forms of teaching and learning, where a substantial amount of the teaching comes from a distance, the provision of guidance and counselling to the learners in order to cope most capably with educational decisions becomes a more complex, deliberate and organized activity. After having shed light in the background to the problem, the question that needs to be addressed, therefore, is: How effective is counselling on learning motivation as perceived by ODL students and the Student Counsellor/Advisors?

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following sub-problems stood as research questions and these assisted in answering the main research question:

1. What counsellor characteristics pave way for effective counselling on students' learning motivation?

2. Which students' characteristics give rise to effective counselling on students' learning motivation in ODL?

3. How appropriate are counsellor skills and techniques for specific student problems?

4. How do ODL students perceive the effectiveness of the counselling provided by the ZOU?

5. What can be done to improve the counselling processes at the ZOU?

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

### Defining Counseling

Counselling is a process that is designed to help an individual solve some of his/her problems or assist the individual in planning the future (Zindi &Makotore, 2000). Basically, it follows that counselling an interpersonal communication which has an objective of assisting students to understand their problems individually and to restore them according to their ability without external advice. Murgatroyd (1992) equates counselling to helping, suggesting that prospective counsellors can be drawn from professional, semi-professional and layman populations; hence counselling is a specialized and professional activity. However, some experts disagree that helping and counselling are the same process. For example Cormier and Hackney (1993) argue that professional counselling involves an interpersonal relationship between someone actively seeking help and someone willing to give help to be given and received. They further add that the process of counselling is directed towards people who experience difficulties as they live through the normal stages of life-span development. Nelson-Jones (1997) suggests that the term counselling includes work with individuals and with relationships which may be developmental, crisis support, psychotherapeutic, guiding or problem solving with the aim of giving the 'client' an opportunity to explore, discover and clarify

ways of living more satisfyingly and resourcefully. Counselling is also viewed as a special kind of helping relationship, as a repertoire of interventions, as a psychological process, or in terms of either its goals, or the people who counsel, or its relationship to psychotherapy (Murgatroyd, 1992; Cormier and Hackney, 1993; Nelson-Jones, 1997).

Counselling is therefore a means of communication between the counsellor and counselee(s) in which the counsellor assists the counselee to understand both the negative and positive life challenges. This, therefore, calls for counsellors in ODL to acquire highly effective skills to be able to assist students understand the learning challenges as a result of the effects of distance on the ODL student which will subsequently lead to low learning motivation (UNESCO, 2004).

## Characteristics of Effective Counseling

Fontana (2001) argues that counsellors should take an active interest in all students in order to develop an atmosphere of approachability so that they can resolve the current crises effectively through counselling. However, Ginott (2001) states that effective counselling is often hindered by the unavailability of time especially when the counsellor has too many students to cope with as he/she needs to know their individual problems. Counselling is, therefore, effective if the numbers of students in the university is manageable since the counsellor will be able to attend to and assist individual students with maximum attention.

However, with a student enrolment of more than 460, one wonders whether the solitary student counsellor/advisor at the Mashonaland East region is capable of coping and providing the students with effective counselling. For counselling to be effective, all resolutions brought about in students should be the result of action taken by the counselees themselves (Aoughughi, 1999). Zindi and Makotore (2000) concur by remarking that students should be counseled and guided positively in a way that will promote self efficacy, self esteem, and self determination and inculcate a feeling of independence through their freedom to resolve any challenging situations they may meet thus proving the effectiveness in ODL. In other words students in ODL should make decisions based on that assistance offered by the counsellor and must own the decision.

Other characteristics of effective counselling include building a trusting relationship between the students and the counsellor to encourage openness on the part of the students and willingness to share and discuss the presenting problems. The counsellors should consider the age, social background, culture, health status and hobbies of the counselees bearing in mind a diversity of student characteristics in ODL institutions (Clewyd, 1996). According to Egan (2002), group counselling is an effective mode given the vast numbers of students in ODL, who are also geographically dispersed. For example, group counselling can be done during tutorial sessions and examination periods when all ODL students converge at the regional centres.

## Effective Student Counseling and the Maintenance of Learning Motivation of ODL Students

When one thinks of adult learners and how to approach them as advisors and instructors, several aspects of their adult status usually come to mind. Among these are the facts that adults play multiple roles in their lives, that they often have anxiety about returning to school, and that many times they are experiencing some sort of life transition at the time they decide to return to school. One characteristic of current and prospective adult students that is often overlooked, particularly by the administration, is the fact that they are consumers and are generally looking for the most out of their time and money (Muench, 1987).

Muench (1987: 24) in a paper, ''A comparative study of the psychosocial needs of adult men and women students in an adult degree program'', says:

> Non-traditional students need many different kinds of support and assistance from family, friends, and institutions of higher learning. Research evidence suggests that "both sexes have difficulties juggling the roles of student, worker, and family member. Adult students need help in building their self-confidence as students, in acquiring or refreshing study skills, and in managing their time and other resources while in school. In addition, adult students benefit from opportunities to interact with their peers and need to be actively involved in the educational process through sharing their relevant work and life experiences.

