

Are there Characteristics of Significance for the Bsc Honors Counseling Degree Students?

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Abstract: The study explored the characteristics and motivations of the Bsc Honors Counseling students studying through open and distance learning at the Zimbabwe Open University. The study also evaluated the challenges faced by the students during their studies. The findings of the study are important in that they assist the ODL institution's drive to increase student enrolment and retention in the Counseling programme as well as across other programmes. The qualitative research methodology utilizing the case study research design was used in this study. Data were gathered from a student population of 200 studying the Bsc Honors Counseling degree with the Zimbabwe Open University. A sample of 50 students was selected through purposive sampling for the questionnaire survey. Ten respondents were chosen for in-depth interviews. Data were presented through charts and narrations. The study revealed that generally the Bsc Honors Counseling programme in Zimbabwe attracted more female adults than males and these are mainly above the age of 20 years. Most of the students (79%) were married and (49%) were employed. The programme attracted students whose professions generally involved counseling. Student dropout in the programme was perceived to have been caused primarily by financial constraints faced by students and a perceived decrease in the market value of the programme.

Key words: characteristics, motivations, Bsc Honors Counseling Degree programme, ODL

I. Introduction

Open and Distance Learning is moving towards a student centred approach where programmes are designed to meet the needs and expectations of the learners. This strategy improves student satisfaction, retention and completion rates. The Zimbabwe Open University's Bachelor of Science Counseling Degree programme has attracted considerable interest from students from diverse backgrounds, characteristics and interests. A study by Lumadue and Duffey (1999) raised a pertinent argument, that the counseling programme, training and profession in general was suitable to a particular group of individuals with the relevant characteristics. The implication of these findings could also be a potential trump-card for an efficient marketing and student recruitment strategy with respect to the relevant programme if effectively applied.

According to Kotler (2008), the efficiency of a marketing programme for any business and a student recruitment drive for universities in particular depends on the extent to which the seller (University) knows the buyer (student). The University has to know the location of the buyer and how to effectively get access to the buyer. The successful recruitment of the marketing message depends on the conformity of the promise offered by the seller to the needs of the buyer. It is therefore imperative that the University, in pursuing potential Bsc Honors Counseling students thoroughly investigates the background characteristics of the students, their needs, challenges and motivations.

1.1 Statement of the problem

ODL is moving towards a more student centric approach in service delivery. Key to the successful implementation of this approach is the availability to the University, of quality information on the needs and expectations of potential students. The University, however, has limited information on the needs and expectations of current and potential students of the Bsc Honors Counseling Programme.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The study sought to explore the needs, characteristics, challenges and motivations of the ODL learner studying the Bsc Honors Counseling degree programme.

1.3 Objectives of the study

- To characterise the Bsc Honors Counseling students learning with the Zimbabwe Open University
- To evaluate the challenges faced by the students

1.4 Research questions

- What are the needs and characteristics of the Bsc Honours Counseling students learning through ODL
- What are the challenges faced by the Bsc Honours Counseling students

1.5 Justification of the study

The study adds to the knowledge bank of the university in terms of the needs and characteristics of students learning through the open and distance learning. The ODL sector is still a developing industry and is in need of the basic research focusing on the characteristics of the stakeholders in the sector. The research has an even greater significance to the Zimbabwe Open University in its quest to increase student enrolment, retention and completion rates. The study is another step in a programme by programme strategy of increasing student enrolment at ZOU, starting with the Bsc Honours Counseling degree.

II. Literature Review

Characteristics refer to features or qualities belonging typically to a person and serving to identify them (Marlett, 2008). According to Lumadue and Duffy (1999), counseling students are expected to possess personal qualities and characteristics that are relevant to effective therapeutic practice. This is because in contemporary counseling practice a counselor's personal characteristics are linked to their ability (Nagpal and Ritchie, 2002; American School Counselor Association, 2008). Knowing the characteristics of the students who enrol for the Bsc Counseling degree programme is essential as it helps to determine and predict the chances that the students will complete the programme. It helps institutions such as universities to develop and adopt teaching and learning methodologies that suit the needs and characteristics of the students (Marlett, 2008; Nichols, 2001).

The main variables that are considered when studying the characteristics of students are, their age group, qualifications, marital status, size of their families, experience prior to enrolling among other factors. These characteristics combined provide a basis for the universities to tailor make the Bsc Honors Counseling degree programme in such a way that it attracts students who are likely to enrol and successfully complete the programme. Thus universities and higher education institutions that offer the Bsc Honors Counseling degree programme have to constantly assess the general characteristics of their students. This paper considered these factors in the survey questionnaire to determine the characteristics of students enrolling in the Bsc Honors Counseling degree at ZOU.

