Digitalization of counselling services in tertiary institutions in Nigeria

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Article information	Abstract
	This paper discusses the benefits of digitalizing counseling services in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. It is a position paper that relies on secondary data, collected from both print and online publications. The paper reveals that the digitalization of counseling services in Nigerian tertiary institutions will enhance the effectiveness of service delivery. Key benefits include the provision of virtual counseling services, personalized support, increased accessibility, and flexible counseling opportunities for both staff and students. Based on these findings, the paper recommends that the management of tertiary institutions in Nigeria should ensure full digitalization of their counseling units to promote more efficient and effective service delivery. Furthermore, both government and private organizations should support these institutions by providing adequate digital infrastructure in all counseling units across Nigerian tertiary institutions. Additionally, counselors should receive ongoing training on the usage of digital tools and technologies.

INTRODUCTION

Tertiary education refers to the educational level pursued after secondary school in institutions such as universities, polytechnics, colleges of education, and specialized institutes like monotechnics, colleges of agriculture, schools of health and technology, the National Teachers' Institute (NTI), Nigeria French Language Village, Nigeria Arabic Language Village, and the National Institute of Nigerian Languages. Tertiary education is a structured and organized system designed for the holistic development of individuals and the transformation of society through teaching, research, and community service. Its core pillars include teaching, research, and the provision of community services (Ogunode, Edinoh, & Okolie, 2023).

Tertiary education—also referred to as post-secondary education—is pursued beyond high school and typically involves specialization in a specific field. It is non-compulsory and provided in institutions such as colleges, polytechnics, and universities, and may be delivered in person, virtually, or through distance learning formats (Top-Hat, 2023). The system is designed for the development of human capital through advanced teaching, rigorous research, and meaningful community engagement. As the third tier of education, it is central to the production of skilled individuals and professionals necessary for national socio-economic and technological advancement (Ogunode, Edinoh, & Agbaje, 2024).

The goals of tertiary education in Nigeria include: (a) contributing to national development through high-level manpower training; (b) providing accessible and affordable learning opportunities in both formal and informal settings; (c) offering high-quality career counseling and lifelong learning programs; (d) addressing skill shortages by producing labor-market-relevant professionals; (e) promoting scholarship, entrepreneurship, and community service; (f) fostering national unity; and (g) enhancing national and international understanding and cooperation. Tertiary institutions serve students, academic staff, and non-academic staff—with student welfare being a top priority (Ogunode, 2025). According to Ogunode (2025), the objectives of tertiary education include: providing higher education through effective teaching, research, and community service; developing students' specialized knowledge and skills for solving both personal and national problems; preparing students for workforce integration; offering academic programs across disciplines; delivering quality instruction; and conducting research to generate new knowledge for national development.

Despite these goals, Nigerian tertiary institutions continue to grapple with social and psychological challenges affecting both students and staff. Research by Onuorah (2010), Ardo (2017), and David, Ohunene, and Ogunode (2021) indicates that stress and anxiety among students and staff stem from unfulfilled aspirations, examination failures, financial uncertainty, academic pressure, and personal challenges. As a result, students—especially males—often display maladaptive behaviors such as public intoxication, absenteeism, and disruptive conduct.

To mitigate these issues, counseling units have been established in tertiary institutions to support the psychological and social well-being of staff and students. According to Ali (2014) and David et al. (2021), these counseling services aim to address mental health needs and help students who may have never received prior counseling support. Counseling services also provide students with a better understanding of the value and relevance of their chosen fields of study. Guidance services can help sustain student engagement throughout their academic journey. As noted by Ali (2008), Ipaye (2006), and Himanee (2018), key services include placement, follow-up, information dissemination, appraisal, referral, guidance, counseling, and planning. This paper focuses on discussing the benefits of digitalizing counseling services in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

THE NEED FOR DIGITALIZATION OF COUNSELING SERVICES

To ensure widespread access to quality counseling services in Nigerian tertiary institutions, it is crucial to deploy technological tools and infrastructure. The increasing student population, coupled with the limited reach of conventional counseling systems, calls for innovative solutions that transcend physical boundaries.