How does counselling achieve this? A number of researches (Muench, 1987; Chi-hung, 2000; Mancillas, 2011; Clewyd, 1996; Gordon, 1995) have indicated the adoption of the following measures among others.

- through counselling by the university using different media or face to face

- university ensures the university effectively communicates with students using different media and technology

- the counsellor, in conjunction with academics, do follow-ups of and encourage students who leg behind

- counsellor ensures students get of all necessary learning materials on registration

- with the help of all departments of the university counsellor follow –up students drop their studies using different means and media and technology

- counsellor work with academics to check on students who do not turn-up for lessons and give necessary support were need be

## COUNSELLING AT ZOU

Open and Distance learning is an undertaking which provides many challenges and many demands. Traditionally, university students have been thrown in a deep end and let to sink or swim. However, the ZOU has realized that not all students enrolled are good swimmers. Thus leaving students to swim or sink is an unfair practice. Hence ZOU established the Student Support Services Unit which aims at offering high quality services and support to all ZOU students. Their mission is to provide quality and efficient services and support to Zimbabwe Open University students and stakeholders that attract more clients and generate high client retention levels which culminate in a viable and sustainable world class University in line with the strategic plan of the organisation.

At ZOU the Student Services and Support unit offers academic and psychosocial support services to students throughout their study at the University. The services and support include advisement and counselling to ensure that students are guided correctly in their career path, engage progressively in their academic work and are not handicapped by psychosocial challenges. It also assists students with special learning needs to access the curriculum.

The functions of the Student Services and Support Unit include among others:

- To provide face to face and telephone counselling and advisory services to individual students or groups of students on academic and psychosocial issues that affect them in learning.

- To offer career advisement on choice of programmes, course selection and exemption on courses.

- To train and advise students on study skills and examination preparation techniques.

- To support students with special learning needs.

- To orient students to the University mode of operation, programmes and processes.

- To prepare students for the world of work.

- To initiate and conduct research on student services, learner support and the general effectiveness and appropriateness of programmes offered by the Zimbabwe Open University

- To collaborate with government and other stakeholders in the provision of HIV/AIDS education to students and advise on possible support services.

The staff compliment at the student support service unit is composed of;

- The Director, Student Services and Support who is the head of the Unit.

- Student Advisors who run the Unit at Regional Office level. They provide services and support to students at each of the ten Regional Offices. They are at the coalface of student support and services.

- The Student Services and Support Unit Secretary is at the front desk of the Unit at the National Centre. She/he manages the Office.

Student referrals can be initiated at any level by any member of staff within the ZOU or outside the University upon identification of student need for such services.

The student Advisor normally sees students by appointment but can attend to drop ins depending on the nature of enquiry. Bookings can be made at the Student Services and Support Unit at each of the Zimbabwe Open University Regional Offices.

It is this unit of ZOU that is the main focus of this study, however, focusing on the regional unit at Mashonaland East Region. The effectiveness of the counselling process at the regional level will be measured against the perceptions of the students and Student Advisor/Counsellor taking note of the aims, objectives and the functions of the Student Support Services Unit of the ZOU.

## PREVIOUS STUDIES ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF COUNSELLING STUDENTS

The effectiveness of counselling has been examined in several studies and has been shown to be generally effective. Examining the progress and outcome of clients undergoing therapy, it is apparent that while the majority of clients improve, a minority remains unchanged, and still others actually deteriorate (Lambert & Cattani-Thompson, 1996). Rowland et al (2000) have shown that counselled ODL students are significantly more likely to be motivated and continue with learning than non-counselled students. Hereunder, the related literature on the factors affecting the effectiveness of counselling on students` learning motivation is discussed.

### Counselor Competence

Based on extensive reviews of counselling outcome research, Lambert (1992) concluded that the counsellor's techniques account for only a small proportion if the total counselling process is to be effective. Another small proportion is attributable to expectancy and placebo effects, which relate to clients' belief that their counselling will result in desired changes. The therapeutic relationship, interpersonal variables of the counsellor, and core conditions of empathy, warmth, and positive regard, account for a greater proportion of a positive and effective counselling outcome. The greatest proportion is due to client variables, such as motivation of the client (the ODL student). That being the case, therefore, for beginning counsellors who are typically preoccupied with competence concerns, it is beneficial for them to know that there are many therapeutic factors outside their control in determining effective counselling, and that outcome is not solely determined by their every action.

However, according to Hemmings, who examined the study of Kingston & Richmond (1997), over half the number of students gave counselling the maximum rating for helpfulness and it was noted that the high ratings were not dependent on the counsellor (Bunker & Locke, 1998). This implies therefore, that counsellor competence may not matter much in the success of the counselling process. To the contrary, www.aahtc.org.au argues in favour of counsellor competence as having a lot more contribution to the success of the counselling session since counsellors must have achieved a high level of competence before commencing counselling and must maintain continuing professional development.

