Effectiveness of Guidance and Counselling Strategies in Open and Distance Learning for Special Education Needs Students: A Survey of Three Selected Universities in Zambia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effectiveness of guidance and counselling (G&C) services for students with disabilities enrolled in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programmes in Zambia. Anchored in Humanistic Theory, the objectives were to: (i) explore strategies employed by three universities in supporting ODL students with special educational needs (SEN); (ii) identify challenges faced in providing G&C services; and (iii) propose measures to enhance effectiveness. A qualitative, descriptive design was adopted. Data were collected through structured interviews and focus group discussions with 15 participants, including lecturers, students, administrators, interpreters, and a counsellor. Thematic analysis was applied to ensure methodological rigor, supported by triangulation and member checking. Findings reveal that while some assistive technologies (e.g., screen readers, audio lessons, sign language videos, remote counselling, and peer mentorship) were available, their provision was inconsistent and insufficient. Institutions lacked trained counsellors, adequate adaptive technologies, and permanent support staff. Students reported stigma, discrimination, and difficulties accessing learning materials, underscoring systemic gaps in inclusivity.

Keywords: Open and Distance Learning, Guidance and Counselling, Visual Impairment, Physical Disability, Inclusive Education

INTRODUCTION

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has become a rapidly expanding mode of education delivery worldwide, offering flexibility and access to diverse learners (Magasu, Muleya and Simui, 2021). However, questions of inclusivity remain pressing, particularly for students with special educational needs (SEN). Despite the universal right to education, many learners with disabilities continue to face barriers that limit their participation and success in higher education.

In Zambia, the integration of SEN students into ODL programmes is aligned with national development priorities and the global commitment to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education. Yet, evidence suggests that institutional practices often fall short of meeting the holistic needs of these learners. Challenges include inadequate assistive technologies, limited trained personnel, and persistent stigma within academic communities.

This study investigates the effectiveness of guidance and counselling (G&C) strategies for ODL students with SEN in three selected universities in Zambia. While the focus is primarily on visually impaired (VI) students, attempts to include hearing impaired (HI) learners were unsuccessful, underscoring the difficulties institutions face in reaching and supporting diverse groups.

By examining the strategies employed, the challenges encountered, and potential measures for improvement, the study addresses a critical research gap: the limited empirical evidence on how G&C services function in ODL contexts for SEN students. In doing so, it contributes to both national and international debates on inclusive education, highlighting the need for policies and practices that ensure no learner is left behind.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Guidance and Counselling in ODL and SEN Contexts

Scholarship across regional and international contexts consistently affirms the importance of guidance and counselling (G&C) in promoting learners' academic success, psychosocial well-being, and persistence. However, closer examination reveals a conceptual and empirical imbalance in the literature. While numerous studies outline the *importance* of counselling services, fewer critically assess their *effectiveness*, particularly within Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and Special Educational Needs (SEN) contexts.

Research from Kenya, for instance, demonstrates that G&C interventions positively influence students' study habits, while evidence from Zimbabwe suggests that inadequate counselling contributes to reduced motivation and increased dropout risk. Although these studies confirm the potential impact of counselling, they primarily establish associative relationships rather than systematically evaluating institutional structures, implementation quality, or contextual barriers. This reveals a broader limitation within the literature: a tendency toward advocacy for counselling services without rigorous interrogation of delivery mechanisms and measurable outcomes.

Effectiveness and Developmental Outcomes

A recurrent theme in the literature concerns the developmental benefits of structured counselling support. Tuchili and Ndhlovu (2016) found that students exposed to G&C programmes demonstrated stronger interpersonal, vocational, and problem-solving competencies than those without access to such services. Similarly, Sitinjak and Canu (2023) link counselling to emotional resilience and preparedness for adult responsibilities, while Vostanis and Bell (2020) highlight tutoring as a complementary intervention that reinforces holistic learner development.