According to Zindi and Mpofo (1995) motivations refer to the intrinsic or extrinsic drives that impel individuals to make certain choices in life. Understanding the motivations behind why individuals make certain choices is very important in relation to why they choose certain degree programmes at the expense of others (Marlett, 2008). Thus Faculty Deans and Lecturers in universities and other higher education institutions should always be well informed about the motivations that drive students to enrol in certain programmes. Lapan, et al, 2007 and Lee, 2001 revealed that the prospect of enhancing career advancement, securing promotion at work, passion and acquiring skills to solve some of society's social problems, inter alia, are some of the motivations behind the reasons why students enrol for the Bsc Counseling degree at universities or other higher education institutions.

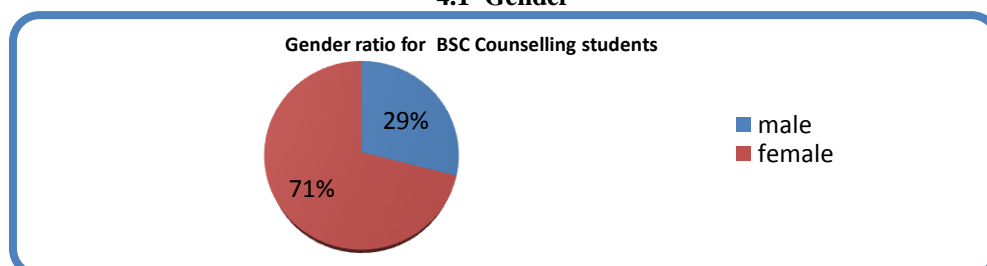
III. Methodology

The study employed a predominantly qualitative research methodology although quantitative data were also used in the study. A case study research design was used focusing on the Zimbabwe Open University Bsc Honors Counseling students. Data were gathered through a combination of questionnaires and interviews. A sample of 50 students was selected for the questionnaire survey using the purposive sampling technique from a population of 200 students. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with ten respondents selected through purposive sampling. Data presentation and analysis was done through a combination of charts and narratives.

IV. Findings

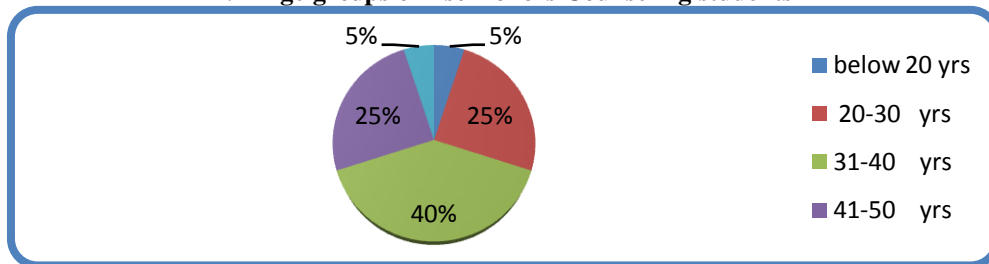
Characteristics of the Bsc Honors Counseling students

4.1 Gender



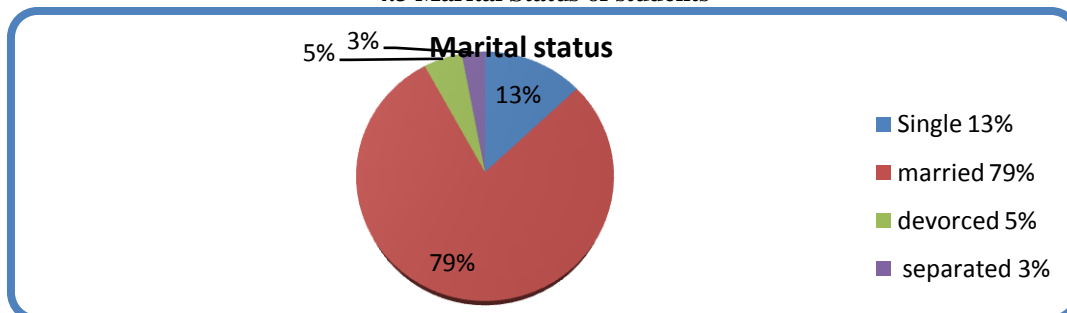
Demographic data from the questionnaire survey indicated that, of the 50 Bsc Honors Counseling students involved in the study, 71% were female while 29% were male. The study, therefore, revealed that generally the programme was predominantly favoured by women. The University should take this as an opportunity, compatible with the government’s women upliftment drive and aggressively enrol more women in the University’s programmes.