### Counselor Skills and Techniques

Findings by Adriean (2011) show that counsellor skills and competence which included specific techniques, counsellor training and knowledge, and any variables pertaining to the counsellor's management of the counseling process were seen to play a significant role in making counselling more effective. Other researches show that when counsellors are confronted with students whom to assist, they need to be skilled in certain specific treatment approaches for various clients. Efficacy studies on counselling suggest that there is some evidence of variability in success rates in the use of the approaches. Panic disorder treatment has been shown to be most successful when cognitive-behavioural interventions are used (Barlow, Craske, Cerny, & Klosko, 1989; Michelson et at., 1990). Behaviour therapies have demonstrated powerful and superior effects for specific problems in comparative studies (Emmelkamp, 1994). Behavioural techniques utilizing systematic exposure have been shown to be very effective and superior to other interventions when treating phobic disorders such as agoraphobia, simple phobias, and compulsions; however, in the case of social phobias, generalized anxiety disorders, or some combination of these exposure treatments are still effective but not as effective or uniquely effective (Emmelkamp, 1994). Manualised treatments have been developed for numerous conditions such as phobias, anxiety, personality disorders, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, panic, borderline personality disorder, and substance abuse (Egan, 2002).

However, there is still a great deal of research that needs to be conducted to determine the optimal approaches and interventions to be utilised within the larger framework of successful counselling and psychotherapy.

The present study therefore aimed at finding out whether the counsellors had the right skills and techniques for specific student problems.

## Personal Qualities and Attributes of the Counselor

The quality or effectiveness of the relationship is determined by the personal qualities of the counsellor, which have been shown to be more important to clients than particular techniques or interventions (Lambert & Cattani-Thompson, 1996; Sperry, Carlson, & Kjos, 2003). Empathy, warmth, and positive regard are also interrelated with the therapeutic relationship and the counselor's attributes. The client's experience of feeling empathically understood has been shown to be a primary component of effective counseling and the best predictor of a successful outcome (Lambert & Barley, 2001; Lafferty, Beutler, & Crago, 1989). Counsellors are also expected to be consistently empathic, genuine, accepting and respectful generally. They should be able to develop a more open and trusting relationship with students and facilitate the opportunity for students to develop more open and trusting relationship with each other, which usually results in a climate of collaboration and mutual exchange in the learning process (Poonwassie, 2001).

## Client Variables

In a study carried out by Adriean (2011) on factors indicative of effective and ineffective counseling on students` learning motivation, client variables such as "strong family support," "specific goals in treatment," "client's consistency to treatment," and client attributes of being "willing," "open," "voluntary," and "honest", contributed significantly to effective counselling whereas client variables such as "resistance," "impractical goals," and "incorrect assumptions about treatment or the counsellor" contributed to ineffective counselling. In researches carried out elsewhere, the effectiveness of counselling sessions was most often determined by client variables such as motivation, defenses, acceptance of responsibility for change, and complexity of anxiety symptoms other than by counselling or individual counsellor variables (Safran, Segal, Vallis, Shaw, & Samstag, 1993). Other researchers have concurred that a large portion of a positive counselling outcome is determined by the client (Lambert & Barley, 2001; Lambert & Cattani-Thompson, 1996). The client's level of pathology, motivation for change, expectations for treatment, coping skills, personal history, and other external resources all influence how effective the counselling experience will be (Lambert, 1992; Lambert & Cattani-Thompson, 1996). ODL students needing counselling clearly benefit by actively participating in the counseling process. The more collaborative, motivated, and engaged clients are, the more they tend to be involved, which results in effective counseling (Sperry et al., 2003). Thus if students are unaware of their importance in determining the counselling outcome and where counsellors do not understand the role that clients have in determining their own outcome, then the counselling experience is bound to become ineffective.

## Receiving Personal Counseling

In a study by Adriean (2011) the majority of respondents believed that experiencing one's own personal counselling was relevant to being an effective counsellor. Among the 86% of students who believed seeking personal counseling was important to being an effective counselor, 52% felt that it was necessary to experience the client's role in order to have greater empathy for the client, 28% believed counseling would help resolve personal issues that may affect one's objectivity and ability to effectively practice, and 20% felt that the observation of counseling strategies and practices by an experienced counsellor would increase the effectiveness of counseling provided to future clients. A minority of the participants (10%) did not believe that experiencing one's own personal counselling was relevant to being an effective counsellor, with many simply commenting that they believed personal experience in counseling has nothing to do with effectiveness.

There are several reasons why receiving personal counselling might increase a counsellor's effectiveness. For example, personal counselling could increase one's emotional stability and ability to practice, and facilitate empathy for clients by experiencing their role (Macran, Stiles, & Smith, 1999). According to studies where counsellors and therapists have been questioned about their personal counseling experiences, it is consistently reported that receiving personal counselling is beneficial and has an impact on one's effectiveness as a counselor (Beck & Yager, 1988; Macran et al., 1999). Due to the beneficial impact personal counseling has been shown to have on counselor efficacy, it would be wise for counsellors to go for such sessions regularly in order to enhance their efficacy in the counselling process.

## Counselor Communication Skills

Communication is a medium, a carrier of information from the source to the receiver and/or vice-visa (COL, 2003). Communication could be viewed from its three components—the source, the channel and the receiver. In this case, the source/receiver of communication could be the counsellor or the ODL student. For counsellors to interact effectively with the learners at a distance, they must be aware of barriers to effective communication in counselling, media of counselling and challenges (Okopi, 2003).

