Process of Assuring Quality in Counselling at the National Open University of Nigeria: A Critique

Fidel O Okopi
National Open University of Nigeria, Lagos
okopifidel@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract: *Provision of counselling services in open and distance education remains one of the best intervention strategies aimed at improving the capacity of every student to develop oneself and also to overcome numerous obstacles that may impinge on the process to successful completion of his or her programme. The process of providing these counselling services in an open university is not without inherent difficulties. This paper critiques the counselling process at the National Open University of Nigeria and possibly identifies impediments militating against effective, efficient and positive impact of therapeutic process on the clients. The paper also identifies areas in the therapeutic processes and procedures that need continuous rigorous research and documentation. The main aim of such research is to explore the possibilities of making the process of counselling interaction more learner centred, learner friendly and quality assured using Six Sigma Quality Assurance model. The paper therefore discusses the concept of open and distance education, alongside with the mission statement of NOUN, learner support services used in counselling or therapeutic services as it operates in ODL and in NOUN, media of counselling, challenges of guidance service delivery in NOUN and makes incisive recommendations on how to improve guidance service delivery.*

Key words: Process, assuring quality, counselling, NOUN, critique, Six Sigma, philosophy

INTRODUCTION

Open and Distance Education as defined by the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) is the mode of teaching in which learners are removed in time and space from the teachers (FGN, 1981, 2004:44). According to the Federal Government of Nigeria, open distance education uses a variety of media and technologies to provide and/or improve access to good quality education for large number of learners wherever they may be. (FGN, 2004 44) Based on this philosophy, the Federal Government of Nigeria established the National Open University in 1983 but by 1984, the Military Government of Nigeria by then, made no budgetary allocation for it. With this action of the Federal Military Government, the University ceased to function. In 2002, the democratically elected Federal Government of Nigeria resuscitated it and christened it National Open University of Nigeria with the following vision and mission.

The *vision* is to ensure that the university is regarded as the foremost in providing highly accessible and enhanced quality education anchored by social justice, equity and national cohesion through a comprehensive reach that transcends all barriers**.** While the *mission* is to provide functional cost-effective, flexible learning which adds life-long value to quality education for all who seek knowledge. And the *motto* is work and learn.

In order to realise the above stated mission, the directorate of learner support services was created right from the inception of the University in order to provide among other services, guidance and counselling services with the aim of catering for the academic and psycho-social needs of the learners. The establishment of the directorate of learner support services by NOUN is a unique feature in the history of university education in Nigeria. The uniqueness stems from the fact that as of October 2010, National Open University of Nigeria

is the only university in Nigeria that operates learner support services as a directorate. For the purposes of bringing tutorial facilitation, counselling and academic advice, administrative, information and other administrative support services closer to the students, as at June 2011, the university had established forty five study centres across Nigeria. To ensure that efficient and effective support services are rendered at every centre, the university employed forty two study centre directors who are mostly seasoned professors, seventy professional counselling psychologists and other administrative staff as full time employees of the university. Also two thousand nine hundred and eighty one tutorial facilitators were employed as part time staff to facilitate tutorials in all its study centres across Nigeria. The duties of student counsellors are discussed below.

Guidance Services in Open and Distance Education

Guidance and counselling services remain one of the crucial support services rendered by the ODL institutions to the learners. In NOUN, guidance and counselling services are designated responsibility of professional counselling psychologists. What is guidance service? Guidance is a dynamic process of helping someone to understand oneself better; to grow and develop as much as possible and adjust to his or her environment if the environment cannot be changed while at the same time remains a factor of possible change of that environment. In this regard educational guidance is the process of helping students to achieve self understanding and self direction necessary to make informed choice and move towards personal goals (Encarta, 2011). Guidance as defined by Bailey's (1987:33) involves a range of processes aimed at helping individuals to become more self-reliant and more able to manage their own personal, educational, and vocational development. According to her the main focus of guidance includes:

- Providing clear, accurate, unbiased, and relevant information to the individual in a form and at a pace that is most useful to him or her.
- Making suggestions to the individual based on the helper's own knowledge or expertise in form of advice.
- Offering the individual, a relationship based on trust and acceptance within which he or she can explore issues relevant to development and can carry through decisions via counselling.
- Creating or structuring a learning experience so that, the individual can practice and gain new knowledge, skills, or perceptions through coaching.
- Gathering and giving information about the individual or about specific aspects of the individual (abilities, performance, aptitudes, values, interests, and so on) through assessment.
- Taking action on behalf of a learner with the agreement of the individual via advocacy.
- Providing information to organizations on the experiences or problems of individuals that require changes in the system through feedback mechanism.

