

Exposure of Zimbabwe Open University Students to Online Counselling

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ABSTRACT

The paper examined the exposition of online-counselling to ZOU students. The mixed research design was used with the sequential-exploratory strategy and an online-survey. Findings were that Student Advisors/Counsellors used both online and face-to-face modes. Online-counselling was considered useful although face-to-face counselling had the advantage of observing clients' feelings. Participants had no adequate online-counselling equipment to use. Online-counselling was time-consuming and costly due to network problems. Lack of video/teleconferencing equipment prevented participants from conducting e-counselling effectively. Younger compared to older students preferred online-counselling. The study recommended increasing Wi-Fi access and deploying video/conference equipment to users. Clients needed to observe the body language of the counsellor to see if they were empathizing with the client.

Keywords: ICT/e-/online counselling, face-to-face counselling, Exposure

INTRODUCTION

The Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) is a state university mandated by the Government of Zimbabwe through an Act of Parliament, ZOU Act (Chapter 25:20) to provide Higher Education through Open and Distance electronic Learning (ODEL) to students across the continents. ZOU was established in 1999. The Zimbabwe Open University is now internationally based and offers e-learning facilities where students can apply, enrol and study online from anywhere in the world. University weekend tutorials also offer face-to-face and online tutorials. ZOU has regional campuses in each of its ten states in the country and has an eleventh regional campus, called the virtual region, that caters for its international students. Each regional campus serves as a hub for all learning activities for students in that state, from registration to personal mentoring and counselling, quota management to proctored exam locations. ZOU has student counsellors in each area to meet all student counselling needs. The Student Services Department of Counselling at the Zimbabwe Open University was established in 2007 and employed 10 student advisors to cater for the students' counselling needs in each region. Only face-to-face counselling was practiced then. In this study, we wanted to find out if online counselling was now being used, as many changes in the world, including the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, have made it necessary. In such trying times, we wanted to know how the counselling needs of distance learning students were being met. ZOU provides distance learning for students who are full-time employees or have other life commitments and these students cannot come to one place, the counselling room, where the counsellor is stationed, yet they will be having problems, academic, or otherwise, that need immediate attention. In a conventional university, students gather in one place for lectures, and facilitators give them the opportunity to work on academic assignments. The instructor/lecturer prepares and presents the material to be taught while the student takes notes (passive listener). The same students, if they face challenges, go to a counsellor stationed at their institution, for counselling. They are hosted by the university, unlike distance and open learners who are in different parts of the country and

abroad. This is unlike a distance learning situation where the students are far from the Counsellor. It is clear that students studying remotely are likely to face academic and personal challenges that require counselling. This confirms the need for online counselling for learners from an open and distance learning university. Our goal was to determine the practicalities of online counselling at the Zimbabwe Open University for distance and open learners.

The following were the research questions for this study.

1. How often are students counselled online?
2. To what extent are students user-friendly with online compared to face-to-face counselling?
3. What are the hindrances for conducting online counselling effectively at Zimbabwe Open University regional offices?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In the following paragraphs we review literature related to Counselling of students online.

Frequency with which students are counselled online

According to Weightman (2020), everyone is aware that face-to-face counselling is used in every nation. On the other hand, e-counselling is now available in many nations despite the fact that some professionals question its efficacy and morality in Ghanaian universities. Despite the widespread accessibility of technology devices, research by Amos (2022) shows that students preferred face-to-face counselling over online counselling. Nevertheless, one could not ignore their propensity for online counselling. In order to give students more options for counselling services, it was advised that university counselling staff expand their usage of face-to-face counseling and acquire e-counselling training. The assertion by Amos (2022), shows that there is some kind of resistance to online counselling by its consumers since they were used to face-to-face counselling. In terms of teaching moral duties online, Wells (2023), emphasises the important quality control implications for student counselling practices in Open and Distance Learning (ODL). In their investigation into the extent to which ICT was currently being utilised to provide counselling services to students, Lee, Jeong, and Kim (2021) discovered that the majority of students knew very little about using ICT for counselling and that email was the only digital tool available to them. According to Wells' study (2023), most users of online counselling are still unaware of the ways in which ICT can be used to improve counselling. This supports the necessity for the current study, which examined whether students at the Zimbabwe Open University received counselling services online. Suranata, Rangka, and Permana (2020) found no appreciable difference in efficacy between cognitive behavioral therapy delivered face-to-face and online. This shows that those receiving counselling according to Suranata, Rangka, and Permana (2020), did not appreciate internet counselling at that time. Novella and Samuolis (2022) looked into how well online individual counselling compared to conventional face-to-face counselling in terms of effectiveness and discovered that the results were mixed. The participants' subjective well-being scores recorded across three times (pre-test, post-test, and follow-up) did not differ significantly between the three groups, according to the lack of a significant interaction effect for the three groups. This study by Novella and Samuolis (2022) show that even the therapists seemed not very sure about which mode of counselling was best for clients. The current researchers sought to find out, what was being done, at Zimbabwe Open University, in cases where body language was not observable, to understand the feelings of the client, which was the student, in this matter.