The basic skills of a counsellor which comprise selecting, listening, structuring and epilogue are intrinsically derived from good communication skills. Listening skills are important in counselling whether you are listening to a learner's voice or reading a learner's message in written communication. As a counsellor, one must interpret both the explicit and implicit messages. The counsellor must confirm that he/she has understood the learner's message correctly by interpreting clarify and restating it. The counsellor needs to be a good listener (COL, 2003). Essentially any contact with the counsellor will build confidence and motivation and it will regularly acted as a sort of routine check whereby they could reassure themselves heading towards the right direction (Rickwood & Godwin, 1997). This helping relationship could only be effective if established through effective and efficient communication.

## Counselor Interpersonal Attributes

An effective counselor not only conveys accurate empathy, but also recognizes whether the empathic responses will indeed be experienced as accurate by the client. Research has demonstrated that empathy increases when counselors modify their empathic response style to fit the client's definition of helpful, empathic responses (Lambert & Barley, 2001); the ability to do so corresponds to counselor sensitivity to individual and cultural differences, which is also a determinant of a quality therapeutic relationship and effective counseling (Sperry et al., 2003). A large portion of a positive counseling outcome is determined by the client (Lambert, 1992: Lambert & Barley, 2001; Lambert & Cattani-Thompson, 1996). An equal number of respondents in a study by Adriean (2011) felt that counsellor interpersonal attributes, which included the counselor's demeanor, personal characteristics, approach to counselling, and presence or lack of the core therapeutic conditions brought about effectiveness as well as ineffectiveness in the counselling process.

## Knowledge of the Determinants of Effective and Successful Counseling

Knowledge of the determinants of successful counselling is essential in order for counsellors to improve therapeutic efficacy, for counselor educators to incorporate current research into instruction, and for counseling students to begin their training with the proper understanding of counseling procedures. Based on extensive reviews of counselling outcome research, Lambert (1992) concluded that the counselor's techniques account for only 15% of the total therapeutic outcome. Another 15% is attributable to expectancy and placebo effects, which relate to clients' belief that their counseling will result in desired changes. The therapeutic relationship, interpersonal variables of the counsellor, and core conditions of empathy, warmth, and positive regard, accounted for 30% of a positive counselling outcome. The greatest proportion, 40%, is estimated to be due to client variables, such as motivation and level of pathology. Numerous studies have demonstrated the significance of the therapeutic relationship in determining effective counseling (e.g., Martin, Garske, & Davis, 2000). Armed with such knowledge, the ODL counsellor may be effective in counselling students so that they become motivated to learn.

## The Quality of the Counseling Relationship

Sperry, Carlson & Kjos (2003) remark that the quality and effectiveness of the relationship between the counsellor and counselee is partially determined by the personal qualities of the counsellor, which have been shown to be more important to clients than particular techniques or interventions used in the counselling process (Lambert & Cattani-Thompson, 1996). Where there is empathy, warmth, and positive regard in the relationship, the process of counselling is bound to be effective. The client's experience of feeling empathically understood has been shown to be a primary component of effective counseling and the best predictor of a successful outcome (Lambert & Barley, 2001; Lafferty, Beutler, & Crago, 1989).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Since the current study is all about ODL students and counsellors` perceptions, the major research design adopted was the descriptive survey strategy which entailed obtaining data at a single point in time and using just one questionnaire or other data collection instruments (Fogelman in Coleman and Briggs;2004). The current study employed a multi-technique approach to data collection in order to obtain a holistic or total view of the subjects under investigation on issues of quality education. A combination of the questionnaires and interviews, as data collection instruments, was therefore, preferred in order to collect qualitative data. This also enabled the facilitation of gathering valid and reliable data from the respondents over and above enabling triangulation to cross validate the validity and reliability of the solicited data.

## POPULATION AND SAMPLE

The population for this current study was all the 460 students currently registered with the Zimbabwe Open University in Mashonaland East Region plus the Student Advisor/Counsellor. The total population, therefore, was 461. Out of the 460 students only 100 were sampled through the convenience sampling method, which is a form of technique in which samples are chosen on the basis of proximity of the interviewer/researcher (Cohen and Manion, 2000). The sampling method was seen to be the most appropriate one because being an ODL institution, there was no guarantee of getting access to the sampled students if other means of predetermining the sample were used. In order to ensure that a diversity of and a balanced representation of views was obtained, the researcher included students from all the four faculties of the university. The lone Student Advisor/Counsellor automatically made it into the sample as a respondent through purposive sampling.

## PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

### Counselor Characteristics Pave Way for Effective Counseling on Students' Learning Motivation

From the results obtained, it would appear that the student advisor/counsellor is the appropriate person for the job. He holds a Master`s degree in Educational Psychology and joined ZOU in 2008. The advisor was 42 years old and had 3 years of counselling experience. Besides the advisor/counsellor was actively involved in student activities which included the setting up of the university Student Representative Council.