4.2 Age groups of Bsc Honors Counseling students



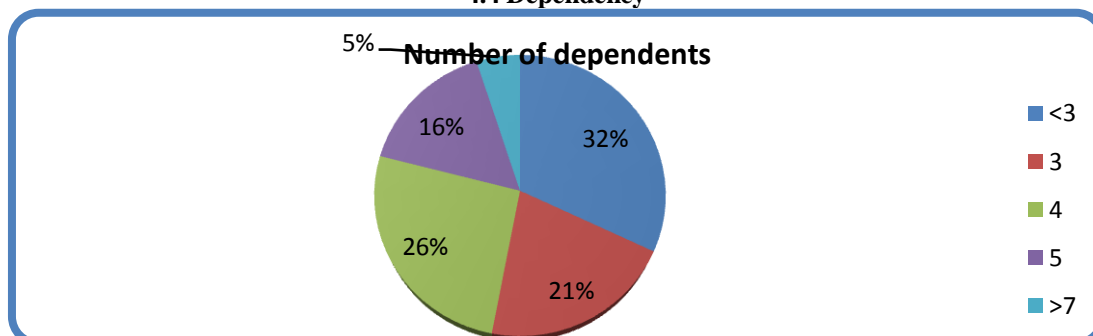
The research also showed that the Bsc Honors Counseling students were of diverse age groups. Of the total number of students, 5% were below 20years, 25% were between 20 to 30 years, 40 % were between 31 to 40years, 25% were between 41 to 50years and 5% were between 51 to 60 years. The study therefore revealed that the programme attracted students who were predominantly above 20 years. The University’s entry requirements, however, provided for the enrolment of students just above 16 years after the attainment of ordinary level qualifications.

4.3 Marital Status of students



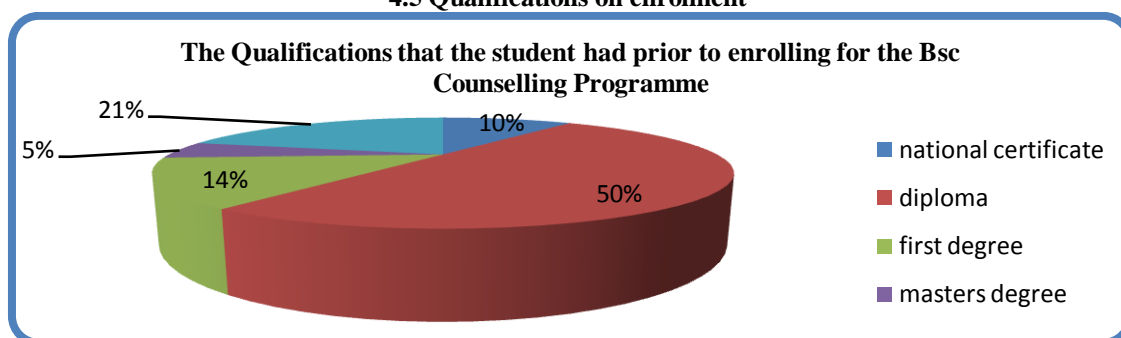
The research revealed that the majority of Bsc Honors Counseling students (79%) were married. The second most significant group of respondents were single with a frequency of 13%. 5% of the students were divorced while 3% were separated. The statistics on the marital status of Counseling students mirrored that of the general ODL students as revealed in a study by Ndudzo (2014).

4.4 Dependency



The study revealed that the majority of Bsc Honors Counseling students had several dependents as they were married. 32% of respondents had less than 3 dependants while 26% of respondents had 4 dependents, 21% had 3 dependents, 16% had 5 dependents and 5% had more than 6 dependents. The study generally revealed that the students had extra responsibilities as parents and guardians. Respondents indicated that their parental duties were in sync and complemented some of the theoretical knowledge they received in their learning process.

4.5 Qualifications on enrolment



The research also revealed the qualifications that the students had prior joining ZOU. It was revealed that 10% of the students had national certificate, 50% had diplomas, 14% first degrees, 5% had master's degrees and 21% had O' level. The study therefore revealed that the programme mainly attracted students who would have attained some other academic qualifications after ordinary levels. The majority of respondents indicated that they were not aware that they could enrol for a degree programme just after completing ordinary level studies. The University therefore should intensify efforts to recruit students just after completion of ordinary level qualifications.