Despite these positive accounts, the literature reveals two key limitations. First, many studies rely on self-reported outcomes rather than comparative or longitudinal designs. Second, few differentiate between conventional educational settings and ODL environments. As a result, questions remain regarding whether established benefits of G&C translate effectively into distance learning contexts, particularly for learners with SEN.

Structural and Systemic Constraints

While the normative value of G&C is widely acknowledged, implementation challenges remain persistent. Kabamba, Mundende, and Simui (2020) identify chronic underfunding, inadequate staffing, and shortages of qualified counsellors as structural impediments to effective service delivery. Nike et al. (2021) further argue that the professional competence of counsellors depends on continuous retraining, yet institutional support for professional development is often inconsistent.

These studies collectively suggest that the effectiveness of counselling cannot be understood solely at the level of individual counsellor–student interactions. Rather, it is shaped by institutional capacity, policy commitment, and systemic resource allocation. However, existing research tends to treat these constraints descriptively rather than analysing how they interact to influence learner outcomes.

Counselling in ODL Environments

The literature becomes more limited and fragmented when addressing counselling in ODL contexts. Ahimie et al. (2020) report that many ODL programmes lack structured counselling services altogether, recommending online awareness initiatives to improve accessibility. Chileshe, Penda, and Mundende (2025) observe that students with visual impairments encounter technological barriers in accessing ICT-based support systems, thereby compounding educational exclusion.

Taken together, these findings indicate that ODL students experience a "double layer" of vulnerability: first, due to the inherent isolation associated with distance learning, and second, due to disability-related barriers. Yet, few

studies explicitly integrate ODL delivery models with inclusive education principles to assess how counselling services can be adapted to such environments.

Inclusivity and the Ethics of "No One Left Behind"

The broader inclusive education discourse emphasises that educational systems should adapt to learners rather than requiring learners to conform to institutional norms. Mundende and colleagues (2015, 2020, 2023) argue that learner-centred approaches must extend to both conventional and distance education settings. This perspective aligns with global commitments to inclusive education and the principle of ensuring that "no one is left behind."

However, the literature reveals a conceptual gap: while inclusivity is widely endorsed as a principle, empirical evidence demonstrating how counselling services operationalise inclusion in ODL contexts remains scarce. There is limited research examining how institutional policies, infrastructural readiness, and staff competencies collectively influence accessibility for SEN learners.

Synthesis and Analytical Gaps

A cross-cutting synthesis of the literature reveals three interrelated gaps:

1. **Effectiveness Gap** – Evidence supports the value of G&C but lacks rigorous evaluation of outcomes in ODL and SEN-specific contexts.

2. **Implementation Gap** – Structural and systemic barriers are acknowledged but insufficiently theorised in relation to counselling effectiveness.

3. **Inclusion Gap** – Although inclusivity is emphasised normatively, limited research examines how G&C services concretely address accessibility and equity in ODL settings.

These gaps suggest the need for an empirically grounded study that moves beyond descriptive advocacy to critically examine how counselling services are experienced, structured, and operationalised within ODL systems serving learners with SEN.

Analytical Framework

Guided by an interpretivist paradigm, this study conceptualises guidance and counselling effectiveness as a multidimensional construct shaped by three interrelated dimensions:

(a) Impact Dimension

This dimension examines the perceived influence of G&C on learners' academic performance, psychosocial well-being, motivation, and persistence.

(b) Structural Dimension

This dimension analyses institutional capacity, including staffing levels, professional competence, technological infrastructure, funding, and policy implementation.

(c) Inclusivity Dimension

This dimension explores the accessibility and responsiveness of G&C services to learners with SEN in ODL environments, focusing on equity, accommodation, and systemic adaptation.

Rather than treating these dimensions in isolation, the framework recognises their interdependence. For example, limited infrastructure may weaken service effectiveness, while insufficient training may undermine inclusive

practices. By integrating these dimensions, the framework provides a coherent structure for analysing how counselling services function within complex educational systems.