Asked what researches the SSS Unit has been carrying out on counselling and student motivation, the region had not done any on the issue but plans were afoot to make investigations on the problems bedeviling the students. The unit, however, has been applying theories and research in the solving of student learning problems. This has resulted in counselling that has its basis on informed theories and research. Within counselling effectiveness research, considerable importance has been placed on the factors that contribute to successful counselling outcomes (Herman, 1993).

Research on knowledge of the determinants of successful counselling is essential in order for counsellors to improve therapeutic efficacy, for counsellor educators to incorporate current research into instruction. However, studies have indicated that as a whole, counselling professionals underutilize research in the process of counselling, which can lead to erroneous conceptions of what makes counselling effective (Herman, 1993).

The present study also established that the counsellor had not received personal counselling. However, he thought that if he had received such counselling, this would have had some impact on his experience and competence as a counsellor. According to studies where counsellors and therapists have been questioned about their personal counseling experiences, it is consistently reported that receiving personal counselling is beneficial and has an impact on one's effectiveness as a counselor (Beck & Yager, 1988; Macran et al., 1999).

**Table1.** *Students` perceptions of the counsellor`s characteristics on given attributes (N=100)*

| Attribute | Good | | Very Good | | Poor | | Very Poor | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Number | % | Number | % | Number | % | Number | % |
| Approachability | 42 | 42 | 55 | 55 | 3 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| Competence | 17 | 17 | 73 | 73 | 6 | 6 | 1 | 1 |

| Relationship building | 66 | 66 | 30 | 30 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Empathy | 68 | 68 | 24 | 24 | 5 | 5 | 3 | 3 |
| Warmth | 64 | 64 | 36 | 36 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Positive regard | 33 | 33 | 43 | 43 | 18 | 18 | 6 | 6 |
| Genuineness | 47 | 47 | 48 | 48 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 1 |
| Acceptance | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Respectfulness | 65 | 65 | 30 | 30 | 5 | 5 | 0 | 0 |
| Trusting | 10 | 10 | 89 | 89 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Demeanor | 84 | 84 | 7 | 7 | 6 | 6 | 3 | 3 |

Table 1 shows that the counsellor was rated very good in all the given characteristics attributes. No respondents rated the counsellor on acceptance. 55 (55%) rated the counsellor very good on approachability. 43 (43%) also rated the counsellor very good on positive regard. However, 18 students rated the counsellor poor on positive regard and 5 respectfulness and 6 students on competence and demeanor.

From the data gathered and analysed the following were given as the counsellor characteristics which paved way for effective counselling: approachability, counsellor competence relationship building, empathy, warmth, positive regard, genuineness, acceptance, respectfulness, trusting, and demeanor. Previous researchers also cited these as the counsellor characteristics necessary for effective counselling.

Among themselves Fontana (2001), Aoughughi, (1999) and Bunker & Locke (1998) established that an atmosphere of approachability coupled with a trusting relationship between the students and the counsellor, openness on the part of the students and willingness to share and discuss the present problems could help resolve the current crises effectively through counselling. Lambert & Barley, 2001; Lafferty, Beutler, & Crago, (1989) concur by in their findings that counsellors are also expected to be consistently empathic, genuine, accepting and respectful generally.

However, the results of the current study seem to disagree with findings by other researchers on counsellor competence. Bunker & Locke`s (1998) findings for example argue that counsellor competence may not matter much in the success of the counselling process. However, www.aahtc.org.au argues in favour of counsellor competence as having a lot more contribution to the success of the counselling session since counsellors must have achieved a high level of competence before commencing counselling and must maintain continuing professional development.

**Table2.** *Students` perceptions of the counsellor in identified counselling skills (N=100)*

| Skill | Good | | Very good | | Poor | | Very poor | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Number** | **%** | **Number** | **%** | **Number** | **%** | **Number** | **%** |
| 1.Communication | 63 | 63 | 26 | 26 | 10 | | | 1 | 1 |
| 2.Listening | 78 | 78 | 20 | 20 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| 3.Attention | 60 | 60 | 34 | 34 | 6 | 6 | | |
| 4.Technique selection | 62 | 62 | 33 | 33 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 2 |
| 5.Treatment selection | 63 | 63 | 33 | 33 | 1 | 1 | | |

Table 2 shows that the counsellors counselling skills were rated as good by most students. However 10(10%) students rated the counsellor poor in communication skills and 5(5%) rated the counsellor poor in the skills of counselling technique selection. Treatment selection was rated as good by 63 (63%) respondents and very good by 33(33%). Only 1 (1%) rated the counsellor poor on Treatment selection.