Counselling Online

When dealing with their personal presenting concerns face-to-face, Maurya, Bruce and Therthani (2020) discovered that young counselling clientele expected to be more satisfied with younger counsellors rather

than older counsellors; therefore, it was ideal to do it online where they could not see the person they were talking to. In this study, the researchers aimed to discover also the age-group that preferred online counselling. In order to help students and lecturers achieve high-quality and long-lasting blended learning, Stoll, Müller, and Trachsel (2020) claim that the usage of e-counselling technology was advised to counsellors as a strategy for deploying counselling services. Stoll, Müller, and Trachsel (2020) are in agreement with, Akgül and Ataan Ergin (2022) who proposed that in order to deploy e-counselling services effectively, counsellors and counsellors-in-training needed to increase their expertise and technical proficiency. This is the same feeling for Bah, Artaria, and Suen (2021), who indicates that e-counselling has limitations and downsides, some of which include the lack of visible and audible communication tools. The observation by the above authors shows that technical proficiency is a very important skill for counsellors. Amos (2022) then emphasizes that, as computer technology rapidly permeates counseling methods, failure to adapt would cause us to fall behind other civilizations.

Hindrances for Conducting Online Counselling

Jena (2020) asserts that the Indian system was more accustomed to face-to-face or physical counselling techniques. The majority of counselling clients lacked the necessary technical skills, and there was a dearth of practice and motivation when it came to using technology in counselling, which exacerbated difficulties during pandemics. This scenario described by Jena (2020) seemed similar to the Zimbabwean situation, that is why the authors in the current study sought to find out if clients at Zimbabwe Open University were exposed online counselling.

Amulya (2020) found out that during the COVID 19 lockdown, many people's basic desire for connection to be able to get counselling online was jeopardised, and that depriving clients of counselling during these stressful and unwell moments made their conditions worse. According to Amulya (2020), the challenges included the lack of personal connection as in a face-to-face meeting, internet connectivity issues and special attention needed to ensure ethical practice. van Kessel, de Pont, Gasteiger and Goedeke (2022) agree with Amulya (2020) that connectivity was the major hindrance of online counselling during COVID 19.

The challenges for providing online counseling to young people as mentioned by Dhesi, Sefi, Donati, Hayes, and Cooper (2022, p. 163) are highlighted in the following lines.

When doing online treatment, the young people perceive an increase in disinhibition as a result of a feeling of isolation. Platforms, in the opinion of young people, should educate potential users about the advantages and drawbacks of this media so that they may decide whether or not to participate. The ability to draw and utilise color, as well as document upload features, should be available on online counselling platforms for young people. Practitioners of internet counseling should warn clients about the possibility of misinterpretation during contracting and the first few sessions because there are no non-verbal signs present.

Young people preferred a personal connection with the counsellor and did not wish to remain anonymous. Accessing online therapy was hampered by flexibility, resource availability, and other technical issues. Technology-related problems were mentioned as a negative aspect by some of the young people. They discovered problems with the counseling website that were causing the server to crash. They also noted problems with their own Internet access, such as Wi-Fi disconnections or a young person's gadget running out of data. This could cause frustration and was counterproductive because sessions grew erratic.