Contribution of the Study

By foregrounding the lived experiences of both staff and students, this study addresses the identified gaps in three ways:

1. It provides empirical evidence on the perceived effectiveness of G&C in ODL settings.

2. It examines structural and systemic constraints affecting implementation.

3. It critically analyses inclusivity and accessibility for students with SEN.

Through this integrated analytical approach, the study contributes to strengthening the evidence base on counselling effectiveness in ODL contexts while advancing scholarly debates on inclusive education and educational equity

METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm and Approach

This study was situated within an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and best understood through participants' lived experiences and meanings. A qualitative research approach was therefore adopted to explore in depth the experiences of staff and students engaged in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) across three universities. This approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand perceptions, challenges, and institutional practices from the perspectives of those directly involved.

Participants and Sampling

The target population comprised lecturers, students, and key support staff involved in ODL at three purposively selected universities (University A, University B, and University C). An initial sample of 25 participants was proposed; however, 15 participants ultimately took part in the study, representing a 60% participation rate. Ten individuals declined participation for personal and logistical reasons.

The final sample consisted of:

- **University A:** 5 lecturers and 4 students (Total = 9)

- **University B:** 2 lecturers (Total = 2)

- **University C:** 2 lecturers and 2 students (Total = 4)

Total participants: **15**

Purposive sampling techniques were employed to ensure that participants possessed relevant experience and could provide rich information aligned with the study objectives. Specifically:

- **Heterogeneous purposive sampling** was used for students to capture diverse perspectives across levels of study and learning experiences.

- **Expert purposive sampling** was applied to lecturers to include those with substantial experience and specialised knowledge in ODL delivery.

- **Critical purposive sampling** was used to identify key support personnel (such as counsellors and interpreters where applicable) whose roles were central to student support in ODL environments.

In addition, one focus group discussion comprising five students from University A (including one sighted student) was conducted to encourage interaction and collective reflection. These five students were part of the 15 total participants and were not additional respondents.

Data Collection

Data were collected using two primary instruments:

1. A structured interview guide for individual participants (lecturers and selected students), and

2. A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) guide for the student focus group.

The structured interview guide ensured consistency across participants while allowing flexibility for probing and elaboration. The FGD guide facilitated collective discussion, enabling participants to build on one another's responses and surface shared or divergent experiences.

All interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in person, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis. The analysis followed a systematic and iterative process:

1. **Familiarisation:** Transcripts were read repeatedly to gain an overall understanding of the data.

2. **Initial Coding:** Meaningful segments of text were identified and assigned open codes representing key ideas or concepts. Coding was conducted manually.

3. **Categorisation:** Related codes were grouped into broader categories reflecting emerging patterns.

4. **Theme Development:** Categories were refined and synthesised into overarching themes that captured the essence of participants' experiences.

5. **Comparative Analysis:** Themes were compared across participant groups (lecturers versus students) and across institutions to identify similarities, differences, and contextual variations.

A provisional codebook was developed during the coding process and refined as new insights emerged. The iterative nature of the analysis ensured that themes were grounded in the data rather than predetermined assumptions.

Trustworthiness

To enhance the rigor and quality of the study, several strategies were employed to ensure credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability:

- **Triangulation:** Data were triangulated across two data collection methods (individual interviews and focus group discussions) and across different participant groups (lecturers and students).

- **Member Checking:** Participants were provided with summaries of their responses and emerging interpretations to verify accuracy and clarify ambiguities.

- **Audit Trail:** Detailed documentation was maintained throughout the research process, including sampling decisions, interview procedures, coding development, and theme refinement.

- **Reflexivity and Confirmability:** The researcher maintained reflexive notes to acknowledge and minimise potential bias in interpretation.

- **Transferability:** Thick descriptions of the research context, participant characteristics, and institutional settings were provided to enable readers to determine the applicability of findings to similar ODL contexts.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional authority prior to data collection. Informed consent was secured from all participants after explaining the purpose of the study, procedures involved, and their rights as participants.

Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Pseudonyms were used in transcripts and reporting to protect identities. Participation was voluntary, and individuals were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Privacy and data security were maintained throughout the research process.

