

COUNSELLING STUDENTS' PRACTICUM EXPERIENCES IN OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING: A CASE STUDY OF ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY- HARARE REGION

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ABSTRACT

The problem of implementing practical courses in an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution is a daunting one realizing that the student is being taught at a distant. The very nature of counselling also requires that the student should have some "hands on" experience in counselling real clients in a real practice. This is the dilemma ODL institutions face coupled with the fact that they do not own counseling clinics where students could do practicum. In order to solve this huddle the Faculty of Social Sciences instituted a practicum component into its counselling degree programme. This study focused on the practicum course, which has been offered since the inception of the degree. Its objective was to find out if students were benefiting from this experiential learning by asking their experiences they had in the various institutions they were attached to. Using triangulation consisting of questionnaires and focused group discussion, sixty second year students provided the benefits, the challenges they faced and their recommendations to improve the practicum. These findings and recommendations will go a long way in improving the implementation of practicum in ODL institutions.

Keywords: Counselling student; experiences; external supervisor; internal supervisor, practicum.

INTRODUCTION

World wide, there is great need for people in the helping field, which includes doctors nurses, teachers, pastors and so on, to link what they theoretically learn with practice. This is a global expectation which grooms one into a fully fledged professional. By linking theory with practice, professionals avoid putting to risk the lives of people they serve. Counsellors are expected to help people heal from their sorrows. It is invaluable for anyone who calls himself or herself a counsellor to have gone through some practicum experience. Practicum experiences are designed to provide students with a sequential, supervised field experience in an appropriate counselling setting.

The Zimbabwe Open University offers open and distance learning and the Bachelor of Science degree in Counselling is one of its degree programmes. Students who are doing this degree are required to complete the designated practicum experiences in counselling. Most of the students are employed and they are supposed to make arrangements as to when they can go for their practicum. They go into the field armed with introductory letters to prove that they are ZOU students and the letters enable them to gain access into the various institutions/ organisations that offer professional counselling. Once they have been accepted, students arrange the time and dates when they are free to attend sessions. All preliminary arrangements for example, student contact and interview, notification of acceptance by site supervisor must be completed and the site approved prior to registration for practicum hours

in the semester. The students should be prepared to make whatever arrangements are necessary to complete this requirement.

ZOU counselling students gain practicum experiences during their first year and final year of the degree program. During the first year the students are required to attach themselves for one semester to counselling institutions of their choice where they are expected to observe qualified counsellors in session and compile a portfolio/ report. In the final year, at the Advanced Practicum level, they are expected to observe as well as counsel clients for a year under the supervision of both the external and internal supervisors. During this period they earn credits from the 20 hours of logging-in of their experiences. They are expected to log in experiences with their peers, supervisors, group counselling, clients and so on. ZOU offers practicum as a course in counselling in its open and distance learning so that students marry theory with practice. This enables them to get real life experiences since they meet different clients in terms of age, gender, occupation and social class.

Currently, the Ministry of Education and other government ministries seem to be failing to recognise the counselling degree programme. One assumption may be that counselling students are perceived to lack hands on experiences in the area. In turn students who work within these government ministries are disadvantaged. For example, an acting headmaster with a counselling degree may not be promoted to be substantive because the degree receives no recognition. In that respect, the researchers were prompted to find out the student's practicum experiences and also sought to establish whether the degree's practicum requirements are up to world standard. Specific courses are required prior to the practicum. Every effort is made to enable students to have a range of experiences that enhances their personal and career development.

Purpose of the Study

To establish the student's practicum experiences in Open and Distance Learning with a view of improving it.

Statement of the Problem

What real life issues do students share after their practicum experience?

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What types of clients and institutions are students exposed to?
2. To what extent are students supervised?
3. What are the major functions of the practicum supervisor?
4. How do the practicum experiences benefit the students?
5. Which challenges do the students face when they are out in the field doing their practicum?
6. How best can the practicum in ODL be improved?