## Students' Characteristics Give Rise to Effective Counseling on Students' Learning Motivation in ODL

The demographic data of the respondents shows that 37(37%) respondents were female whilst the majority 63 (63%) were male respondents. This shows the dominance of male respondents over their female counterparts in the current study. In terms of age, the 36-45 age range was the most represented with 68(68%) followed by the 19(19%) and the 46-60 which had 14(14%). The least represented was the above 60 range which had 1(1%). The majority were mature adults enrolled in ODL. Data obtained also shows that the majority of the respondents, 87(87%) were married, 3(3%)

each single and separated and 7(7%) were widowed. There is a likelihood of facing problems among the students owing to their being family people or marital status. The majority, 78(78%) of the respondents were employed while 4(4%) were not. Eighteen (18%) were self employed. These characteristics are typical of ODL students who are usually the elderly folk and mature adults and predominantly employed.()

Results show that a strong family support, honest, voluntary, openness, resistance, motivation, assumptions about the counsellor and acceptance of responsibility were some of the student variables that are important to an effective counselling outcome. Research has shown that the greatest proportion of effective counselling is due to client variables, such as motivation of the client (Lambert, 1992). Zindi and Makotore (2000) concur by remarking that for students to be counselled and guided positively in a way that will promote self efficacy, self esteem, and self determination and inculcate a feeling of independence through their freedom to resolve any challenging situations they may meet, they should be honest, go for counselling voluntarily and accept responsibility for the counselling outcomes. For counselling to be effective, all resolutions brought about in students should be the result of action taken by the counselees themselves (Aoughughi, 1999).

### The Appropriateness of Counselor Skills and Techniques for Specific Student Problems
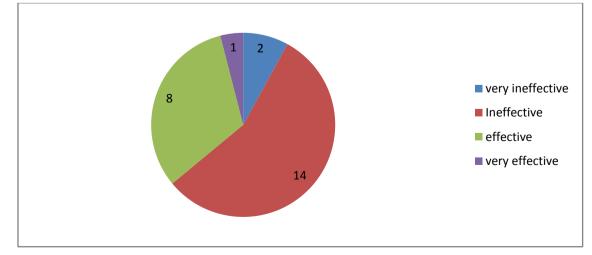
Findings of the present study show that the counsellors` counselling skills were rated as good by the majority of the students. In order to choose the most appropriate counselling technique, the counsellors should consider the age, social background, culture, health status and hobbies of the counselees bearing in mind a diversity of student characteristics in ODL institutions (Clewyd, 1996). The therapeutic relationship, interpersonal variables of the counsellor and core conditions of empathy, warmth and positive regard account for a greater proportion of a positive and effective counselling outcome.

However, 10(10%) students rated the counsellor as poor in communication skills and 5(5%) rated the counsellor poor in the skills of counselling technique selection. The findings of the present study disagree with those by Lambert (1992) who concluded that the counsellor's techniques account for only a small proportion if the total counselling process is to be effective.

Treatment selection was rated as good by a majority of 63 (63%) respondents and very good by 33(33%). Only 1 (1%) rated the counsellor poor on treatment selection. Other researches show that when counsellors are confronted with students whom to assist, they need to be skilled in certain specific treatment approaches for various clients. Efficacy studies on counselling suggest that there is some evidence of variability in success rates in the use of the approaches. Panic disorder treatment has been shown to be most successful when cognitive-behavioural interventions are used (Barlow, Craske, Cerny, & Klosko, 1989; Michelson et at., 1990).

### ODL Students` Perceptions the Effectiveness of the Counseling Provided by the ZOU

Results from the show that the majority of those who received counselling and guidance at the Student Support Services Unit found the service ineffective whilst a minority 8 remarked that the service was effective as depicted in Figure 2 below.



**Figure2.** *Respondents` views on the effectiveness of the counselling service received*
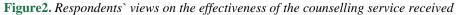
Fig. 2 shows that the majority (14) of those who received counselling and guidance at the Student Support Services Unit found the service ineffective whilst 8 remarked that the service was effective. Two responded that the service was very ineffective while 1 respondent said the service was very effective.

According to the Student Advisor/Counsellor, problems militating against counselling effectiveness were among others, due to the fact that the student counsellor was under pressure from the huge numbers needing assistance and as indicated by the findings, an average of 123 students came for counselling on learning motivation per semester. The Student Counsellor/Advisor also cited the unavailability of modern technology at the ZOU. He admitted that the least effective method, that is, mailing, was the mostly used method by the ZOU thus hindering effective communication between the student and the counsellor resulting in counselling being ineffective. Some researchers have argued that effective counselling requires the counsellor to understand the effects of distance on the choice technology so that you can choose the right delivery method for the message, and design messages to make the best use of the technology (UNESCO, 2004; Okopi, 2003). However, some have suggested that it is much better to convey detailed information in print rather than over the phone, so that the learner can refer to the printed message later on (COL, 2003).

The majority of the students indicated that as more students were in need of the service, the counsellor could not cope. Instead he referred some to Programme Coordinators who lacked counselling knowledge thus students could not get the best service they required hence the majority felt the sessions were ineffective.