The aim of educational guidance is to provide every student an opportunity to enable him or her to develop his or her abilities, aptitudes and capacities to the fullest, giving every individual student an opportunity for a useful and happy life. Counselling means offering the individual, a relationship based on trust and acceptance within which he or she can explore and clarify development issues and problems that might militate against the realisation of his or her objective of enrolling in his or her programme or successful completion of their programmes and be in a position to take informed decisions. The scope of this paper would be confined to appraising the traditional face-to-face counselling process as conducted at the National Open University of Nigeria.

COUNSELLING IN OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

Theories of counselling

There are quite a number of counselling and psychotherapeutic theories, however this paper would rely on eclectic therapy. The choice of eclectic therapy has been necessitated by the diverse counselling situations in ODL and different strategies needed to be explored to understand the client better. Counselling is part and parcel of the more inclusive process of guidance. Akinboye (1983) identified counselling as a helping relationship in which a professionally trained individual (the counsellor) utilises a number of strategies to help an individual (counselee) who has some problem to cope with, decide and live according to his/her (counselee) best interest. According to Poonwassile (2001) a counsellor 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. Wickramaratne, (2001) review of relevant literature has indicated that counselling is an appropriate way to enhance the capacity of students to develop themselves and also to overcome barriers that they may encounter in the process of successful completion of programmes.

From the foregoing discussion, it is difficult to say exactly what are the goals clients want to achieve from counselling and psychotherapy, and what counselling and psychotherapy are for him or her however, the goals for seeking counselling by the individual client evolve as the process of counselling progresses. Feltham (2003:9) opined that it is possible to say that the overall goal of therapy is to facilitate clients' own resourcefulness, insight, problem-solving capacities, and happiness and so on. At NOUN, experience has shown that counselling service seems to focus mainly on developmental, supportive, psycho-educational guidance, problem solving and decision-making and adjustment and resource provision counselling. Although there is no rigid demarcation between these areas of focus, for the purpose of clarity the above mentioned terms will be briefly explained in the subsequent sections.

From the developmental perspective, counselling is concerned with the development of learners and covers issues related to clarification of course information, entry requirements, orientation to study at a distance, overall career directions; support to deal with the sense of frustration and disappointment; encouraging return to study, organising and structuring time and social demands, etc. (Feltham, 2003:10).

While supportive therapy as suggested by Feltham (*op. cit)* means a form of therapy that upholds current ego-strength and/or coping skills and does not seek challenge or uncover. The support may be in form of warm, non-judgemental listening and encouragement and, supportive therapy leans towards advocacy. Its aim is to support the person through a difficult time and/or towards a position of independence or readiness for more challenging therapy. This is in line with the tenet of Open and Distance learning which emphasises independent study on the part of the students.

However, psycho-educational guidance involves psychologically informed practices such as appropriate information- giving, administering of questionnaire, coaching, mentoring, provision of social skills, life skills training, assertiveness and relaxation training, marriage enrichment programmes, parents effectiveness training, relapse prevention programmes, stress inoculation training programmes are examples. All these are aimed at identifying improvable behaviours and to teach personal skills in various areas of life. According to Feltham (*op. cit*), the aim is not to uncover presumed psychopathology but to directly

enhance cognitive, behavioural and interpersonal functioning, to assist clients in meeting their developmental challenges and to equip them with concrete coping techniques and philosophies. Among all aspects of counselling psycho-education guidance is the most widely practised in NOUN.

On the other hand, problem solving and decision making counselling involves examining a life situation or dilemma and come to a (probably quite early) resolution or decision; for example, how to cope with difficult relationship, learning at a distance, how to prepare for examination and so on. The aim is to facilitate exploration of issues, feelings and practicalities, addressing anxiety and loss may be part of the process. In some approaches, a philosophy and techniques of problem-solving may be imparted as a proactive tool for living (Feltham, 2003:10).

Meanwhile, adjustment and resource provision counselling approach seems to be present in some counselling settings (e.g. induction and orientation programme of NOUN) aims at helping students who seek short-terms adjustment-orientation that may include elements of supportive therapy, problem solving skills, assertiveness training, brain storming solutions, plus the provision of contextual information (e.g. how to adjust to ODL system , or what skills are required of students that will enable them complete their programmes successfully?) According to Feltham (*op.cit*) in such context, counsellors may act both as non-directive facilitators and as providers of relevant information and in some cases as brokers between individual clients and the organisation.

Some other aspects of counselling which are rarely used in NOUN include crisis intervention and management, symptom amelioration, insight and understanding, cure, self-actualisation, personality change, discovery of meaning and transcendental experience, systemic, organisational or social change etc. However the paper is concerned with establishing qualitative therapeutic relationship through face-to-face process, leaving out technological mediated counselling process. The reason for leaving out discussion of technologically mediated counselling process is because the on line or mobile counselling process has not been fully implemented at all NOUN study centres. Nevertheless, the subsequent sections of this paper would focus on assuring quality of counselling process in NOUN.