LITERATURE REVIEW

A practicum is an experience that requires the practical application of theory or conceptual knowledge. Most types of professional education whether in medicine, nursing, law,

pharmacy, speech therapy, or social work wisely employ some form of practicum to help the student learn how to apply knowledge and general principles to real situations, problems, and concerns (www.mysocialworklab.com). A practicum serves as the arena for the practical application of theories and concepts of counselling that the student has learned in previous coursework (DuBey, DuBey and Ndagi, 1985).

Institutions and clients

Clients should come from the environment in which the students are preparing to work. The primary goal of the counselling practicum course is to develop the expertise of counsellor trainees to do individual counselling in a professional setting. This is accomplished by helping a student combine her/his counselling skills and personality into an effective therapeutic style, while enhancing the student's growth as a person and as a professional counsellor.

Student supervision

The host institution must have staff who are qualified to supervise the counsellor trainees. The supervisor has to be qualified because the counselling practicum is a required and integral course in every credentialed counsellor training program (CACREP, 2001). Practicum requires supervision since this is the time when counselling theory is applied to practice and it provides students experiences in counselling with diverse clients in one-to-one interactions. In these interactions informed consent is sought so that the interactions are recorded on audiotape or videotapes. Afterwards, students receive immediate feedback from the practicum counselling sessions and this aids in shaping the students' professional and personal behaviours. The practice of skills in clinical settings is considered a necessary condition to develop professional competencies (Bernard and Goodyear, 2004).

The student and the External/Site Supervisor should jointly determine a mutually agreeable schedule for completing the required internship hours. Both parties also bear responsibility for assuring that the student is familiar with all relevant agency regulations, policies, and procedure and for communicating any problems or concerns to one another and to the Faculty Supervisor in a timely manner (Eschbach, 2009).

Confidentiality and other ethical considerations are important aspects of practicum. Supervision is a confidential process too, similar to the therapy process. Personal and confidential information will likely be shared among trainees during group supervision and between trainee and site and faculty supervisors during individual supervision. It therefore becomes the responsibility of the student and his or her supervisor to adhere to the ACA code of ethics with regard to confidentiality. Any information which is expressed by other people should not be shared outside of supervision. It should be noted that the supervisor/supervisee relationship has the same limits to confidentiality that exist in the therapy relationship and supervisors are obligated to break confidentiality to protect supervisees from harming themselves or others.

Where there is any difference of opinion between the internal and external supervisors, the student should seek the guidance of the internal supervisor, that is, the ZOU supervisor who is more fully aware of the academic requirements that must be met, and of the rules and procedures of the Counselling Department. If the external supervisor does not easily accept this, one should get the internal supervisor to contact them and resolve the situation. It is also

helpful if the internal and external supervisors can be in occasional contact by phone or email.

Any concern about ethical behaviour, difficulty with boundaries, and/or moral decision making should be shared with the faculty supervisor immediately (Counselling Fieldwork Manual, 2009).

Major functions of the practicum supervisor

Practicum students are supervised by external and internal supervisors. The external supervisor is the one who is the mentor at the practicum site and the internal supervisor is from the university. The external supervisor should obviously have appropriate credentials necessary for providing supervision. He/she is expected to introduce the practicum student to the administrative staff and other appropriate staff members and furnish him/her with rules and regulations of the agency.

He/she should spend a minimum of one hour a week per 3 credit hours of practicum in direct supervision of practicum student. The practicum supervisor should spend time reviewing the student's progress in meeting the specific requirements of the agreement, consultation concerning on-going caseload, discussion of professional concerns as they affect the workings of the site, or other relevant topics. Another responsibility of the external supervisor is to provide the practicum student with constructive feedback on his or her performance and share insights and experience with the student for the practicing professional.

The supervisor also serves as a professional role model for the practicum student in job performance, personal growth, and professional and ethical behaviour. Hence the need for possession of appropriate training, knowledge, and experience in a recognized helping profession, preferably counselling. Furthermore, it is the supervisor's responsibility to assist in facilitating the practicum student's need to record on audio/ video as part of their training. This process facilitates the professional development of students and assists in quality control of services delivered to clients. It is the duty of the supervisor to help students identify clients that will be amenable to videotaping of sessions for training and university supervision purposes. These videotapes are to be reviewed as is appropriate and needed during the weekly individual supervision sessions (UNCC, 2006).

