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USE OF ICT APPLICATION IN IMPROVING GUIDANCE SERVICES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study theoretically surveys several ways ICT application can help in improving guidance services in Nigeria. The findings show that ICT application has helped client to increase self awareness among others. The study also highlights challenges faced in the application of ICT in Nigeria.

Introduction

The use of information communication technology (ICT) for learning is no longer a new trend in Nigeria. ICT application is the use of any computer based tool, electronic device or equipment to collect, process and store information for future use. The information stored could be used to support and manage the information needs of an organization, corporation, industry and institutions. ICT is the fastest growing form of technology in the labour market in Nigeria (Nwana, 2008). In education, it is generally used to familiarize students with the use and workings of computers and related social and ethical issues. ICT has also enabled learning through multiple intelligence as ICT has introduced learning through simulation games; this enables active learning through all senses.

ICT in education can be broadly categorized in the following ways as;

- ICT as a subject (i.e., computer studies)
- ICT as a tool to support traditional subjects (i.e., computer-based learning, presentation, research)
- ICT as an administrative tool (i.e., education management information systems/EMIS)

Guidance services on the other hand are defined in various ways in our society today. Obineli, (2008) viewed guidance services as a set of inter-related activities that have goals, structured provision of information and assistance that enable individuals and groups of any age and at any point throughout their lives, to make choices related to educational, training and occupational trajectories and to manage their life paths effectively. Sweet (2003) defines guidance services in terms of its contribution to educational goals and its relevance to addressing socioeconomic problems. Specifically, it charges not only guidance services but the whole school with the responsibility of helping students;

- a) Explore and match their personal traits, abilities and skills, interests and plans for the future with contemporary opportunities and realities.
- b) Make wise decisions regarding their educational and vocational options.
- c) Learn about the world of work and the present working environment.
- d) Learn how to find process and use information.

Agali 2010, establishes that in the labour market sector, the goals for guidance services are to provide information on vocational training opportunities, to support young people and adults in making decisions regarding their training options, to assist them in finding placements in apprenticeships and continuous vocational training, to help clients develop job-seeking skills, and to place them in employment.

Access has been improved in several ways. Guidance services, for instance, is increasingly acknowledged to be a right to which all citizens are entitled throughout their lives, and not just an ancillary service aimed at those who are in crisis or unemployed. There has been a diversification in terms of the sites in which guidance is offered (not restricted to institutional sites, but also available at leisure sites, in the community, and in the home), in terms of the providers (not just the state, but also community-based and private services), and in terms of modality of provision (not based solely on one-to-one input, but also on group-based, curricular and self-service modes of delivery; not homogeneous but differentiated according to specific client needs). This echoes that there is need for education, training and labour market data to overcome their tendency to be (a) fragmented, and (b) lacking in transparency. As pathways into education, training and work become more diversified and complex, so clients need to have access to clear road maps that help them navigate systems of provision, with full knowledge about which

options they open and which they close when embarking on a particular track.

The use of ICT applications in guidance

Underlying all these trends is a change in the way guidance staff perform their work, largely - though not solely - as a consequence of the use of new information and communication technologies (ICT). ICT has become increasingly harnessed across most states in Nigeria in order to support and complement traditional forms of guidance services rendered, such as face-to-face interviews, assessment tools, and printed career information materials. It is used to more widely disseminate information about occupations, and also to support a number of guidance functions via CD-Rom software, career navigation systems, or the Internet.

Typically, ICT applications help clients increase their self-awareness by developing knowledge about themselves, which can then be related to learning and work opportunities. to increase their opportunity awareness by providing access to databases about learning, training and working. to facilitate decision-making by helping clients narrow options by balancing opportunities and feasibility, and to support transition learning by assisting clients to implement decisions, on the basis of skills needed to apply for jobs, to sit for interviews, to secure education and training grants, and so on. In the more sophisticated systems, several of these different functions are available to the user, with the software more fully and comprehensively reflecting and supporting the complex nature of career decision-making. At a more basic level, CD-ROMs and especially the Internet are used to make a great deal of information about educational programmes and institutions, as well as about labour markets, available at the touch of a button. Again, the more sophisticated websites have the capacity of linking different databases together to support a multidimensional approach to decision-making (Watts, 2001; Offer, 1997). Most frequently, however, ICT tools reproduce the traditional matching

model of guidance, with the main difference being that it is the client who is responsible for the matching.

ICT can help widen access to guidance services in two important and related ways. First of all, it encourages a different approach to service provision, where self-help takes precedence over direct delivery by professionals. Clients can carry out a great deal of initial self and opportunity-related exploration and assessment thanks to ICT, prior to asking for a face-to-face interview if necessary.