Presentation of Findings

Effectiveness of Guidance and Counselling Services

Participants across the three universities generally perceived guidance and counselling (G&C) services for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) as minimally effective. Most respondents found it difficult to quantify effectiveness; however, some students estimated it to range between 40% and 50%. Only one lecturer from University B rated the services at approximately 70%, explaining that the institution primarily enrolled slow learners and students with minor visual challenges rather than those with severe visual or hearing impairments.

Several administrators and lecturers indicated that essential service parameters were not being met. One administrator stated unequivocally, "there was no effectiveness" (Ad1). Students' narratives reinforced this perception. One student reported inadequate orientation that nearly resulted in withdrawal from the programme. Another described writing examinations in shared spaces with sighted students without necessary accommodations. Additional concerns included the absence of sign language interpreters for hearing-impaired students and lecturers who relied heavily on board work without adapting materials for visually impaired learners.

Despite these challenges, some students acknowledged individual lecturers who demonstrated patience and flexibility, which positively influenced their academic persistence.

Services Offered

Participants reported that institutions provided various forms of support, including emotional, academic, psychological, social, and limited financial assistance. Students mentioned receiving counselling for academic underperformance, victimisation, and financial hardship. However, the availability and accessibility of these services varied across institutions and were often dependent on individual initiative rather than structured institutional systems.

Strategies for Supporting SEN Students

Institutions employed several strategies to support SEN students in ODL programmes. These included sensitisation programmes, lecturer support (particularly from Special Education departments), peer assistance initiatives, involvement of the Dean of Students Affairs, and hostel attendants trained through collaboration with UNESCO. Some universities also relied on ODL student union leaders and external partnerships to address emerging challenges.

While these strategies existed, their implementation was inconsistent and often lacked institutional coordination.

Challenges in the Provision of Services

Participants identified multiple barriers affecting the effectiveness of G&C services:

(a) Infrastructural and Mobility Barriers

Students described unsafe physical environments, including potholes and poorly designed walkways that limited independent movement. One participant stated: "the environment has potholes making the movement very difficult for me" (ST1). Another reported being left alone after group discussions late at night due to the absence of personal assistance (ST5).

(b) Assessment and Technological Constraints

The absence of assistive technologies, such as embossers, required invigilators to read examination questions aloud individually to visually impaired students. This process consumed examination time and created inequitable assessment conditions. Although extra time was sometimes granted, participants felt it did not sufficiently compensate for structural disadvantages. Some lecturers acknowledged limited training in SEN pedagogy, with one stating, "lecturers are not competent" (LT2).

(c) Discrimination and Academic Exclusion

Several visually impaired students reported being denied front seating or being discouraged from enrolling in certain academic programmes. One participant indicated being redirected from a science programme to a Special Education programme due to his impairment. These accounts reflect experiences of marginalisation within institutional structures.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings reveal a significant gap between institutional commitments to inclusive education and the lived experiences of SEN students in ODL contexts. The generally low ratings of G&C effectiveness suggest systemic rather than individual shortcomings.

The reported lack of structured orientation, limited assistive technologies, and inadequate interpreter services indicates that inclusion remains largely aspirational. These findings support the argument by Ahimie et al. (2020) that counselling services for ODL learners with SEN are often less effective than those in conventional learning environments due to structural and logistical constraints.

Although institutions reported offering emotional and academic support, the inconsistency in implementation suggests weak institutionalisation of inclusive frameworks. Effective counselling systems require coordinated policy implementation, trained personnel, and adequate technological infrastructure. The absence of embossers and adaptive assessment systems highlights a disconnect between inclusive policy rhetoric and operational practice.

The experiences of redirection from certain academic programmes and denial of front seating further reflect structural discrimination. Such practices align with concerns raised in UNESCO (2017) regarding weak enforcement of inclusive education policies in higher education systems. Similarly, Blessing and Gilani (2024) emphasise that exclusion often occurs subtly through institutional norms rather than explicit denial of access.

