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**E-GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATION FOR PERSONS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS DURING AND POST COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN NIGERIA FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

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**Abstract**

The trust of this paper exploit e-guidance and counselling implementation consideration for persons with special needs during and post Covid-19 period in Nigeria for National development. School closures due to coronavirus (COVID-19) are affecting learners/clients worldwide. Therefore, the prosperous concept of this paper is to ensure that the temporary measures of e-guidance and counselling benefits both learners/clients with or without special needs in rural and urban area and not to create inequality in the educational system in Nigeria. The paper states that e-guidance and counselling of persons with special needs could be done through: What's App, Zoom, Skype, You-Tube, we-Chat, Tik Tok, facebook, phone calls, SMS message, radio, television, e-mails, internet as medium of e-guidance and counselling and to maintaining good interpersonal communications among others as significant factors that will help to bridge the gap between learners/clients with special needs in rural and urban areas. The roles of stakeholders is to facilitate measures that is all encompassing that will motivate counsellors, special educators and others in exploring new online curricula modalities as a temporary measures to facilitate and promote e-guidance and counselling among others. Thus, the challenges of e-guidance and counselling facing Nigeria learners/clients with special needs need a collaborative effort in ameliorating their plight. Hence, this paper discussed the meaning of e-guidance and counselling, the concept of Covid-19 and e-counselling, Covid-19 challenges and e-guidance and counselling, Covid-19 and technological aids in e-guidance and counselling, roles of stakeholders and effective implementation of e-guidance and counselling during the Covid-19, factors that will aid e-guidance and counselling, and the general e-guidance and counselling process in Nigeria educational system.

**Keywords:** Persons with special needs, covid-19 pandemic, e-guidance and counselling.

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## Introduction

As schools move to distance learning provision, so does e-guidance and counselling in education and training. The availability of ICT infrastructure, previous use of ICT, as well as the attitude of the guidance counselling practitioners and clients towards digital forms of delivery plays a major role. For all countries who closed their schools, this meant that guidance and counselling could only be provided using digital technologies aids and other tools as channels that can be used for communication at a distance. Only Nigerian reports that in exceptional cases, some contact support can be provided for students with a special support decision. Besides personal issues, students with special needs and those without are also provided with support concerning: curricular difficulties, study difficulties, queries related to choice of subjects, changes in the postsecondary course requirements due to COVID-19, queries related to exams, concerns related to transition to post-secondary education, etc. (Cedefop, 2019).

Sanders and Rosenfield (2019) view e-guidance and counselling as a counselling method through the medium of telecommunication technologies such as telephone, internet and teleconferencing. Digital e-guidance and counselling is gradually emerging as an effective tool to leverage students into holistic self-management and development (Bada, 2021). However, e-guidance and counselling is unconventional in the Nigeria context because of its challenges, and this is undoubtedly a new dimension to students with or without special needs. Sedano (2020) describes e-guidance and counselling contextual as hyper-contextual. Hyper contextualised is a locally designed game which seeks to depict the context for which it is developed (Sedano, 2020). Therefore, the face-to-face guidance and counselling method is nonetheless still a necessity and applicable (Zamani, 2019). Tait (2019) also emphasizes the need to reconsider the face-to-face guidance and counselling method in counselling delivery. Thus, ICT needs to be integrated into the traditional face-to-face counselling for the diversity in guidance and counselling delivery (Obi, 2021) in order to alleviate the problems connected with the face-to-face guidance and counselling method during the Covid-19 pandemic. In this regard, the efficiency of the guidance and counselling methods needs to be rigorously explored in order to meet the needs of learners/clients. Guidance and counselling in the Nigeria schools has existed for years until the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic when the Ministry of Education re-emphasize the need to resource the centres with state-of-the-art facilities in order to augment the services (NERIC, 2017). Conversely, the first researcher's prior experience as a teacher confirms that some educational counsellors in Nigeria are reluctant to adapt to the emerging e-guidance and counselling technologies, and this is mainly due to their incapacity to use technology.

E-guidance and counselling seems to be a phenomenon within the counselling parlance. It is a modern means of communication between counsellor(s) and client(s) in sessions via internet within a stipulated period of at least once a week in a year or six months with a singular purpose of assisting persons with special or clients in discovering

themselves and making useful choices in relation to their educational, vocational and personal-social needs. E-guidance and counselling or tele-counselling is an extension of information and communication technology which Ivowi (2015) prescribed as generic term employed in describing the generation, storage, dissemination and eliciting of relevant information for therapeutic encounter. Most counsellors seem to be regressive in relation to familiarization and use of information technology. Their lack of competency in the use of electronic services could deter them from relating effectively with learners/clients who are not within their immediate reach. Electronic communication involves the use of e-mails, internet and communication aided strategies in counselling clients (Arrieta, 2021). Arrieta further alluded that counsellors are not left out in this all-important phenomenon which has potential to transform not only counselling practices but education as well.