Secondly, ICT brings information and guidance services to the client. Increasingly, computer terminals - often linked to the Internet - are available in non-institutional sites. As Kress (2000) has noted, the boundaries between spaces dedicated to learning, to working, and to leisure are becoming blurred. Young people and adults can access many guidance-related services in bars and cafes, in youth and community centres, and at home. Several countries according to Sweet (2003), have set up Internet points in leisure and public spaces in the community, with links to sites that offer assistance in discovering aptitudes and interests, and in matching profiles with opportunities for further education and employment. E-mail queries can be quickly sent to a central information bureau, or to the communication offices of educational institutions and enterprises.

Challenges facing ICT application in Nigeria

Despite the opportunities that ICT offers, there are nevertheless important issues to consider in attempting guidance provision in Nigeria. The first and most obvious one concerns differential access to hardware, to software, and to Internet connection. The digital deficit is particularly serious when one considers the situation in many. But the digital divide is present across all states in Nigeria in other ways as well, affecting poorer groups, older people who may feel uncomfortable with new technology, and those living in remote areas where penetration of telecommunication services is lagging behind the more urbanized zones.

In addition, skills in the use of ICT, as well as costs and bandwidth access, differ greatly between, and sometimes even within, country Nigeria, all of which affect the extent to which the opportunities made available by the new technology can be exploited. In some ways too, certain cultural contexts within Nigeria predispose people to shun the rather impersonal approach to guidance. Others might still prefer to consult information in traditional print format, even though the information is available electronically.

Other technologies that have opened up new opportunities for guidance service delivery are call-centres. While several states in Nigeria report that call-in services tend to be associated rather more with help-lines and hot-lines providing crisis support in relation to a range of problems such as domestic violence, child abuse, attempted suicides, rape, substance abuse, they are nevertheless being used to good effect in some guidance services rendered, with clients being able to telephone in queries (Obineli, 2008).

These and related issues about the nature, quality and intelligent and critical use of information are particularly pertinent when it comes to consider information provided through ICT, which differs from print-based data in one essential manner, namely, that it invites the user to shift from a linear reading of text, to one that is hyper-linked to related data. At the click of a button, readers are deviated from one focus to another, gaining access to associated worlds of facts, images and sounds. Only the most steadfast and those with sharp information management skills are capable of re-routing themselves back on track, making use of unexpected insights that have been vicariously developed in order to make wise decisions. This is an important issue, not only because it reminds us that self-service approaches to information require the back-up of skilled personal support, but also because ICT tends to be rather uncritically touted as the panacea to plug information gaps. There is indeed much that commends the use of ICT in the guidance services. Not only does it help widen access, but it also dramatically reduces the production costs associated with

print-based alternatives; it permits quick, cheap and regular updating of information; it facilitates linkage to personal assessment tools and other relevant resources; and it has features which permit searching and trawling through a great deal of diverse material, which would be much less accessible in print form. Despite such advantages, ICT remains a tool that requires both basic skills in reading and more sophisticated ones, confidence in manipulating the technology, ability to access information in a systematic manner, and therefore raises serious equity issues, particularly if provision is not complemented by skilled support, as well as by alternative sources and channels of information (Offer and Sampson, 1999; Grubb, 2002a).

In contrast are multidimensional, matrix-based management information systems which privilege synergy between different databases, connecting educational and guidance services with labour market data such as vulnerability to unemployment, current and projected supply and demand, and average earnings compared to minimum salary. Some systems have an experiential component, enabling users to get a feel for the occupation they are investigating, through the possibility of downloading short films and interviews with workers.

Such systems are, however, not very common in the guidance field. In many cases, CD-ROMs and websites end up being nothing more than a replica of print-based materials, giving more importance to cramming information in rather than designing it in ways that render it useful to specific groups of users.

Implication of ICT application to guidance

This has important implications for mainstreaming guidance services in the seamless flow of life, helping remove the stigma that it has occasionally had, particularly when it was seen as a peripheral service to be used by those who either could not manage their lives effectively or had become marginalized through unemployment. It also has important implications for overcoming barriers of service delivery to

the remote regions in countries that have scattered populations, particularly when the software used permits several of the functions referred to earlier, including interactive sessions with counsellors, and where Internet connections provide a portal into a broad and flexible network of inter-linked services. Distance career guidance is therefore increasingly on the agenda.

Conclusion

ICT application has indeed helped to improve guidance services in Nigeria. Its application has helped clients to increase self awareness, develop their knowledge about themselves and the world of work around them. ICT implication in guidance services cannot be over emphasis because it has helped in removing the stigma that some clients have, occasionally in the traditional guidance. Above all ICT application still has its challenges in Nigeria.

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