Ogunode and Ndayebom (2023) observe that globally, higher education is increasingly driven by information and communication technologies (ICTs) and digitalization. Digital transformation has significantly reshaped classroom dynamics and the way lecturers interact with students. These shifts were further accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to school closures across Nigeria in 2020. In response, many higher institutions adopted digital education tools to ensure learning continuity.

Several national and international policy frameworks support this digital shift. For example, the Nigerian National Policy on Education, the Digital Protocol Network, the National Digital Policy launched by the World Economic Forum, and the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development all promote technology integration in education. Additionally, the National Policy on Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in School Education emphasizes digital learning as a key pathway for equipping students with labor market-

relevant skills.

The overarching goal of these ICT policies is to promote the complete digitalization of tertiary education programs and services in Nigeria. Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to explore the benefits of digitalizing counseling services in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

CONCEPT OF GUIDANCE AND COUNSELING UNITS

Guidance and Counseling Units in tertiary institutions are established to provide a range of support services including individual counseling, group counseling, seminar presentations, workshops, and online-based guidance for both students and staff. Although different institutions may refer to these units by different names, they generally deliver similar core services.

For instance, at the University of Ibadan, the Career and Counseling Unit is dedicated to assisting students in their career aspirations and addressing other needs requiring professional counseling. Functioning as a sub-division of the Student Affairs Division, this unit operates within the expertise of its professional staff, offering psychosocial therapies that are non-clinical in nature. Clinical cases are referred to appropriate health services. The unit also supports staff members and collaborates with various departments and agencies to promote a conducive campus environment (University of Ibadan, 2020).

Similarly, the Counseling and Human Development Centre (UCHDC) at the University of Ilorin, as cited in David et al. (2021), outlines its objectives as follows: identifying students' innate abilities and fostering their development; assisting individuals in adapting to educational and institutional challenges; cultivating sound character; promoting healthy interpersonal relationships; and enhancing students' academic excellence and personal well-being.

Programs Available at the Centre

The Centre offers guidance and counseling through the following programs:

A. Educational/Academic Counseling

The Centre supports students with services related to registration procedures, course selection, graduation requirements, spillover issues, transfer and withdrawal processes, effective study habits, use of library resources, and examination preparation. It also provides awareness of opportunities such as postgraduate programs and scholarship schemes, both local and international.

B. Career Guidance/Counseling

This service prepares students for the job market, particularly self-employment. It includes information on job opportunities and challenges related to various academic disciplines. The Centre also conducts research on career counseling, organizes employability training, and collaborates with companies to host career talks for prospective graduates. Guidance is also provided on job search strategies and job retention.

C. Personal-Social Counseling

Personal-social services offered by the Centre address issues such as managing academic pressure, adapting to university life, coping after graduation, dealing with phobias, stress, depression, and suicidal thoughts. The Centre also assists students in building assertiveness, decision-making, and mentoring skills. Additional support is provided for overcoming addiction, poor habits (e.g., overeating, extravagant behavior), and emotional difficulties. Services also include fostering discipline, managing loneliness and inadequacy, handling interpersonal relationships (e.g., conflicts with roommates), and navigating spiritual or religious concerns.

D. Marriage and Family Counseling

Services in this category address topics such as marriage and sexual matters (e.g., harassment, rape, premarital sex, incest, and sexual dysfunctions). Counseling is also available for partner selection, marital preparation, managing marital difficulties, and resolving family or courtship conflicts.

E. Health Counseling

This includes education on personal hygiene, disease prevention and control, and referrals to medical facilities for additional healthcare support.

F. Research Activities

The UCHDC engages in the collection and dissemination of guidance-related information. It organizes workshops, seminars, and conferences, produces guidance materials (e.g., pamphlets, handbills), and conducts research. The Centre also facilitates outreach programs, postgraduate training, practicum activities, and life-planning skill development (David et al., 2021).

Ali (2014) emphasizes that the need for guidance services in university education is both imperative and invaluable—particularly when tailored to the psychological, emotional, educational, and social realities of university students. Students often face emotional stress due to challenges such as inadequate housing, limited financial support from parents, insecurity, and exposure to cult-related activities. Educational difficulties may arise when students are admitted into programs they did not initially choose, which can dampen academic motivation. Social responsibilities, too, may interfere with academic performance.