Assuring quality of counselling process in NOUN
Ekong (1998) revealed that quality assurance system must be a means by which an institution confirms to itself and to others the conditions that are in place for students to achieve the standards that the institution has set. In other words, student development and experiences should form the core index in developing quality assurance. Quality assurance as applied in Open and Distance context is designed to *prove* and *improve* the quality of an institution's methods, educational products and outcomes. In applying this concept to counselling therefore means to prove and improve the process of counselling services by making it more efficient and effective in meeting the needs and expectations of the students, propelling them toward successful completion of their programmes. The *Six Sigma philosophy* or initiative model of quality assurance which aimed at improving the quality of products or services by improving the system and processes involved seems to be very much appropriate to this write-up.

Six sigma philosophy is one of the quality assurance models used initially by manufacturing industries to improve quality of their products. Six sigma is a philosophy and quality tool or initiative to improve the quality of products or services by improving the system and processes involved. It is a measure of goodness involving the application of statistical methods to business processes to improve operation efficiency, reduce variation and waste,

and avoid defects (Onyewuenyi, 2008). Six Sigma was originally developed by Motorola in 1981. The targets of Six Sigma are to contribute to financial cost reduction or (project increase) or whatever is critical to the process (cycle time, safety, delivery, etc). The term 'Six Sigma' comes from a field of statistics known as process capacity studies. Originally it referred to the ability of manufacturing processes to produce a very high proportion of output within specification. Six Sigma implication goals are to improve all processes to that level of quality.

In the education industry, the customers' specification expected to be met includes the expectations of students, staff, and parents, government and employers. Six sigma projects follow two project methodologies inspired by Deming's Plan-Do-Check- Act cycle. These methodologies comprising five phases each bear the acronyms DMAIC and DMADV. DMAIC is used for projects, aimed to improving an existing business processes while DMADV is used for projects aimed at creating new products or process design. For the purpose of this paper, the DMAIC would be a more relevant methodology.

DMAIC methodology has five phases
- Define the problems, the voice of the customers and project goals, specifically.
- Measure key aspects of the current processes and collect relevant data.
- Analyse the data to investigate and verify cause- and- effect relationship. Determine what the relationships are and attempt to ensure that all factors have been considered seek out root causes of the defect under investigation.
- Improve or optimise the current process based upon data analysed using techniques such as design of experiments, poka yoke or mistake proofing and standard work to create a new future state processes set up runs to establish process capacity.
- Control the future state process to ensure that any deviations from the target are corrected before the result in defect. Control systems are implemented such as statistical processes control, production boards and visual workplace control. Production boards and visual workplaces and the process is continuously monitored.

Implications of Six Sigma to education
Quality of subject matter taught, the mode of delivery, the character generated in the students, the quality of study, guidance services and school life are areas onto which the Six Sigma can be applied (Onyewuenyi, 2008). The application of Six Sigma in the case of counselling involves counsellor using his or her both generic skills, receptive and responding skills to improve the quality of therapeutic process. The main focus of DMAIC is on how to improve the existing processes of organisational operations or institutional operations. In other words, how to improve specifically, the process of establishing therapeutic relationship with the students by counsellors at the study centres through traditional face-to-face counselling. The concept of DMAIC as it applies to counselling in ODL is to examine how to effectively and efficiently improve the process of helping learners explore and clarify issues and problems that might militate against the realisation of their objectives of enrolling in their programmes or successful completion of their programmes. In the subsequent sections of this paper, we would be discussing the processes of standardising the traditional face-to-face counselling in NOUN.

Process of establishing therapeutic relationship with students at NOUN study centres
As identified by many authors, therapeutic relationship remains the main core of counselling process. Kahn (1999:1) revealed that the relationship is the therapy itself. In terms of the therapeutic climate there is overwhelming agreement among researchers that the key factor

in client change resides in the relationship between client and counsellor, and in the self that the counsellor is able to put into a relationship with the client (McGuines 2003:94). However Clarkson (1999: viii) indicated that person-to-person relationship exemplified in Rogerian counselling is a paradigmatic example of relationship. According to Khan (1999:28) Rogers' pursuit of goal involves setting out with the client, not to solve one particular problem or presented one but for the client to grow, in a way that facilitates the growth of autonomous, developing coping strategies that will have more generalised application in the whole of the client's life. Also Rogers (1942: 233) focused on the concept of growth towards more autonomous, responsible and confident living which is based on creation of a relationship, a therapeutic climate, which of its nature encourages, permits and enhances therapeutic movement in the client. Rogers used self-disclosure as a means of establishing more symmetry in the relationship. Effective counselling consists of a definitely structured permissive relationship which allows the client to gain an understanding of himself or herself to a degree which enables one to take positive steps in the light of this new orientation (Rogers, 1942:18). Strupp (1986) noted that counselling may be said to develop, maintain and manage a specialised human relationship with therapeutic intent. Egan (1986) acknowledged that the prime responsibility for creating that relationship, he calls a therapeutic climate lies with the therapist, who must be congruent in the relationship.