The young people commented on communication, saying that while typing was acknowledged to be helpful in some situations, it also created "a little less flow" and took more time than chatting, which may make sessions feel rushed. Some teenagers found it challenging to express their bodily or emotional feelings when typing. As a result, speaking may seem like a more efficient way to communicate than typing. Face-to-face

therapy, in contrast, allowed for the use of gestures, art, and play therapy. Therefore, depending too much on typing online could be hazardous when using words to convey oneself. The young people occasionally found themselves unable to express themselves as a result of this lack of flexibility. Many young people wrote on how typing removed the subtleties of face-to-face communication. This included being unable to read the therapist's facial expressions or communicate through voice tones. It was challenging for the young person to determine the therapist's current feelings toward them based on their absence of facial expression and voice tone, which they used to gauge the counselors' potential engagement. As a result of such possible therapist misinterpretations, some young people became unhappy because their sense of trust had been betrayed, so they temporarily stopped using online counselling.

However, youngsters did recognize the advantages of online counseling, according to Dhesi, Sefi, Donati, Hayes and Cooper (2022). Typing was useful because it gave them time and space to think while typing and submitting their response, which made them feel like they could be more articulate to the therapist. They could use portable devices in any location and have access to their preferred device, such as a laptop or mobile phone. These were universally applicable. To seek counseling, one does not need to travel far. They were allowed to receive counseling outside of a structured environment. use the internet to research a range of subjects. where the teenager thought they had more authority to direct the session.

Benefits and shortcomings of Online Therapy

Supriyanto, et al. (2020) assert that all psychotherapists, regardless of whether they personally practice online, should be aware of the risks and benefits associated with the expanding field of providing care remotely via technology, which is reaching a large number of patients. Pelekelo (2022) asserts that a variety of elements influence the accessibility of online counseling. A few of issues are the requirement for computer and speak time for communication, the need for privacy when utilising online services, and slow internet connectivity. A lack of money prevents them from providing high-quality counselling services, insufficient ICT infrastructures, a shortage of ICT-trained therapists, and a shortage of ICT-trained counsellors are additional problems. According to Stoll, Müller, and Trachsel (2020, p.5), the top five ethical concerns with internet counselling are, "(1) privacy, confidentiality, and security concerns; (2) concerns about therapist competency and the need for specialized training; (3) concerns about technology-specific communication; (4) research gaps; and (5) concerns about emergencies." Fisher (2022) contends that working online has distinct opportunities and challenges that require the active application of creative ways. Florence (2022) also highlights that students also lacked devices to connect to MyVista and recommended that ZOU should appeal to its former students for donations.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to investigate if the Zimbabwe Open University students were exposed to online counselling. The following were the research questions for this study:

1. What are counselling modes used for counselling students at the university?
2. How often are students counselled online?
3. To what extent are students user-friendly with online compared to face-to-face counselling?
4. What are the hindrances for conducting online counselling effectively at Zimbabwe Open University regional offices?

According to Gray (2010:34), it is dangerous to categorise research methodologies against philosophies/approaches. Gray (2010) states that action research, for example, can incorporate a qualitative, inductive approach with an emphasis on seeking the views and perspectives of participants. Equally, it can use, say a series of case studies involving intervention with several groups, with others used as a control – in

other words, an experimental methodology. According to Gray (2010), what is important is that whatever method you adopt for your research, you should be able to justify your mix concerning your research philosophy and research questions.

The mixed research methodology was used in this study. There was need to seek views and perceptions of Student Advisors and check the applicability of online counselling to students and also check the numbers to see if the collected information could be generalised. According to Creswell (2007:1), mixed methods research methodology is used for conducting research that involves collecting, analyzing, and integrating quantitative and qualitative research in a single study or a longitudinal program of inquiry. The purpose of this form of research is that both qualitative and quantitative research, in combination, provide a better understanding of a research problem or issue than either research approach alone.