Ali (2014) further explains that university students frequently struggle with personal-social challenges, including navigating relationships, managing emotional trauma, dealing with misunderstandings, and adjusting to structured schedules. For students to successfully navigate university life and realize their academic potential, guidance and counseling services must be prioritized. Students need continuous support, encouragement, and professional counseling to help them stay on a positive trajectory. In today's fast-paced, digitally connected world, technology has become essential for delivering accessible, effective, and flexible mental health care. Counselors and social workers now utilize digital tools that transform how they assess, engage, and support their clients.

CONCEPT OF DIGITALIZATION

Digitalization has been defined in various ways by different scholars. Ogunode and Ndayebom (2023) describe *digitization* as the use of electronic platforms to convert teaching and learning into digital forms such as online courses, assessments, and web-based seminars or workshops. Digitalization, therefore, refers to the process of transforming physical educational resources into digital formats that can be stored, manipulated, and deployed through computer systems for implementing teaching and learning programs in schools. According to Bejinaru (2019), digitalization involves converting various forms of content—text, audio, images, and video—into digital formats using technologies such as laptops, the internet, mobile devices, scanners, digital cameras, projectors, and printers. These digital formats can then be processed and accessed via computers.

Machekhina (2017), Daniel (2020), and Ray (2020) expand this view by including digital platforms such as Zoom, WhatsApp, Google Meet, Skype, Microsoft Teams, and FaceTime, which support synchronous and asynchronous learning. In the educational context, digitalization represents a shift from traditional, physical modes of instruction to virtual and technology-

mediated formats. Kannappanava, Rajamkanta, and Tandur (2010) differentiate *digitization* as the conversion of analog or physical materials into electronic forms, excluding content that was digitally created from inception. Borisenkov, Gukalenko, and Pustovoitov (2021) further emphasize that digitalization in education entails a wide range of approaches to transition from conventional pedagogical methods to virtual platforms. Ding (2000) highlights several advantages of digitization: reduced need for physical infrastructure, improved information sharing, reduced redundancy, and cost-effectiveness. Digital resources can be transmitted, retrieved, and stored with ease, enhancing institutional efficiency and learner access.

In the realm of counseling, digitalization implies the transformation of traditional counseling services into digital formats, including online sessions, virtual assessments, and web-based therapeutic interventions. Enokela (2022) refers to digital therapy by terms such as *online counseling*, *e-therapy*, or *e-counseling*, which involve providing mental health services via digital devices and internet-based platforms. These may include text messaging, video conferencing, telephonic interactions, and emails. Recent advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) have also greatly influenced digital counseling practices, offering more personalized and responsive therapeutic services (Popoola, Ibraheem, & Yusuf, 2023).

BENEFITS OF DIGITALIZING COUNSELING SERVICES IN NIGERIAN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

The digitalization of counseling services in Nigeria's tertiary institutions presents numerous benefits that enhance the quality, accessibility, and flexibility of support offered to students and staff. These benefits include:

A. Effective Delivery of Counseling Services

Digitalization supports the efficient and timely delivery of counseling services. It allows counselors to reach students and staff remotely, offering assistance irrespective of time or location. This flexibility enhances the responsiveness and overall quality of services provided in tertiary institutions.

B. Virtual Counseling Services

Digital platforms enable the provision of counseling services through virtual means, which can significantly extend access to those who may not be physically present on campus. Ogunode et al. (2023) highlight the growing role of virtual reality in various sectors, including education. In this context, virtual counseling platforms allow students to access psychological and academic support resources from any geographical location. According to Vuorikari, Kluzer, and Punie (2022) and Quispe (2023), virtual counseling provides learners with the flexibility to seek support at their convenience, enhancing engagement and promoting mental wellness among students and staff.

C. Personalized Counseling Services

Digital platforms offer opportunities for personalized counseling tailored to individual students' needs. Agent of Change (2024) emphasizes that personalization enhances therapeutic effectiveness. Technology enables data collection and analysis, allowing counselors to:

- **Identify behavioral patterns**: Track client behavior over time to detect mental health trends.