The concession among the authors above is that the ability of the counsellor to communicate empathic understanding of the client, unconditional respect and to be perceived as congruent, genuine, honest, and non-judgemental by the client, requires both generic skills, receptive and responding skills of the therapist. The communication of the generic skills, receptive and responding skills by the counsellor to the clients will encourage the client's self disclosure, his or her continuous readiness to learn new coping skills and be motivated to change his or her life strategies. Communication also forms the basis of establishing a therapeutic relationship or counselling itself. The generic skills include;
(i)   Establishing contact with clients.
(ii)   Ensuring a structured therapeutic setting.
(iii)   Developing the therapeutic relationship.
(iv)   Developing and maintaining interaction with clients.
(v)   Evaluating and developing work on self.
(vi)   Monitoring self within the therapeutic process (Inskipp 2003:74)

According to Inskipp (2003:74) apart from generic skills a counsellor also needs to have basic and more complex communication skills. These skills can be learned and practised. He further stated that effective and efficient counselling process depends not only on the skills counsellors use to communicate with their clients, but on how well they are able to be aware and reflect upon what is going on inside themselves as well as their clients and what they imagine is going on inside their clients. This in turn depends on the awareness of the counsellor's own attitude, belief, values, intentions and knowledge. These skills of inside awareness are what Inskipp (2003) referred to as 'inside or process skills' and those skills that can be seen and evaluated by an observer as 'outside skills'.

Inside skills
At the beginning stage of counselling, the counsellor must use his inside skills such as awareness of his own experience of initial interpersonal contact and this can be developed by self-reflecting.
• What feelings, thought, bodily sensations are engendered at the first individual?
• How do these vary when meeting with different individuals?
• Have I any particular allergies to people?

- How to develop impartial witnessing?
- How different am I in the role of the counsellor from my everyday self?

Impartial witnessing

Another inside skill, counsellors need to develop is impartial witnessing. According to Inskipp, (2003:78) impartial witnessing is concerned with the ability to observe inner processes without judging. To be an interested and curious observer of inner self is one of the greatest skills that should be developed by a counsellor. It enables the counsellors to use their thoughts, sensation, images and emotions both to build the therapeutic relationship and promote purposeful interaction with the client. For the counsellor to be aware of how others experience, the counsellor must be in psychological contact initially**.** That is whether the counselee experiences the counsellor as, for example, being warm or cool, immediate or slow in contact, anxious or relaxed, engaged or distance, congruent or incongruent, strong or vulnerable, fearful or open, intrusive or distant etc.

Outsider skills

Skills of greeting appropriately and starting the interactions are concerned with the following kinds of issues:
- How do I encourage psychological contact?
- Does the counsellor have physical contact e.g. shake hand?
- Does the counsellor put the client at ease? If so how?
- What impression, if any does the counsellor wants the client to have about him or her?
- How the scene is set which is not a social visit but is sufficiently welcoming?
- Eye to eye contact and gaze (not staring) facial expression and head movement (Inskipp, 2003:79).

There is a degree of anxiety and threat in all interpersonal relationship. The counsellor tends (as a human being) to like approval and fear rejection and this can interfere with their non-verbal messages of receptiveness to the client if they are not aware of or have not worked on their interpersonal anxieties (Inskipp 2003:82). Both verbal and non-verbal behaviour can indicate an open willingness to work with the client and also a commitment to helping him or her.

Observing

What is the counsellor looking for? And why is he looking for it?
The counsellor is looking out for physical appearance, posture, facial expression, dressing, grooming, perspiration, blushing, breathing or smell. Also tone and volume of voice, pace expressiveness, speech difficulties, articulation, thinking; slow, fast, disjointed, rational, congruence between worlds and body language.
Why is the counsellor looking for these? It is for him or her to pick up clues, to begin to understand the client from his internal reference point, his view of himself, looking, listening and resonating give the clues to developing empathy.

Listening and hearing are essential out skills effective that a counsellor must develop. Hearing is picking up the sounds, listening is an inner activity which is aligned with attention giving. Listening to how the words are said, the tone, intensity, emotional reflexion, pace, volume and taking all these in helps the counsellor to catch the precise meaning of the speaker, and what this says about him as a person. As counsellors listen, they are remember, choose and discriminate what to respond to, monitoring their own thoughts, feeling, images, and bodily sensation- listening with their bodies as well as their ears. When clients feel really listened to they are encouraged to talk and reveal themselves. Counsellors will often get a lot

of information in a first session without asking specific questions, allowing clients to tell their story in their own way, rather than through a formal assessment. Accurate listening can help clients to become more aware of their 'inner flow of experiencing'. Some clients may need to be encouraged to acknowledge experience and express their thoughts and feelings. Good listening may reduce defensiveness and this may enable clients to focus on their own behaviour rather than on what others do to them. Good listening provides psychological space and support for client's self-exploration (Inskipp 2003:83).