The Mixed Research Methodology was suitable for this study because we had to compare the qualitative descriptions from this study with the numbers of the participants who gave those views, to get the general views of the participants. Only descriptive statistics were used as the researcher was not very proficient in quantitative analysis. The mixed methodology also made possible triangulation in this study, which, according to Doyle; Brady & Byrne (2009), allows for greater validity in a study by seeking corroboration between quantitative and qualitative data. Completeness was also achieved by using a combination of research approaches to provide a complete and comprehensive picture of the exposure of online counselling to Zimbabwe open University Students. Using the mixed methodology offset weaknesses in one method and provided stronger inferences by making the limitations of each approach to be neutralised while strengths were built upon thereby providing stronger and more accurate inferences. Mixed methods research helped answer the research questions that could not be answered by quantitative or qualitative methods alone and provided a greater selection of tools to meet the aims and objectives of this study. The mixed methodology was useful in this study because of the confidentiality nature of counselling and the range of viewpoints that were required. According to Gray (2010), mixed-methods studies can use one research approach (that is, quantitative or qualitative) to explain the data generated from a study using the other research approach, when unanticipated or unusual findings emerge. In this study, findings from Student Advisors were followed up and explained by conducting interviews to gain an appreciation of the findings obtained. Using a qualitative research approach to illustrate quantitative findings helped paint a better picture of the phenomenon under investigation.

RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY

According to Brierley (2017), a flexible approach should be adopted in the application of mixed methods research in behavioural accounting research by conducting it within the pragmatic paradigm. Brierley (2017:1), defines a paradigm as, “shared beliefs among members of a speciality area.” Using the pragmatic paradigm in this study meant that the researchers were not restricted to ontological and epistemological issues when deciding on how to address a variety of different research questions. This study was informed by the pragmatist philosophy to research. According to Maarouf (2019), the choice between the quantitative and qualitative research approaches is mainly based on the position of the conducted research to the theory. The quantitative deductive approach is testing a theory, while the qualitative inductive approach is developing one. Besides the role of each approach in developing knowledge, the two approaches have contradicting advantages and disadvantages. The qualitative research is useful in examining a limited number of cases in depth and addressing complex phenomena as it could provide richer details. However, the knowledge produced by qualitative research cannot be generalised in other contexts. Besides, it is very time-consuming in data collection and analysis. From this integrated view emerged a philosophy that legitimates mixing quantitative and qualitative methods in one research. Phenomenology which is an attempt to understand social reality grounded in people’s experiences of social reality was used in this study.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The Sequential Exploratory Design method was used in this study. The sequential exploratory strategy according to Creswell (2009, p.211) involves the first phase of qualitative data collection and analysis, followed by the second phase of quantitative data collection and analysis that builds on the results of the first qualitative phase. The first phase of this study involved the collection of qualitative descriptions by Student Advisors and the second phase involved quantitative data collection and analysis of those descriptions. Weight is generally placed on the first phase, according to Creswell (2009), in this study feelings were shared and this is where the weight of this study was placed, and the data were mixed through being connected between the qualitative data analysis and the quantitative data collection. The design was employed within a clear theoretical viewpoint. The Sequential Exploratory Design method was used for this study because it was suitable for both quantitative and qualitative findings. The other justification of using this sequential exploratory design was to initially explore the exposure of online counselling to student clientele at Zimbabwe Open University and probably generalise the qualitative findings to different universities. One advantage of the sequential exploratory model is that it makes it easy to implement and is straightforward in describing and reporting. This model made this study more acceptable to advisers, committees, and the research community not well versed in either quantitative or qualitative unfamiliar with the qualitative approaches. The disadvantage of this approach, according to Creswell (2009) is that it requires a substantial length of time to complete both data collection phases, which could be a drawback for some research situations. The researcher was a full-time employee who had many tasks to perform at work, so indeed it consumed a lot of time to collect and analyse the data. Again, the researcher had to make some key decisions about which findings from the initial qualitative phase were focused on in the subsequent quantitative phase, and this was cumbersome.

Questionnaires and interviews were translated, coded and interpreted. This researcher came up with new meanings of online counselling. This goes with the Technology Acceptance Model which is an information systems theory that models how users come to accept and use technology.