**Table3.** *Responses on various variables*

| Variable | Yes | | No | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Number** | **%** | **Number** | **%** |
| Have you studied with an open and distance learning institution before | 28 | 28 | 72 | 72 |
| Are you aware of the existence of the student support service unit in the ZOU structures | 23 | 23 | 77 | 77 |
| Are you aware of the functions and services offered by the student support service unit | 18 | 18 | 82 | 82 |
| Have you faced any academic challenges in your studies | 83 | 83 | 17 | 17 |
| Have you faced any psychosocial challenges that interfered with your studies? | 96 | 96 | 4 | 4 |
| Have you at one point dropped out of your studies since you started studying with the ZOU? | 31 | 31 | 69 | 69 |
| Have you received any counselling service from the SSS unit since you joined the ZOU? | 25 | 25 | 75 | 75 |
| Were there any follow-up sessions by the counsellor? | 2 | 8 | 23 | 92 |

Results in table 3 show that the majority of respondents 72(72%) had not studied with an open and distance learning institution before and 77(77%) were not aware of the existence of the student support service unit in the ZOU structures. Of the 23(23%) who knew of the existence of the unit, only 18 were aware of the functions and services offered by the Unit. The majority of the students had faced both academic and psychosocial challenges that interfered with their studies. Twenty-five (25%) had received counselling service from the SSS unit since they joined the ZOU and of those who received counselling, only 2 follow-up sessions were made by the counsellor.

**Table4.** *Assistance given by the University for Academic Challenges (N=83)*

| Response | Number | % |
|---|---|---|
| Referred to the counsellor | 9 | 10.8 |
| Assisted by ZOU coordinator | 22 | 26.5 |
| No assistance was given | 52 | 62.7 |

Table 4 shows that 52(63%) of the respondents did not receive help from the university when they were faced with academic challenges. 26% got help from their programme coordinators while only 11 % were assisted by the university counsellor.

**Table5.** *Shortcomings of the offered counselling service*

| Response | Number | % |
|---|---|---|
| Solutions were not practicable | 5 | 29 |
| No solutions came out of the counselling process | 8 | 48 |
| The counsellor was directive and judgmental | 3 | 23 |

Table 5 shows that of 16 the students who perceived counselling service received at ineffective, 5 pointed out that the solutions were not practicable while 8 said no solutions came out of the counselling process and 3 suggested that the counsellor was directive and judgmental.

### Strategies to Improve the Counseling Processes at the ZOU

**Table6.** *Students` views on what should be done to effectively counsel ODL students in an attempt to maintain their learning motivation (N=100)*

| Remedy | Number | % |
|---|---|---|
| 1.Increase the number of Student Counsellors/Advisors | 50 | 50 |
| 2.Improve identification of students with problems | 46 | 46 |
| 3.Improve students` awareness of the existence of the Counsellor | 36 | 36 |
| 4.Include ICTs in student advisory services | 48 | 48 |
| 5.Intensify research on students` problems to verify sources of problems and recommend remedies | 53 | 53 |
| 6.Introduce referral services to registered counsellors | 57 | 57 |

The respondents were asked to provide remedial action on how to enhance the effectiveness of counselling at ZOU. Findings from the table above, reveal that the majority, fifty (50%) advocated for an increase in the number of Student Counsellors/Advisors while 46 (46%) advocated for the improvement of identification of students with problems. The same feelings were echoed by the student counsellor/advisor who indicated that weaknesses in the counselling system were partly due to the fact that the student counsellor was under pressure from the huge numbers needing assistance bearing in mind that he was a lonely figure in the department at provincial level were over 460 students would need his services. Lessons can be learnt from studies from other institutions on the staffing of Student Counsellors/Advisors. For example, NOUN has recruited 63 student counsellors with the aim of bringing counselling services closer the students (Okopi, 2003).

However, Ginott (2001) states that effective counselling on learning motivation is often hindered by the unavailability of resources such as time especially when the counsellor has too many students to cope with as he/she needs to know their individual problems. Counselling on learning motivation is therefore effective if the numbers of students in the university is manageable since the counsellor will be able to attend to and assist individual students with maximum attention. However, with a student enrolment of more than 460, one wonders whether the solitary student counsellor/advisor at the Mashonaland East region is capable of coping and providing the students with effective counselling.

Therefore, more counsellor/advisors were required in order to cope with demand. However, according to Egan (2002), group counselling is an effective mode given the vast numbers of students in ODL, who are also geographically dispersed. For example group counselling can be done during tutorial session and examination periods when all ODL students converge at the regional centres.

Forty-eight (48%) suggested the inclusion ICTs in student advisory services. The students` views were also echoed by their advisor. According to data supplied by the Student Counsellor/Advisor, ZOU has no computer resources for use in computer conferencing and e-mailing. The counsellor admitted that computer conferencing, e-mail and teleconferencing if available would make for the most effective modes of counselling in ODL. To foster interaction between learners, in certain cases, online support is offered through real time chat, advice, and email discussion groups with staff and other students (Ray and Day, 1998).

While 53(53%) respondents wanted research on students` problems to verify sources of problems to be intensified, a further fifty-seven (57%) thought that the introduction of referral services to registered counsellors could do the trick but acknowledged that this would come with a cost to the university which would pass the cost to the student meaning an increase in the fees. The counsellors have the responsibility of keeping in constant touch with distance learners and providing any early warning signals regarding difficulty with studies in order to provide prompt remedial actions (Okopi, 2003)

Presented hereunder are the results of the interview held by the researcher with the student advisor.

The advisor indicated that he was 42 years old and had 3 years of counselling experience. He holds a Master`s degree in Educational Psychology and had joined ZOU in 2008. Asked how he copes with a students` enrolment of about 500, the counsellor indicated that it was difficult as he is alone in the region. He indicated that the enrolment required more counsellors to cope given the lack of communication technology at the ZOU given the distance the counsellor and the students. The counsellor indicated that he sometimes carried out group counselling particularly during examination periods when students converge at one place for their semester examinations.