Responding/facilitating skills
The above mentioned skills are receptive ones, communicated through body language. Counsellors also need good responding or facilitating skills- active listening skills. These demonstrate and communicate empathy and acceptance facilitates self-exploration. The first level of empathy communicates to the client the manner he/she is perceived at this moment. It needs to be as accurate as possible, without adding or subtracting and also identifying the level of feeling being expressed. Two important skills at this point are:-
- *Paraphrasing:* This involves picking up the meaning of the client's words and putting them back to him accurately, using your own words and/ or his using a tentative, almost questioning tone, checking you understand what he is conveying.
- *Reflecting feeling:* This means identifying what the client is feeling often mainly from the non-verbal-tone of voice, bodily expression, your own bodily resonance.

Implications of six sigma to counselling
The process of applying Six Sigma therefore involves researching and constantly evaluating the three facets of counselling: beginning, middle and ending process phases in counselling using appropriate statistics package. First and foremost, the counsellor must document each phase in a written form. The video/visual camera or radio cassette could be used to video/audio tape each phase of the process or peer review mechanism could be explored. These methods mentioned above, will enable both the counsellor and counselee to re-examine the whole process and determine whether the process meets the set objectives or not. However the video/audio taping must be undertaken with the consent of the counselee. Equally important, is the use of well-designed questionnaire administered on the clients with aim of assessing the effectiveness and efficiency of each session. The counsellor must endeavour to carry out scientific analysis of questionnaire and all documentations. In the proceeding section, the paper will discuss face-to-face counselling in NOUN study centres.

Building therapeutic relationship through face-to face medium: NOUN context
Face-to-face counselling in many ways remains the most important medium of counselling at all study centres of the National Open University of Nigeria. However, it is extremely expensive in terms of staff engagement, time and travel; and could also be inaccessible to some distance learners. One way of reducing the problems of individual face-to-face counselling is through group counselling. Although a group loses the one-to-one relationship of counsellor and learner, it provides the opportunity for learners to share their concerns with each other.

In traditional face-to-face counselling, the client needs to know that the counsellor understands him or her from his or her point of view, accepting and not judging him or her and openly present genuineness in the role toward helping to develop, maintain and foster therapeutic relationship, a rapport and working alliance. According to Simpson (1992), in order to build, maintain and promote therapeutic relationship with a client the counsellor must acquire the following prerequisite skills; attending, observing, listening, reflecting, probing and being concrete. The process of counselling can be categorised into three stages-

beginning, middle and end. For the purpose of this write up, only the summary of these process phases of counselling are discussed.

Beginning
How does a client know about counsellors at the study centre? When a prospective student walks to a NOUN study centre for inquiry, the first port of call is the counsellor's office or when the prospective students visit the University's webpage, the profile of their counsellors are conspicuously displayed. This is to enable the prospective students and registered students to know whom their counsellors are, their qualification, their phone numbers, contact addresses, e-mail addresses and at the centre to physically meet the counsellor. In the counsellor's office are displayed; university student handbook, bulletin, the university prospectus, getting to know your university, and the contact addresses of the counsellors'. On the notice boards outside the counsellor's office, a list of available counselling services at the centre is displayed. Knowing your counsellor either physically or hearing his or her voice through the phone or text is the beginning of building a therapeutic relationship, establishing rapport and effective working alliance. At NOUN orientation is organised on continuous process and counsellors are involved from the point of first pre-admission inquiry by the prospective students through registration, matriculation, on course to graduation.

At NOUN the process of assuring quality counselling services begins with recruitment of professional counselling psychologists. The minimum qualification of the student counsellors at NOUN is a Masters Degree in Guidance and Counselling or psychology. In spite of their qualifications whenever counsellors are recruited at NOUN, an induction/orientation programme is being organised for them. This is to orientate them on counselling in Open and Distance Learning system and rehearse the three process phases of standard face-to-face counselling, starting from beginning process phrase to ending process phrase. In addition, monthly bulletin treating critical areas of counselling in ODL are sent to every counsellor on the field in order to keep them abreast of latest development in these areas. At NOUN centres where there are two counsellors, they are encouraged to use pair review mechanism method for appraising their practices. To keep abreast with their work, the student counsellors are encouraged to undertake systemic research in their various centres.