Population

Out of a population of 10 Student Advisors from the 10 Regions of Zimbabwe Open University across the country only seven responded to the questionnaire and interviews sent to them. The three who did not, had busy schedules. On second attempt, one more student Advisor agreed to answer the questionnaire.

DATA ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION

Questionnaires and interviews were translated, coded and interpreted in this study. The purpose of analysing data was to obtain usable and useful information. The analysis, irrespective of whether the data was qualitative or quantitative was used, to describe and summarise the data, to identify relationships between variables, to compare the variables, identify the difference between variables and to forecast outcomes on 'Exposure of Zimbabwe Open University Students To Online Counselling'.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A key finding was that most student counsellors were middle-aged and had been counselling students for at least 10 years. They used both face-to-face and online forms of counselling. Face-to-face counselling mode was more common in all 10 regions of the country at Zimbabwe Open University. As Amos (2022) noted, everyone is aware that face-to-face counseling is practiced in every country. However, despite some experts' concerns about its effectiveness and morality, e-counselling is now accessible in many countries.

The ten Student Advisors were familiar with and used online consultations. Student advisors were advising at least 50 students online, largely due to the geographical distribution of students. This goes with Amos (2022) who asserts that the use of computer technology in counselling procedures is gradually encroaching on every civilization and that failing to adapt will cause us to fall behind. Younger generations preferred online counselling to personal counselling, largely because it was anonymous. This agrees with Harrison and Lam (2020) who found that young counselling clients expected to be more satisfied with younger counsellors rather than older counsellors when dealing with their personal presenting issues, face-to-face, so it was best done online where they did not see the person they were talking to. 60% of college advisers preferred counselling students in face-to-face mode because they could observe the client's body language and see the consistency of their statements and emotions. 75% of Student Advisors' time was spent doing face-to-face rather than online counselling. Also, the Student Advisors were well trained in confidentiality, so the client felt his data was more secure and divulged their information easily. However, online information could be hacked, which was a disadvantage. Counselors/Student Advisors had computers, internet and telephones as equipment for online counselling, however they had no video/teleconferencing or Skype equipment. According to the study participants, the Zimbabwe Open University students who had counselling issues, preferred face-to-face compared to online counselling. This contrasts Mabvurira (2019), who highlights that employing ICT to provide counselling was advantageous. The main reasons were that most clients did not have equipment for online counseling, the data was very expensive and most clients could not use it for counselling. This is in agreement with Bah, Artaria, and Suen (2021), who indicate that e-counselling, has its drawbacks and restrictions, which can include absence of visual and aural communication tools. Face-to-face counseling further reduced the workload of counsellors as most issues were resolved during the counselling session. This finding contrasts with that of Liu et al. (2022), who found that robot-assisted tele-rehabilitation therapy had significant advantages over hospital-based manual therapy in terms of reducing the therapist's workload and accelerating the patient's recovery. The clients had very good computer skills, but online counselling facilities or equipment were not available. Since the Covid 19 outbreak, face-to-face counselling was not very helpful.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Student Advisors be supplied with modern computers and better internet facilities and connectivity should be provided to enable the use of online counselling to be effective with their clients. The online equipment for counselling should include video-conferencing, teleconferencing, skyping and emailing equipment. Computers with the latest types of software should be provided. Government and NGOs should also ensure that universities and other counselling institutions have adequate resources for online counselling for the benefit of the nation. This is in agreement with Florence (2022).

The drawbacks mentioned in this study necessitate the use of ICT-counselling in addition to face-to-face counselling. Verbal cues, voice tones and body language were crucial in identifying a client's actual difficulties since most of the time the problem the client presented was not his or her real predicament. Suicidal cases, for example, where, a person who was suicidal would not stop committing suicide after receiving an e-mail or telephone call from the counsellor.

It is necessary to identify the specific ICT competencies needed by counselling practitioners and then deliver training courses based on them.

The effects of using online counselling in conjunction with face-to-face counselling should be the focus of future research.