The counsellor indicated that he employed mostly face to face counselling, group counselling and at times telephone counselling and letters to a minimum extent. Computer conferencing, e-mail and pamphlets were not used at all. The counsellor stated that the computer conferencing, e-mail and teleconferencing were the most effective modes of counselling in ODL. However, these are not available at the ZOU just like in most Third World countries. The least effective method is mailing because of lack of immediate feedback though it is the mostly used method by the ZOU.

Students with special needs with special needs are assisted through liaison with special needs department and the academic registry of the university.

The counsellor remarked that one counsellor per region was not sufficient given that a lot of students are encountering problems at the moment. However, the National had no problems of staff complement because the bulk of the work is at regional level.

Asked what researches the SSS Unit has been carrying out on counselling and student motivation, the region had not done any on the issue but plans were afoot to make investigations on the problems bedeviling the students. The unit, however, has been applying theories and research in the solving of student learning problems. This has resulted in counselling that has its basis on informed theories and research. Within counselling effectiveness research, considerable importance has been placed on the factors that contribute to successful counselling outcomes. Knowledge of the determinants of successful counselling is essential in order for counsellors to improve therapeutic efficacy, for counsellor educators to incorporate current research into instruction. However, studies have indicated that as a whole, counselling professionals underutilize research in the process of counselling, which can lead to erroneous conceptions of what makes counselling effective (Herman, 1993). Inaccurate perceptions of counsellor competence have been demonstrated with Open and Distance Learning yet there is a lack of discussion in the literature, particularly in regard to what ODL students specifically believe contributes to effective counselling of students to maintain their motivation to learn, hence there could be ineffective counselling in ODL students due to underutilisation of available research students (Yager, 1984).

Due to the fact that the student counsellor was under pressure from the huge numbers needing assistance, an average of 123 students receive counselling on learning motivation per semester. More are in need of the service but the counsellor cannot cope, instead referring some to programme coordinators who lack counselling knowledge.

According to the student advisor follow-up mechanisms employed at the ZOU include the use of letters and the notice boards and individual and group counselling

The student advisor indicated that a strong family support, honest, voluntary, openness, resistance, motivation, assumptions about the counsellor and acceptance of responsibility were some of the student variables that are important to an effective counselling outcome. The counsellor was asked if he had received personal counselling as a counsellor and he stated that he had received none. However, he thought that if he had received such counselling, this would have had some impact on his experience and competence as a counsellor. Receiving counselling would make him judge his knowledge and expertise against those by his counsellors with aim of improving his own counselling of the students at the ZOU.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the above findings, it is therefore concluded that:

- Counsellor characteristics such as approachability, counsellor competence relationship building, empathy, warmth, positive regard, genuineness, acceptance, respectfulness, trusting, and demeanor paved way for effective counselling.

- A strong family support, honest, voluntary, openness, resistance, motivation, assumptions about the counsellor and acceptance of responsibility are some of the student variables that are important to an effective counselling outcome.

- The most employed method of counselling on learning motivation at the Zimbabwe Open University is the face to face counselling, group counselling and at times telephone counselling and letters to a minimum extent.

- The ZOU counsellor`s counselling skills and treatment selection are appropriate.

- The Student Advisor/Counsellor`s qualifications are appropriate for the job since he holds a Master`s degree in Educational Psychology and has three years of experience on the job.

- By not receiving personal counselling, this deprived the Student Counsellor/Advisor of the necessary experience and knowledge to effectively provide counselling on learning motivation.

- Inadequate numbers of Student Counsellors/Advisors is partly to blame for the ineffectiveness of the process of counselling students on learning motivation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- For student counsellor to be effective he/she must be approachable, competent in relationship building, empathetic, warm, have positive regard, genuine, have acceptance, respectful, trusting and have demeanor.

- Student advisors should educate the students on their obligation to the counselling process through being honest, open, motivation and avoiding assumptions about the counsellor, among others as these are important to an effective counselling outcome on student learning motivation.

- The Zimbabwe Open University should keep abreast with modern technology in order to reach out to the students wherever they may be, to offer them academic and psychosocial counselling whenever necessary. ICTs should be employed to make the counselling more effective.

- The counsellor should improve on areas rated as poor particularly in communication and counselling technique selection so that he becomes effective in learning motivation counselling.

- The Student Advisor/Counsellor`s is to encouraged to further his studies on student affairs despite possessing the qualifications that are appropriate so that he can perform better in offering learning motivation counselling to the ZOU students.

- The counsellor should receive personal counselling to equip him with experience knowledge to effectively provide counselling on learning motivation.

- Programme Coordinators to whom some students were referred to lack counselling knowledge thus need to be trained in counselling if they are to be of any help on students learning motivation.

- The number of Student Counsellors/Advisors should be increased significantly so that the counsellors can cope because some of the weaknesses of the counselling system were partly due to the fact that the student counsellor was under pressure from the huge numbers needing assistance.

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