- **Adjust treatment approaches**: Use real-time feedback to refine counseling strategies.

- **Improve outcome tracking**: Data analysis can help counselors assess the efficacy of certain techniques, providing a clear view of a client's progress.

The main advantage of the digital education system is that it allows students to learn at their own pace. According to Mcnulty (2021), learners' progress at an individual pace and when students are unable to keep up with the rest of the class, it causes them to lose interest. Counsellors in digital services can tailor the counselling services to the learning speed and abilities of their students. Digital education enables teachers to pace learning according to individual needs (Jain International Residential School, 2021). Personalized learning approaches have also been an important component of the digital education revolution. Rather than trying to fit everyone into the same metaphorical box, many schools and programs have begun to realize the value of offering adaptable solutions for students based on their own strengths and weaknesses. It provide a number of benefits for students and educational institutions to provide services according to students needs. When students are allowed to access services in a way that fits their own learning approaches best, it helps them absorb and retain critical information; personalization empowers them to move forward in their education. Learners become encouraged to go for counselling services in educational institutions (Agent of change 2024;Ogunode, 2025).

D. Greater Accessibility to Counseling Services

One of the most transformative outcomes of digitalization in education is the enhanced accessibility to institutional services, including counseling. Digital tools have significantly reduced the barriers that once limited students' access to educational and support resources. Students with physical, sensory, or cognitive impairments now benefit from assistive technologies that make counseling services more inclusive. For example, text-to-speech software and voice recognition tools can assist students with visual impairments or reading difficulties in accessing counseling content and engaging in therapeutic interactions (Study. com, 2023; Key, 2020).

Agent of Change (2024) underscores that technological advancements have revolutionized mental health accessibility by enabling clients to interact with professionals in ways that were not possible a decade ago. This is especially beneficial for individuals living in rural or underserved communities, those with mobility limitations, or those uncomfortable with traditional in-person settings. Through teletherapy and virtual platforms, counseling becomes more inclusive and far-reaching. Key advantages include:

- **Convenient access**: Clients can attend sessions from virtually any location, reducing travel time and logistical constraints.

- **Reach to remote areas**: Students and staff in geographically isolated regions gain access to professional counseling services.

- **Reduced stigma**: Being in a familiar environment—such as one's home—may reduce anxiety and increase willingness to seek help.

E. Provision of Flexible Counseling Services

The digitalization of counseling services also introduces flexibility into the service delivery model. Counselors can tailor their sessions to fit the individual needs, schedules, and preferences of both students and staff. This flexibility is essential in contemporary academic environments, where learners often juggle complex academic, personal, and professional responsibilities. Agent of Change (2024) reiterates that virtual counseling allows professionals to reach clients more effectively by offering services in non-traditional formats and time slots. This flexibility ensures that students who might otherwise face challenges accessing counseling—due to class schedules, work commitments, or personal constraints—can still benefit from psychological and academic support. In turn, institutions are better positioned to provide responsive, need-

based mental health care.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This paper has explored the substantial benefits of digitalizing counseling services in Nigeria's tertiary institutions. The findings highlight that digitalization enhances the effectiveness, accessibility, personalization, and flexibility of counseling services for students and staff. Specifically, digital platforms facilitate:

- Timely and effective service delivery,
- Virtual counseling modalities,
- Personalized treatment approaches,
- Greater inclusivity and accessibility,
- Flexible scheduling and service models.

In light of these benefits, the following recommendations are made:

- **Institutional Implementation**: Tertiary institution administrators should prioritize the full digitalization of counseling units to improve service delivery and student well-being.

- **Government and Private Sector Support**: Stakeholders, including the government and private organizations, should invest in the digital infrastructure needed to equip counseling centers in tertiary institutions.

- **Continuous Training**: Professional development programs should be implemented to train counselors in the use of digital tools and platforms, ensuring they remain competent and confident in delivering virtual services.

By embracing digitalization, Nigerian tertiary institutions can significantly improve the reach, quality, and impact of their counseling services, fostering healthier and more supportive academic environments.

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