First contact at the study centres
The NOUN normally and formally organises two days orientation for the registering students and this orientation marks the first face-to-face formal contact with many of the students. Also during the orientation the counsellors at various centres provide information about themselves, their functions and duties. Further information provided includes:
- Educational facilities available at the centre.
- Information and communication facilities at the centre and how students may access them.
- Full range of support services available at the study centre.
- Whom to contact when selecting courses.
- Employment opportunities available and skills they will have after completion.
- What the programme entails and what is expected of them as distance learners.
- ODL system and methodology including counselling, assignment schedule, mentoring, library and learning resources, interactive sessions, despatch of course materials and examination systems.
- Fees, scholarship, financial assistance and recognition of prior learning.

In addition, students are provided with orientation package that contains Student Hand book, Brochure, Getting to Know Your University, fee schedule, etc. During the orientation, the skilful presentation of this information service by the counsellors about themselves and university provides opportunity and serve as a means of inspiring students to have confidence, start building therapeutic relationship, and establishing rapport and effective working alliance with their counsellors. In addition, the counsellors at the study centres open and keep a file on every registered student of the university in order to facilitate easy contact, tracing of every student and to enhance therapeutic communication. Such file contains student ledger, registration form, courses registered for, fees paid, examination registration, change of programme if any, change of study centre if any, learning circle or facilitation group of the student, students contact address, e-mail, phone number and student ledger. The counsellors at the study centres are expected to keep daily records of their counselling activities which include names of the students counselled, the nature of the problems, time, next appointment etc. Building therapeutic relationship, establishing a rapport and working alliance with the clients are fundamental ingredients in all forms of counselling. At this point of the discourse, the writer would like to focus on face-to-face counselling mode.

Beginning phase process goals of face-to-face counselling mode
According to Horton (2003:114) the first face-to-face meeting with the client sows the seeds of attraction, uncertainty or dislike and the beginning of the therapist's assessment of the client. But of course this is a two way process, clients will have feelings too and make assumptions about the therapists on their meeting. He opined that both parties will be tentatively sizing the other up. The goals of the beginning phase process in therapy at the National Open University of Nigeria follow the normal standard practice of building relationship, establishing a rapport and effective working alliance with clients, clarify boundaries, conditions and the clients' role and work towards developing mental aims about the work of the therapy. This phase process also helps the counsellor to say something about the ground rules or boundaries of counselling. Issues about privacy, confidentiality and its limitation, length of session and time boundaries may need to be explained and discussed. At this point the counsellor may need to reassure the client that he or she respects confidentiality and the therapy is no compatible with socialising. The aspect of the counselling process most strongly associated with successful outcome is the quality of the therapeutic relationship and the strength of the working alliance.

Facilitating client's self-disclosure is the primary task of the beginning phase of counselling. Identify the client's present problem, beginning to understand the client's world view and experiences, exploring antecedents, precipitating events, social/cultural context and assessment of client strength and resources are considered to be very important at this phase (Horton, 2004:117). As the counsellor listens to the client's story, he may begin to develop a tentative assessment of the nature, origins and ramifications of the client's problem(s) in such ways that suggest a possible target for change. This will enable both the counsellor and client to begin building a picture of the problem to consider if and how therapy might help. The beginning phase may last for one, or two or more sessions depending on the nature of the contract, theoretical orientation and progress made.

Middle phase process
In the middle phase the counsellor continues to maintain and sustain further the relationship with the clients. Where appropriate and consistent with the counsellor's theoretical orientation, the dynamics of the relationship or what is going on within both the counsellor and client and between them may be used as a basis for learning and motivation. The relationship between the counsellor and client can often provide an opportunity for the client to present his or her problems and any hidden conflicts or issues.

In the middle phase the counsellor is concerned with facilitating learning and change, congruent with the identified therapeutic goals and theoretical assumptions about change (Horton, 2003:118). It is the phase in which sometimes unexpected memories, discoveries, obstacles, crisis, ambivalence or defence may arise. The process goals of this phase may involve searching for patterns and key themes in the client's experience and behaviours, and ways of coping, working towards new perspectives, deeper self awareness or understanding and learning different ways of thinking, feelings and/or behaving.

At this point a progress review agenda would usually involve discussing the following aspects;
- Client and counsellor expectations and the understanding of what it is they are trying to achieve together.
- The counselling goal; what has been achieved? What change has occurred? What evidence is there of any change?
- Client's experience of the counselling process and relationship. What has the client found helpful, unhelpful or difficult? What problems if any, do the counsellor and client have in working together?
- Negotiate ways forward. Review and confirm or if necessary revise the therapeutic process, work and discuss the alternative ways of working.
- Review the contract and re-contract for a further period between the next review session (Horton, 2003:119).