Counsellors who lack basic skills in electronic services may not be able to email, facebook, what's app etc and make internet contact with distant learners/clients that need such help. This may have been necessitated by lack of access to the electronic gadgets or lack of training in their usage. Taking into consideration that not all career counsellors have a psychology background there is an emergent need of training counsellors on how to provide basic psychological support and/or partner with professional psychologists to address this need of their learners/clients". The digital gap among practitioners in Nigeria, in many regions, implies that there is the need to train most of the practitioners in order to provide career guidance services remotely. By implication, the lockdown therefore, points to an increased risk that those who greatly need tailored guidance and support will suffer the most from adverse consequences of the lockdown, thus deepening social inequality. Again, experiences in the countries during the covid-19 pandemic period needs investigation, also in terms of the potential for tailored support using digital technologies. Even if online services and education have been expanded, access to WIFI, particularly in rural areas, may be a barrier to accessing these provisions.

### **The Meaning of E-Guidance and Counselling**

E-guidance and counselling is a new phenomenon within the counselling parlance. It is a modern means of communication between counsellor(s) and learners/client(s) in sessions via internet within a stipulated period of at least once a week in a year or six months with a singular purpose of assisting learners/clients in discovering themselves and making useful choices in relation to their educational, vocational and personal-social needs. E-guidance and counselling or tele-counselling is an extension of information and communication technology which Ivowi (2015) prescribed as generic term employed in describing the generation, storage, dissemination and eliciting of relevant information for therapeutic encounter. Most counsellors seem to be regressive in relation to familiarization and use of information technology. Their lack of

competency in the use of electronic services could deter them from relating effectively with clients who are not within their immediate reach. Electronic communication involves the use of e-mails, internet and communication aided strategies in counselling clients (Smith, 2021). Smith further added that counsellors are not left out in this all-important phenomenon which has potential to transform not only counselling practices but education as well. Counsellors who lack basic skills in electronic services may not be able to email and make internet contact with distant clients that need such help. This may have been necessitated by lack of access to the electronic gadgets or lack of training in their usage.

### **Concept of Covid-19 and E-guidance and counselling**

Guidance professionals are already organised as a network within schools. They work in a complementary way with teachers in charge of classes in order to keep information on guidance procedures up to date and to support and accompany the guidance of persons with or without special needs who are in a problematic situation. Continuity has been established with the teachers through telephone interviews and emails. This also seems to be the case in Nigeria, where the teaching staff of the educational unit collaborates with the school counsellors and speech therapists. In Nigeria, career practitioners are actively collaborating and sharing their expertise in working at a distance using their internal communication channels. The companies who are developing online learning solutions have united their forces to give free access to their materials (including career education) and help the teachers discover how new educational tools can be used or how to complement their traditional way of working for both persons with or without special needs.

In additional local initiatives from different NGOs appeared in this period, dedicated to online counselling. The Nigeria Career Guidance Association which is a voluntary organisation that represents career guidance practitioners is extending its services to the community where its volunteers can answer any questions through e-mail, facebook, what's app chat or online calls. The service includes guidance related to choice of subjects, career-related queries, employability skills, course information and adult participation in lifelong learning. This service was promoted on the Association's Facebook page and website and was shared by various members. In addition, the Association has updated its website and included a dedicated area related to COVID-19 queries in terms of employment and education. The page consolidates information issued from various government entities such as those in education, government assistance and job searching services.

### **Challenges of E-guidance and Counselling during and Post Covid-19 Pandemic**

There were two meaningful categories of identified relating to the counsellors' challenges in the implementation of guidance and counselling services during and post

COVID-19 pandemic for persons with or without special needs namely (1) inadequate support for the delivery of services, and (2) restrictions in the delivery of services.

### **Inadequate Support for the Delivery of Services**

The readiness of both persons with or without special needs and counselling offices for this change is very valuable for the protection of the mental health of the community. This is divided into two (2) subcategories namely Stakeholders' Participation, and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Facilities and Services.

### **Stakeholders' Participation**

Effective delivery of guidance services to persons with or without special needs depends on the collaboration, cooperation, and participation between counsellors and all stakeholders. Counsellors view stakeholders as pertinent partners in the implementation of guidance services. Faruk (2021) opined new ways to stay connected to learners and their families and keeping in contact with them is one of the most important things school counsellors can do right now. To get support there is also a need to focus on the barriers that persons with or without special needs and their parents face in this new mode of learning. Many parents are feeling overwhelmed with providing financial support for the family, and coping with the online learning needs of their children which can be sources of frustration for them. Hence, getting their support and cooperatively working with them can also be challenging. Some parents failed to get involved in their child/children in online schooling/e-guidance and counselling.