Communication with the university coordinator is important. External supervision recognizes that communication with the university is required regarding all practicum students. The supervisor therefore maintains contact with university supervisor for assistance and consultation relating to student's progress. Contact may be by phone or a site visit, to be determined, based on need, by the university coordinator. This assists in reviewing the student's performance and any concerns.

Communication with the student is also of importance. The external supervisor provides on-going feedback to the student concerning his or her performance of agreed upon duties, as well as his or her overall performance and behaviour at the practicum site. The supervisor sets up a conference with the student to assess his or her work toward the goals that were established at the beginning of the semester. A formal final evaluation with the student at the end of the semester should be conducted and this final evaluation is submitted after reviewing it with the student.

In general, the external/site supervising counsellor has a major responsibility in helping to structure a beneficial learning experience throughout the practicum by closely supervising all the practicum student's activities and in time.

On the other hand, the practicum student has the supervisor from the university, the internal supervisor. He/she is expected to have provided guidance and coordination in the selection of sites. The internal supervisor is also a guest at the host site and is expected to act accordingly. He/she should have all observations scheduled in advance and with input from the site supervisor. In addition, the internal supervisor is expected to respond in a timely manner to any concerns raised by the external supervisor.

The ultimate responsibility for the internal supervisor is to ensure that a student's training needs are met by the training site. Another responsibility for the internal supervisor is to meet with students during tutorials. These tutorials are designed to be interactive with individuals or small groups. During this time the supervisor gets feedback from students about experiences at the sites. This is time for the supervisor to coordinate group discussions by students. At the ZOU this is done in small groups in the Counselling Clinics/ Laboratories which are meant for training Counselling students through role-playing, audio-tape analysis, and/or written reports.

Ultimately, the internal supervisor serves as a liaison between the University and the practicum site. He/she will provide the educational coordination of the candidate's internship experiences

Benefits of practicum experiences to students

It is an exciting time when one gets to put everything he or she will have been learning into practice. Practicum placement brings with it varied benefits to the student. The major benefit is the acquisition of greater knowledge and experience in the application of a variety of intervention strategies as well as gaining an understanding and appreciation of professional, ethical, and legal issues and behavior (Poole, 2004).

Other benefits include an opportunity for expanding upon skills developed during other core courses in the Counselling degree and relating theory to practice. Counselling students are afforded a chance to evaluate their professional growth as well as specific career goals. They can consult with other appropriate, professional individuals. During practicum there is an opportunity of gaining an increased understanding of the relationship of administrative functions to the counsellor role.

According to CACREP (2006) the practicum student has the privilege of gaining an understanding of multicultural and diversity issues and needs. Sue and Sue (1999) state that, part of the process of becoming an effective counsellor involves learning how to recognize diversity and shaping one's counselling practice to fit the client's world. Acquiring this understanding begins with counsellors' awareness of any cultural values, biases, and attitudes that may hinder their development of a positive view of pluralism. It is important to realize that culture does not refer just to an ethnic or racial heritage but includes age, gender, religion, sexual orientation, physical and mental ability, and socioeconomic status.

Finally, the Lamar University School Counselor Practicum Manual (2012) says the students benefit through expansion of knowledge and application of technology in counselling.

Possible challenges faced in the field

For many students, the practicum is a very positive and meaningful experience, but for some the practicum can fall short of expectations. Fitch and Marshal (2002) also concur that students in the counselling practicum courses experience many self-defeating thoughts and anxieties. These worries can impede their performance as new counsellors and can have a negative impact on the supervision process.

First-year practicum students often indicate that they have many fears and worries about their initial counseling experiences (Bernard and Goodyear, 1992). If this anxiety becomes excessive, it can impede the skills development of the practicum student and impair his or her functioning as a counselor. When excessive anxiety lingers past the practicum experience, counsellors might become at risk for burnout. The ability to handle the anxiety and stress related to practicum and initial counselling experiences is a crucial skill that is needed by practicum students. Cognitive therapists (Beck and Emery, 1985; Ellis and Grieger, 1986) identified interventions that can be used to alleviate stress and anxiety problems. These techniques can be used effectively with practicum students (Dodge, 1982).