Ending phase process
The ending phase of the therapy should be decided by mutual agreement between the counsellor and client. This decision must take into consideration the nature of the therapy, type of contract and sometimes negotiated or otherwise implicit completion criteria. Clearly counsellors need to be aware of what, if any, are the circumstances that justify extension and how flexible they can be and what the ramifications are. The following are important tasks in working towards a satisfactory ending with clients that must be noted;
- Seeking resolution of the client's issues around ending.
- Exploring ways of consolidating learning and change through helping clients to apply and assimilate change into news of being or living and through identifying obstacles and a ways of sustaining and expanding change.
- Evaluating the outcomes of therapy and the effectiveness (or otherwise of the therapy process and relationship (Horton, 2003:120)

In addition to the measures taken by the National Open University of Nigeria in order to assure quality in counselling process, a ledger is kept for every student that comes for counselling. In the ledger, information about the student's bio- data, identified problem areas, theoretical framework used in the process, follow up date, etc is kept and equally audio/or visual cassettes of such encounters are also kept. Every counsellor in NOUN is expected to send monthly reports of their counselling encounters to the Directorate of Learner Support Services for performance assessment. A monitoring team from the Directorate of Learner Support services visits every study centre at least four times every year to assess the performance of all staff at the study centres. Towards the end of every year, a questionnaire is given to samples of students drawn from various centres for independent assessment of their perceptions of learners support services. Moreover the counsellors are encouraged to carry out centre specific research on counselling processes and send their reports to the Directorate of Learner Support Services

Challenges to effective counselling process at the National Open University
There are many challenges to effective counselling process at NOUN. Among these challenges are:

Funding
At NOUN, student counsellors are full time employees of the University and so they are not allowed to enter into any contract with any prospective or registered students. To compound the funding problem no provision is made for counselling office in the imprest funding given periodically to the Study Centres. Student counsellors have to run their offices from their monthly salaries. For example, if there is need to call or visit a student or students, the counsellor has to do that at his or her own expense.

Number of students assigned to each counsellor
It is the policy of NOUN that each study centre will have a minimum of two counsellors but in reality, many study centres as for now are having only one counsellor for over two thousand students. With this large number of students under one counsellor, it is very difficult for effective one-to-one counselling to take place. The same situation applies to group counselling.

Lack of conducive environment for counselling
In most of NOUN study centres, the counsellors are provided with ill equipped offices and mostly lack the basic counselling tools. In most centres counsellors are not provided with computers, internet facility, radio cassette, web or video cameras, and CD Room or call phones by the University. In most cases the counsellors have to provide these equipment on their own.

Counsellors are burdened with other administrative duties
In NOUN study counsellors are over burdened with other administrative duties such as admission, registration, matriculation, examination, etc. assigned by their Study Centre Directors, making counselling a secondary duty. As a subordinate to the Study Centre Director, the student counsellor must not refuse to carry out any directive or assignment given by the Director, even though the directive or assignment may be outside his or her duty schedules. These burdens make it difficult for the counsellors to be efficient, effective and deliver desired impaction on the counselling process.

Training and re-training programmes
Training and re-training is the hallmark of capacity building of staff and means of improving efficient, effectiveness and making desirable impact on the performance of staff. The Directorate of Learner Support Services has planned quarterly workshops/seminars for counsellors on the field in other to brainstorm on problems encountered during the performance of their duties but most of the time the planned workshops and seminar did not take place because of paucity of fund. For about two years now, the Directorate has not conducted such workshops/seminars.

Relationship with other staff of the centre
In NOUN study centres many of our staff especially the administrative ones do not know precisely the functions of the student counsellors and many of them dabble into counselling areas which they are not adequately trained thereby compounded the problems of the students or misleading them. In spite of the fact that these staff members received adequate induction/orientation at the entering point to the career in NOUN, most of them hardly make appropriate referral on counselling issues. These hazardous handling of counselling issues by

the other staff of the centres had in recent past discouraged many students from seeking counselling from professional counsellors at the centres.

Perception of counsellors by the students themselves
Many of NOUN students are from conversional institutions where counselling did not exist or had not experienced counselling in their life. In Nigeria, many people misconceive visiting a counselling psychologist or psychiatrist as a sign of having mental or psychiatric problems and many of our students harbour this misconception. Many NOUN students see their counsellors as unapproachable and therefore avoid them by all means despite their problems.

RECOMMENDATIONS
Counselling unit should be created at all the NOUN study centres, staffed with two other staff apart from the counsellors and be recognised as such. Adequate budgetary allocation should be made toward funding this unit. The fund could be remitted through the centre's imprest or directly from the university budget. The provision of adequate fund becomes necessary as to enable the counsellor to effectively run the unit. Moreover adequate funding has become imperative due to the fact that counsellors in NOUN are not allowed to charge fees for their services.

The issue of a large number of students being assigned to each counsellor could be alleviated by employing more counsellors. Feelers received from various NOUN centres at the Directorate of Learner Support Services indicate that although not many NOUN students are seeking therapy at the same time, many of them are seeking other psycho-educational guidance services which the counsellors are currently and effectively providing.