### **ICT Facilities and Services**

The use of technology and the internet in guidance and counselling of persons with or without special needs is inevitable. The pandemic has even necessitated its significant role in service delivery to persons with or without special needs. By using technology, counsellors make the guidance services accessible to more clients and stakeholders. Due to the pandemic, guidance counsellors had to find a way to virtually re-create their in-person while performing their roles and responsibilities in school. This instant shift posed great challenges and has become a source of stress for everyone and it is complicated by the fact that a significant number of persons with or without special needs lacked access to high-speed internet connections and lack of desktop, laptop, or tablet computers.

On the other hand, Faruk (2021) disclosed that the following are quite challenging during the peak of covid-19 pandemic and post restrictions in counselling, student activities, testing, and inventory, as well as career guidance program.

**Counselling:** This requires the counsellor and the persons with or without special needs to have a collaborative effort. Counsellors appreciate the physical presence to efficiently deliver this guidance service. Counselling is helping students through a one-on-one

relationship with a professionally trained/Registered Guidance Counsellor for persons with or without special needs to become fully functioning people. It is usually done face to face in a private place. However, in this unusual peak of covid-19 pandemic time, there is a great need for guidance counsellors to conduct virtual counselling sessions and connect with persons with or without special needs in a safe meeting space or use a tele-counseling platform. This can be a challenge to some of them especially the need for privacy in virtual counselling sessions. Some counsellors may still need training in this area. Face-to-face counselling of persons with or without special needs was not possible during the peak of the covid-19 pandemic.

**Student with or without Special Needs Activities:** Counsellors consider persons with or without special needs activities as opportunities for their development especially in improving their capacities to reach their best. E-guidance and counselling of persons with or without special needs is geared towards the development of well-adjusted, well-integrated, and self-directed individuals. Activities are built on openness, truth, mutual respect, and teamwork to assist students to actualize their academic, career, personal, and social potentialities towards becoming responsible and effective members of society. E-guidance and counselling sponsored persons with or without special needs in development activities were restricted and put on hold during the covid-19 pandemic.

**Testing and Inventory:** These services give counsellors, teachers, and the school as a whole persons with or without special needs information and data. Through psychological testing, persons with or without special needs build a realistic picture of their selves by exploring their personality traits/work values as revealed in their personality/values test results. It also provides relevant data for use in counselling and organizing a guidance program. An important concern here is the lack of available standardized online psychological tests and training on conducting these tests online. The pandemic post challenges and restricted physical testing and inventory of persons with or without special needs.

**Career E-guidance and counselling Programs:** Counsellors also faced challenges in this area of helping persons with or without special needs to make educational choices. It involves helping persons with or without special needs to find a place that will contribute to their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health and well-being (Villar, 2017). Various activities (group guidance activities, pre-employment orientation program, etc.) are conducted to assist persons with or without special needs in their career and employment concerns. It is challenging in providing career guidance program for our persons with or without special needs during the covid-19 pandemic. Career fairs and labour education for persons with or without special needs were restricted at the peak of covid-19 pandemic.”

### **Role of Stakeholders in Effective Implementation of E-Guidance and Counselling During Covid-19 Pandemic:**

What is needed to improve the system and ultimately benefit individuals, especially persons with or without special needs. These ideas are grouped according to categories listed below:

1. Implementation of the recommendations of the national review would create an overarching national guidance strategy, to include an interim plan for the current responses needed to involve all relevant stakeholders; formal coordinated, considered plan for guidance policy across government departments and for guidance delivery now and into the future; funding allocated specifically to ICT developments to include a national/regional/local approach to online career guidance information and service provision.
2. Locate e-guidance mechanisms or policy strategies that will provide an appropriate response to the problems countries are facing. Stakeholders should address the key issues in e-guidance stemming from the covid-19 pandemic: how to respond to early school leaving from education and training (apprenticeships); how to manage professional transitions; how to reduce the digital divide and inequalities that the pandemic threw into relief. Other issues for adults: change of professions for those facing health risks; dropout from apprenticeships loss of company funding; unemployment, etc.

Other issues for youth and younger students: social digital gap increases those who have digital tools and those who do not; higher dropout rate of persons with or without special needs; geographical disparities; decreased student mobility towards metropolitan France; increased anxiety or psychological disorders Funding for career guidance should be part of a package of measures (Nigeria).