Anxiety can be a cause for concern in practicum supervision. Bernard and Goodyear (1992) identified personalization skills as a major area of development for counsellors. Personalization skills relate to the personality and emotional traits of the counsellor. Being patient with resistant clients and managing anger if clients are confrontational are examples of personalization skills. Counsellor trainees will require the ability to manage and to cope with anxiety and this happens to be another personalization skill. Counsellors need to learn how to keep their own personal issues such as performance anxiety, from interfering with the counselling relationship.

Bernard and Goodyear (1992) reported that there is no apparent need to avoid anxiety altogether, especially because moderate levels of anxiety probably improve counselor performance. However, unchecked anxiety can negatively influence the counsellor's speech rates, the accuracy of his or her perceptions, and his or her ability to provide appropriate affective feedback.

Besides anxiety problems, students on practicum face bias problems. It is important for students to become aware of their biases and how these may affect the counselling process. The practicum course promotes personal growth in students by encouraging them to develop attitudes, values, and beliefs which will enhance and facilitate the helping process.

METHODOLOGY

This study was based on both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Cohen and Manion (1989) and Flick (2009) define it as the use of two or more methods of data collection in a study of some human behaviour. In this case it was the experiences of counselling students during their practicum. The study focussed on the population of all second year students who were doing their practicum. Purposive sampling was used to select the sixty (60) counselling students who were finally included in the study. An open-ended questionnaire was used to gather baseline information from the 60 counselling students. Focused group discussions probed their experiences the challenges they faced and their recommendations to improve the practicum. This triangulation consisting of the use of both questionnaires and the focused group discussion ensured the trustworthiness of the data.

Data analysis was done in two stages. First, data from the open ended questionnaires was grouped into four areas namely; supervisor and institution, qualifications, benefits and recommendations. The second stage involved the analysis of the deliberations from the focussed group discussion. These were coded and patterns established. Themes were constructed from the patterns. These were triangulated with the data from the questionnaire. The results are presented below.

RESULTS

The results are presented in the order of the research questions.

What types of clients and institutions are students exposed to?

Institutions for Practicum attachments

Students accessed practical experiences mostly at local clinics, hospitals and schools where they were members of staff. A few were accepted at private organisations such as CLAIVI Consultants, CONNECT-ZIST (an institute that is affiliated to ZOU and trains people in Systems Approach counselling) and Children's Homes.

What are the major functions of the practicum supervisor?

Most of the students on practicum attachment had qualified counsellors as their supervisors. It appears most of the supervisors are CONNECT graduates who hold certificates in Systemic Family Therapy. One of these graduates holds a Diploma in Systemic Family Therapy.

The rest of the supervisors had ZOU degrees in Counselling, mere basic counselling or their qualifications pertaining to the Counselling field were not known by the students.

Supervisors' roles/duties

The institutions' supervisors played different roles towards the attached students' experiences. The following are some of the roles:

- counselling while students observed
- gave students clients to counsel; discussed the sessions, corrected and advised on what should be done.
- Some supervisors gave students a chance to counsel clients on a 2:1 ratio
- Mr C of Claivi Consultants arranged for students to observe diploma students in session with clients. He would also phone our students whenever clients were available. He also drove with the students to clients' homes for follow up counselling when all was done he requested feedback from our students, enabling them to learn report writing skills.

How do the practicum experiences benefit the students?