The findings also highlight the importance of individual lecturer agency. While systemic limitations were evident, supportive lecturers mitigated some barriers through adaptive teaching practices. This underscores the importance of professional development in inclusive pedagogy.

Overall, the study demonstrates that while guidance and counselling structures exist, their effectiveness is constrained by infrastructural deficits, limited training, technological gaps, and attitudinal barriers. Addressing these challenges requires systemic reform rather than reliance on individual goodwill

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study found that guidance and counselling (G&C) strategies for ODL SEN students across the three universities were largely ineffective, with most participants rating them below 60% or declining to assign any effectiveness at all. The challenges identified included inadequate assistive technologies, absence of permanent support staff (such as interpreters and personal assistants), lack of specialized equipment (e.g., embossers), and insufficient training among lecturers and administrators. These shortcomings reflect broader institutional gaps in understanding and addressing the holistic needs of students with disabilities.

While ODL platforms offer flexibility, the absence of inclusive policies, trained personnel, and adaptive technologies undermines their potential. The findings highlight not only infrastructural and resource limitations but also attitudinal barriers, including discrimination and lack of awareness among peers and staff.

Theoretically, this study underscores the importance of embedding inclusivity within educational frameworks, aligning with principles of equity and social justice. Beyond the Zambian context, the results resonate with global debates on inclusive education, demonstrating that effective G&C services are critical for ensuring that students with diverse needs can fully participate and succeed in higher education.

Recommendations

1. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** The Ministry of Education should establish regular monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in higher education institutions (HEIs) to ensure accountability and continuous improvement in G&C services.

2. **Capacity Building:** Higher Education Institutions should conduct regular workshops and seminars to train all staff in basic SEN competencies, fostering inclusive teaching and support practices.

3. **Investment in Resources:** Universities should prioritise investment in assistive technologies (e.g., embossers, adaptive learning materials) and recruit sufficient human capital to provide individualized support for SEN students.

4. **Permanent Staffing:** Institutions should employ permanent interpreters and personal assistants for visually and hearing-impaired students, ensuring consistent and high-quality support.

5. **Policy Integration:** Inclusive education policies should be mainstreamed into institutional frameworks, ensuring that G&C services are not peripheral but integral to academic and student support systems.

6. **Global Applicability:** Lessons from this study can inform broader contexts, emphasising that inclusive G&C services are essential for equity in ODL worldwide. Institutions in diverse settings should adopt similar strategies to strengthen accessibility and participation for SEN learners.

Implications for Future Research

The findings of this study underscore the urgent need for further inquiry into the provision of guidance and counselling (G&C) services for ODL SEN students. Several implications emerge:

- **Theoretical Development:** Future research should deepen the theoretical understanding of inclusivity in ODL contexts, particularly by integrating frameworks of equity, social justice, and universal design for learning. This would strengthen the analytical foundation for examining how G&C services contribute to broader educational outcomes.

- **Comparative Studies:** Cross-national and regional comparative studies could illuminate similarities and differences in how institutions address SEN needs in ODL. Such research would extend the applicability of findings beyond Zambia and contribute to global debates on inclusive higher education.

- **Methodological Expansion:** While this study relied on qualitative methods, future research could incorporate mixed-methods approaches to generate both rich narratives and measurable evidence of effectiveness. Quantitative data on retention, performance, and psychosocial outcomes would complement qualitative insights.

- **Technology and Innovation:** Further exploration is needed into how assistive technologies and digital platforms can be leveraged to enhance accessibility in ODL. Research should examine both institutional readiness and student experiences with emerging tools.

- **Policy Impact:** Longitudinal studies could assess the effectiveness of policy interventions and institutional reforms over time, providing evidence on whether investments in training, staffing, and infrastructure translate into improved outcomes for SEN learners.

By pursuing these directions, future research can build on the present study's findings to advance both theory and practice, ensuring that G&C services in ODL settings are inclusive, effective, and globally relevant.

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