Other role of stakeholders in effective implementation of e-guidance and counselling during covid-19 pandemic itemise by Faruk (2021) include the followings:

- ✓ Implement and support digitalisation of guidance services for persons with or without special needs in Nigeria.
- ✓ Support digitalisation and e-governance in e-guidance at Nigeria level including a conceptual discussion for which cases and for which target groups physical face-to-face services are needed and in which cases for the future will be focusing on interactive online career counselling sessions.
- ✓ Stakeholders should digitalise interventions and services due to the social-distancing measures. Telephone, digital interviews, web chats are attractive. Long-term professional integration and individual empowerment in the use of digital technologies is vital.
- ✓ Greater investment in technical infrastructures and workforce development is often needed at national level in order to support more effective use of ICT during and after the pandemic. Improve cooperation, collaboration and knowledge-building and exchange: Strengthen the evidence-base by capturing

current impacts and recommendations to national, regional and/or local decision-makers.

- ✓ Strengthen an exchange at national and at regional level among main guidance providers in the field of education and employment on service concepts, tools, ethical considerations, data protection, staff competences and training manuals to foster both customer-oriented interactive web tools and professional service provision for persons with or without special needs.
- ✓ Guidance experts should support, train, share knowledge with, practitioners and relevant ministries, to raise awareness and find concrete actions to implement.
- ✓ The pandemic has shed light on how to improve coordination and communication. Gaps are being exposed in school-level networks and teamwork that can hinder efforts in social and educational counselling. In Nigeria, for example, schools without functional teamwork are those who are facing greater difficulties in providing these supports to all persons with or without special needs in Nigeria.
- ✓ Stakeholders should collaborate with national and local organisations to further support our clients/persons with or without special needs in their needs (i.e. economic and social needs) hence collaborating with the public employment service, social services, disability services, etc. so clients/persons with or without special needs feel supported in all ways. This means reshaping the design of career delivery in a way where there is less compartmentalisation of services and where we move towards innovative and diverse ways of service delivery.
- ✓ There is need for stakeholders to create multi-professional and cross-sectorial networks. Moreover, two new key actors have been identified: health and well-being professionals; and data providers. Greater networking possibilities need to be promoted by using digital technologies during the pandemic and after the pandemic with a blend of face-to-face.

### **Conclusion**

This pandemic may introduce new ways and new mentalities of reaching and working with individuals. There are skills that need to be prioritised in guidance interventions during the pandemic. The important thing is to help others become more resilient. The counsellors are in a good position to help explore feelings of their clients in order to support their general well-being. This crisis has jump-started the process of improving online services and it is providing all of us the necessary experience to be able to fine tune such online services. Many mentioned that in future entities will be in a better position to use technology to enhance their service. This pandemic has broadened our way of doing things, new ways of working which practitioners might not have tried out, tending to rely on traditional methods. Many colleagues who work in the education and



employment sector are emphasising the importance of reaching out to their students/jobseekers through telephone, what's App, Tick Tok, emails, chat, Facebook, Zoom, video conferencing, etc. However, since we are dealing with video conferencing/sessions quite frequently some aspects are to be re-examined such as GDPR, online recording issues and rights and obligations for both the clients and the career guidance practitioner. There is a need now to reflect on the role that digital technology should have in the future of education and career guidance of persons with or without special needs e.g. for personalisation of learning/career guidance. A powered system could have helped teachers, students and parents, employers and unemployed people navigate the range of digital learning resources out there if they were more available and ready to use. Employers should move recruitment online and make more development activities virtual.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations were made for effective e-guidance and counselling in times like this are:

1. Government, federal state and local government ministries of education and school heads should as a matter of policy should have annual allocation of fund that will be sufficient to manage e-guidance and counselling in critical time like this for persons with or without special needs.
2. Government should make available e-guidance and counselling facilities that could enhance counselling activities for persons with or without special needs both in school and non-school setting.
3. Organizations and schools with e-guidance and counselling facilities should imbibe maintenance culture that will enable equipment such as computer, office furniture, tapes and others serve for a long period of time.
4. Scholarship and subventions should be made available for e-guidance and counsellors by government and NGOs in order to give themselves to adequate training.
5. More effort should be made by the government to train and retrain counsellors in E-communication. It gives room for a wider range of counselling activities. Individuals will have opportunity to relate with counsellors online as it is in developed countries.
6. Government and NGO's should establish more e-guidance and counselling centers in every field of organizations in government custody. There should be at least three counsellor to a school from nursery to tertiary institutions depending on the population strength. They should create an atmosphere for early introduction of persons with or without special needs in to e-guidance and counselling practice which is intended to foster quality education.

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