Table 1: Benefits

Supervisor & Institution	Qualifications	Benefits	Recommendations
(1)Mrs C Lord Marven High	Systemic –SFT	-gained knowledge about SPS as support system for abuse cases -knowledge on ARV's	-need for fully employed professional counsellors in schools
(2)Ms X Wilkins Hospital (O.I.C) Harare	Counsellor & Administrator (QNK)	-Supervised counselling -gained confidence through observation -was phoned when there were clients	-ZOU to have a department or clinic to attach counselling students
(3)Rujeko Poly Clinic (City of Harare)	Nurse + SFT	-knowledge on PPTCT counselling -Counselling on 2; 1 ratio -corrected/ advised -gained confidence -use of genograms -psychosomatic clients -now prepared to counsel	-ZOU to liaise with City of Harare/Parirenyatwa Hospital to accept students.
(4)Mr C CLAIVI Consultants & CONNECT Five Ave	DSFT	-observed diploma students -supervisor arranged & phoned students for observations -giving feedback (learnt the skill) -link theory +practice	-ZOU + Claivi or other private organisations and work together on practicum aspect.
(5)Ms S Rusununguko Primary School	-SFT/Childline -ZOU student	-hands on practice	-Practical counselling should be more
(6)Mrs D Howard Mission Hospital	SFT	-observed that there are lots of HIV +ve children in schools -learnt ARV admin -counsellors counsel each other before starting work (avoiding	-more practicum required

		unfinished business).	
(7)Mrs E Kuwadzana High 1	ZOU	-had chance of working on own personal issues with counsellor	-Teachers are unaware of counselling issues. ZOU to staff develop teachers e.g. label children- <i>vana vechirwere (HIV and AIDS children)</i>
(8) Arcturus High & Clinic	School-NQC Clinic=QNK	-was taught on use of AIDS testing kit but not allowed to test	-ZOU to have periodical talks on HIV issues at rural school - no exposure
(9)Pastor X Gracious Women's Fellowship	QNK	-Confidentiality	-ZOU to set up counselling clinic for students to counsel real clients.
(10)Norton Hospital		-learnt people still do not know about HIV	

Key-

SFT-Systematic Family Therapist

QNK- Not Known

NQC-Not qualified In Counselling

PPTC-Prevention of Parent to child transmission

OIC-Opportunist Infections Clinic

DSFT-Diploma in Systemic Family Therapy

Themes from the focussed group discussion and triangulated with the questionnaire data are presented below. We present these in the following order; benefits accrued and challenges and the recommendations from the practicum experiences.

Benefits accrued from practicum experiences

Different students benefited from the counselling practicum experiences in different areas and different ways. Findings indicated that the students gained confidence in themselves. They also realised and gained knowledge on support systems that are available in Zimbabwe for different cases for example Schools Psychological Services and Special Needs Education for abuse cases in schools. Students who were attached to local clinics and hospitals such as Wilkins Hospital and Howard Mission Hospital gained more knowledge (in addition to what they will have covered in their module on Counselling of People living with HIV and AIDS – BSCC312) on HIV/AIDS and ARV issues as well as PPTCT counselling. Some of the students doing practicum in the health sector were afforded the opportunity to learn how to administer prophylaxis treatment and ARV's as cases arose. Besides dealing with HIV and AIDS issues at hospitals, students also benefited in practical experience on bereavement counselling e.g. at Avenues Clinic where a client was in a coma and eventually passed on. The student attached to this site indicated that she was tasked with counselling the family members of the deceased and had to make follow-ups on their stages of grieving.

An interesting aspect in the findings shows how students at Howard Mission Hospital benefited during practicum as they discovered that at hospital, counsellors counselled each other before starting work (to avoid any unfinished businesses such as domestic violence and bereavement issues). This gave them a chance to work on their own personal issues with the qualified counsellors at the practicum site.

The practicum experience benefited students as they gained practical experience on relationship building, especially with teenagers at Children's Homes (Chinyaradzo). This experience proved to be useful since generally trainee counsellors seem to find it challenging to deal with adolescents who in most cases do not come for counselling voluntarily but are referred and not willing to participate. Students who were involved in Girl Child Network investigations indicated that they felt good as they were recognised as ZOU students.

Ethically, students learnt in reality to respect confidentiality and ultimately, therefore gained requisite skills in counselling as they linked theory to practice. The hands on practice also benefited the students as they learnt report writing and feedback giving skills. Students were corrected and directed on how to counsel.

Which challenges do the students face when they are out in the field doing their practicum?