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APPENDIX: QUESTIONNAIRE

Questionnaire for Counsellors in the Counselling Institutions

My name is Tanunurwa W Mangava. I am a DPhil student carrying out a study on, ‘The use and impact of ICT on counselling institutions of Bulawayo Metropolitan Province.’ I would be grateful if you could truthfully answer the following questions. I assure you that any information you give will be held strictly confidential and used only for purposes of this study. If you need extra space for answering, a blank sheet has been attached at the back for that purpose. Feel free to answer using your preferred mode of communication with me. Thank you.

Personal Information

1. What is your age?
- | | | | |
|----------|--------------------------|----------|--------------------------|
| Under 20 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 21 – 30 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 31 – 40 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 41 – 50 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 51 – 60 | <input type="checkbox"/> | Above 60 | <input type="checkbox"/> |

2. Sex:
- | | | | |
|------|--------------------------|--------|--------------------------|
| Male | <input type="checkbox"/> | Female | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|------|--------------------------|--------|--------------------------|

3. Marital Status?
- | | | | |
|---------|--------------------------|----------|--------------------------|
| Married | <input type="checkbox"/> | Single | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Widowed | <input type="checkbox"/> | Divorced | <input type="checkbox"/> |

4. What is your position in the Counselling Institution?
-

5. What are your qualifications (Start with the highest going down)
-
-
-

6. For how long have you been counselling?
- | | |
|--------------------|--------------------------|
| Less than 2 years | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2 – 5 years | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6 – 9 years | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10 years and above | <input type="checkbox"/> |

7. What modes of counselling do you have in your institution?

- | | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Face-to-face counselling | <input type="checkbox"/> | Online/ICT Counselling | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|

Any other (please explain)

.....

Your type of counselling:

Marriage/family Counselling The girl child and female counseling

children and adolescent counselling HIV/AIDS counselling

Counselling of the aged Special population counseling

Counselling of people with disabilities

Any other (please state)

.....

8. What is your explanation of ICT-Counselling/e-counselling?

.....

.....

9. Which type of counselling do you use in your institution

Face-to-face counseling ICT/Online Counseling

Both

10. Which of the following facilities/equipment do you have in your counselling institution for effective

ICT/Online counseling/e-counselling?

a. Computers

b. Internet

c. Video/tele-conferencing equipment

d. Telephones

e. fax machines

f. Skype equipment

g. All of the above

h. None of the above

i. Any other (suggest)

.....
.....
.....

11. Show the frequency with which you use the type of counselling you chose for number (9) above

.....
.....

12. How did you acquire your material for counselling in 10 (above), if you have

.....
.....

13. Which one is preferable to you ICT-Counselling or face-to-face counselling?

.....
.....

14. Considering the confidentiality nature of Counselling, which of the two types of counselling offers more security to clients' data

Give reasons for your answer

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.....
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15. Which of the two types do your clients prefer and why?

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16. Compared to face-to-face counselling, how do you rate your clients' knowledge of online/ICT-Counselling/e-counselling?

Do not have an idea of ICT-Counselling

Clients indicate that ICT methods are costly and not user-friendly

Clients prefer face-to-face counseling than on-line counselling

Most of the clientele is computer illiterate

Any other views (suggest)
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17. From your population of clientele, which group would prefers e-/online/ICT-Counselling to face-to-face counselling?

The aged Young Adolescents

Those who are computer literate All

We do not use ICT-Counselling

18. Rate your answer, for example, no. 1 the young, 2. children etc.

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19. Justify your answer for (17) above

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20. In your view which type benefits the counselling profession more?

ICT/online-counselling face-to-face counselling

21. Which type of Counselling reduces the counsellor's workload more?

ICT-Counselling face to face counselling

Give your reason(s)

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22. How would you rate computer-literacy for Counsellors in your institution?

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23. What are your suggestions to improve the literacy rate for e-/online/ICT-Counselling for counsellors?

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24. How possible is it to increase computer literacy and and e-counselling friendliness for your clients?

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25. How easy is it to solve a client's problems using ICT-Counselling?

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26. What kind of suggestions do you have for ICT/Online/e-counselling to be more practicable in the counselling institutions of Bulawayo Metropolitan province?

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27. Feel free to give any other suggestions for the improvement of ICT/e-/online counseling on the blank sheets.

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Thank you for answering this questionnaire