On the issue of office accommodation and un-conducive environment for counselling, there is urgent need to improve and properly equip the counsellor's office for effective, efficient and impaction on counselling. The counselling offices in all NOUN study centres must be upgraded to meet the minimum benchmark regarding facilities and equipment for effective and efficient counselling, which at present in many centre fall below expectations.

Another important impediment is the administrative duties being heaped on the counsellors. This impairment could be solved easily if the Study Centre Directors were fully aware and understood the functions and responsibilities of every staff at the centres and encouraged each staff to stay within the boundaries of their duties. Also the impediment could be eliminated through constant centre staff meetings where every staff's functions would be discussed and areas of collaboration spelt out clearly and unambiguously.
Training and re-training programmes should be constantly organised in order for the counsellors to regularly update their knowledge. More in- house workshops, seminars and clinics should be organised for the counsellors by the university.

Impairment to effective counselling process is the misconceptions of the roles of counsellors at the study centres by the students. The counsellors should intensify their efforts in sensitising students on every opportunity they have, which include induction/orientation, seminars, workshops, clinics and day-to-day interactions with the students. This sensitisation processes will encourage the students to patronise the guidance and counselling services more at the centres.

Action and systemic researches are important ingredients for effective, efficient and impaction on counselling process to evolve and the reports of such results should be made available to the counsellors through the monthly counsellors' bulletins. Research in counselling process should involve investigation on how students perceive guidance services

in general and counselling process at NOUN or their perceptions of counsellors at NOUN etc but the focus of the process of counselling researches must be students centred.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, therefore the counsellors in Open and Distance Learning institutions must prove to all stakeholders their relevance in the system by continuously improving the counselling process. The paper has critiqued the standard traditional process of counselling in general and with specific reference to NOUN. Moreover it has identified the challenges militating against quality counselling process in NOUN and explained how Six Sigma Quality Assurance model could be used to prove and improve the quality of traditional face-to-face counselling at NOUN. The writer has made some recommendations which if judiciously implemented will go a long way towards improving the quality of counselling process at NOUN.

References

Akinboye, J.O.(1983), *The* Role of Guidance and Counselling in continuous assessment*. In D.J. Dinga *Guidance and Counselling for the 6-3-3-4 system of education. Calabar: Wusen press Ltd*

 Bailey, D. (1985), The nature of Guidance and the open tech programme, *NICEL1985. 33*

Clarkson, P. (1995) The therapeutic relationship. *London: Whurt*

Egan, G. (1986), The skilled helper (2nd *ed) Monterey C.A.Brroks/cole*

Ekong D. (1998a*)* Quality*: Trends from the UNESCO, Regional Consultations on Higher Education. In UNESCO, 1998a*

Federal Ministry of Education (2004) *National Policy of Education*.(revised edition) Lagos

Feltham, C. (2003), Types of goal. In the C. Feltham & .I Horton (Ed) *Handbook of counselling and psychotherapy.* London: Sage publication 9-17

Horton I (2003), Structuring: In C. Feltham & I Horton (Ed) *Handbook of counselling and psychotherapy*. London. Sage publication 111- 151

Inskipp, F. (2003), General skills. In C. Feltham & I. Horton (Ed) *Handbook of counselling and psychotherapy*. London: Sage publication 74-93

Khan, M. (1997 2nd ed) Between therapist and client: the new relation. *New York W.H. Freeman and Co*

McGuines, J (2003), The relationship is the therapy. In the C. Feltham & .I Horton (Ed) *Handbook of counselling and psychotherapy*. London: Sage publication 95-101

McNickle, C. (4, June, 2004), Learner Support requirements for flexible delivery. *Australian Flexible Learning Framework for the National Vocational Education and Training System 2001- 2004 ANTA Brisbane*

Onyewenyi, N (February, 2008*),* Application of six sigma to education and NOUN. *Being a paper presented at the Regional Training and Research For Open and Distance Learning*

Poonwassie, A. (2001), Facilitating adult education: A practitioner's approach, in Poonwassie, D. and Poonwassie, A. (eds) *Fundamentals of Adult Education:Issues and Practices for Lifelong Learning* Toronto:Thompson Educational Publishing

Ramakrishna, C.P (1995), *Reaching out the role of counselling*. In A.S.Kanwar and N. Jagannathan (eds) Speaking for ourselves women and distance education in India New Delhi Manohar 167-78

Rogers, C.R (1942), *Counselling and psychotherapy*. Boston, M.A. Houghton Mifflin

Simpson, O. (1992), Dialogue through "face-to-face". *Unit 11 in Adult learning.*

Strupp, H.R. (1986), *Psychotherapy: research, practice and public policy*. In American Psychologist, 4:120-130.