The following challenges were met by the students in their various institutions. Students who carried out their practicum at schools had problems with elderly staff members who were not qualified counsellors but were assigned the guidance and counselling posts to lessen their teaching loads. These "counsellors" felt threatened by those who were doing the counselling degree and so were in some cases unreceptive to the students.

Sometimes school authorities insisted on knowing the children's issues (especially if there had been referrals from SOS and follow up was needed). This forced counsellors to break confidentiality. Some students faced dilemmas in schools as children would not easily open up due to the dual relationship. Furthermore, one student on practicum in a school setting said she had to fight to keep self in check as she almost broke confidentiality in staff room.

Another challenge was faced by a student who lived in a farming community namely, Arcturus, where people would not open up at the local clinic, fearing disclosure. This forced the student to revert to the school site for practicum even though there was no qualified counsellor whilst the clinic had a qualified supervisor.

Other challenges included issues of burnout and failure to empathise but sympathised with clients, especially school children and ended up even crying. Students also indicated that they faced challenges of time at institutions i.e. afforded limited time. Others said that they initially faced difficulties in securing attachment places at various institutions and also had to endure antagonism at some institutions.

Pressure of work at some of the sites turned out to be an issue. Students said that that they had to deal with full loads of work and barely had time to reflect on their sessions. Some even felt taken advantage of.

For those practicum students doing BSCC108, which is in the first year of the Counselling degree, there was an indication that some clients did not want observers in session and that seemed to limit the number of sessions and different issues that they would have wanted to observe.

Some institutions, such as the Gracious Women's Fellowship were limited to pastoral counselling which did not give the students wider knowledge.

How best can the practicum in ODL be improved?

Recommendations for ZOU by students

The students had the following as recommendations to improve on the teaching/ learning experiences

- ZOU to have a department or counselling clinic to attach their students.
- ZOU to liaise with City of Harare and hospitals e.g. Parirenyatwa to accept counselling students for practicum.
- ZOU to work together with private organisations e.g. CLAIVI consultants, on the practicum aspect.
- More practicum experiences and time should be scheduled for.
- ZOU counselling department should staff develop teachers in schools on counselling that is conduct basic counselling. Teachers are unaware of counselling issues and there is need to make them appreciate counselling. One finds teachers labelling children, 'Vana vechirwere' (the children/orphans of the disease), destroying a child's self esteem and confidence at school.
- The counselling department in conjunction with relevant stakeholders should conduct talks on HIV and AIDS in rural, farming and mining communities.
- Children's Homes have no qualified counsellors and ZOU students should be encouraged to be voluntary counsellors to such institutions.
- Less of assignments and more practical sessions with more tutor supervision

DISCUSSION

The study clearly indicates the type of institutions and the clients they are exposed to. This is similar to what the literature depicts. This reflects Poole's (2004) affirmation of the different roles the student is supposed to play in the institution they are attached to. Students' experiences are varied in this area. Although most students received external supervision, it is the quality which needs further interrogation. This is in line with Eschbach's (2009) assertion on supervision. The students in the study benefited from the practicum. These benefits are in line with Sue and Sue (1999) who said that it raises awareness of cultural values and the status of people.

All the challenges the students faced when they were out in the field doing their practicum tend to raise their anxieties. Fitch and Marshal (2002) assert that students face anxieties when they are doing their practicum. The nature of the varied institutions brings a variety of challenges to the student which they should be able to handle without any emotional baggage. A counsellor who fails to handle their emotions is doomed to fail their practicum. Counselling students proffered ways of improving the practicum in ODL. However these do not address ways of empowering them. This is unlike Bernard and Goodyear (2004) who say

one way is to reduce the anxiety in the counselling student so that he or she is confident to tackle any challenge which comes their way.

CONCLUSIONS

The study concluded that ZOU students were attached in a variety of institutions ranging from schools, private institutions to hospitals. Students benefitted from these attachments but faced numerous challenges which need to be addressed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study made the following recommendations;

- ZOU should consider the recommendations which were given by students in this study.
- To carry out a survey on how institutions view ZOU counselling students' attachments in comparison to other similar institutions.

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