4.6 O-Level subjects students had on enrolment

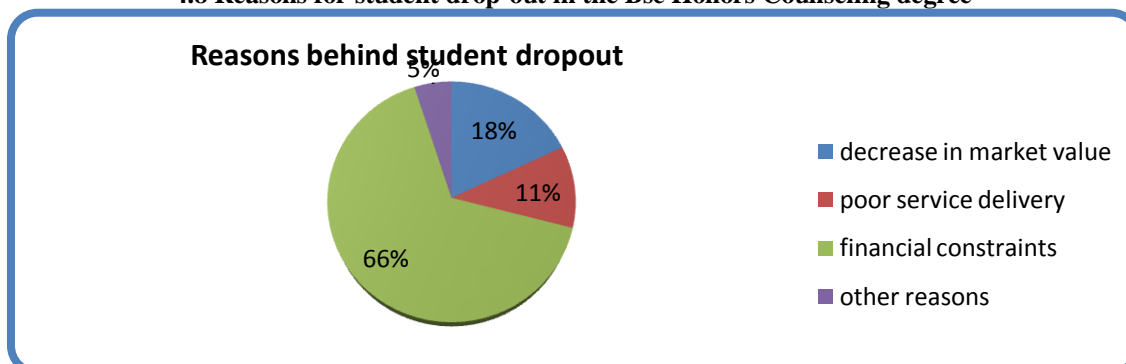
The research revealed that 100% of the students had English in addition to other subjects, 87% had Shona, 31% had science, 50% had history, 22% had mathematics, 76% had geography, 61% had commerce and 47% had religious studies. The study revealed that the students who preferred Counseling had a strong background in arts and humanities subjects. The study also revealed that students who preferred to pursue the Bsc Hons Counseling had challenges in mathematics as only 22% had passed mathematics at Ordinary level.

4.7 The reasons why the students chose to study Bsc Honors Counseling.

The study through in-depth interviews revealed that students who chose to study Counseling viewed the programme as essential to their careers. The programme was therefore chosen for the purpose of career advancement. Respondents were mainly in the care giving sectors, for example, nursing, mid wifery and other professions which involved practical Counseling experiences. The other reason motivating the learners' choice for the programme was passion for the counselling profession. Other respondents, however, indicated that they chose the programme because of its broad usefulness to societal issues.

The research showed that the Bsc Honors Counseling degree was the first option for 84% of the respondents, 13 % had the programme as their second option while only 3% of respondents had the programme as their third option.

4.8 Reasons for student drop-out in the Bsc Honors Counseling degree

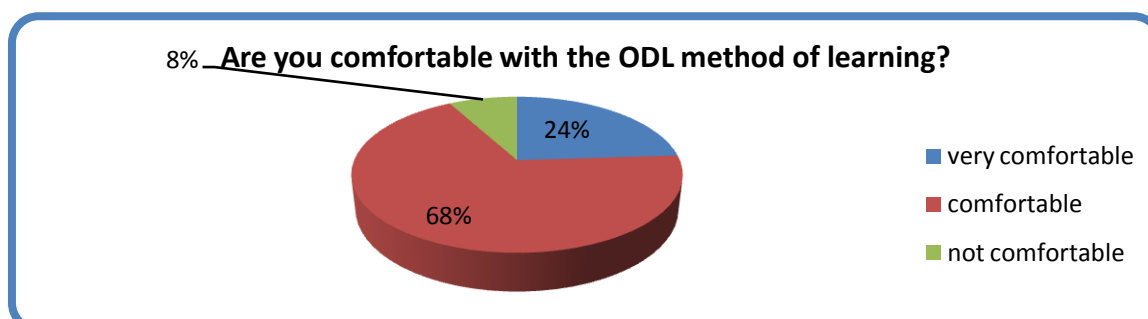


The study revealed that the major reason for students drop out in the Bsc Honors Counseling degree at the Zimbabwe Open University was the financial constraints facing the students as indicated by 66% of respondents. The second most significant factor as indicated by 18% of respondents was the perceived decrease in the market value of the programme. Respondents indicated that the programme was mostly useful and required in employment setups run by nongovernmental, care giving, and other organisations providing humanitarian aid. Respondents indicated that these organisations were scaling down their operations in Zimbabwe.

Poor service delivery was cited as a determinant of student dropouts by 11% of respondents. The respondents indicated that the University's online services needed to be revitalised and developed further to enhance convenience for the students. There were other reasons apart from those referred to above which include challenges with course content, assignments and examinations.

4.9 Suitability of ODL to learners needs

The students were asked how comfortable they were with the ODL method of learning. The research showed that 68% students were comfortable, 24% were very comfortable and 8% were not comfortable.



In-depth interviews were conducted with students and the researcher managed to establish the reasoning behind the questionnaire responses in the chart above. The students who indicated that they were very comfortable with the ODL mode of learning were mostly in their third and final years of study and were adults above thirty years of age. These respondents had adjusted to the demands of ODL and had developed what they thought to be effective strategies of studying. Adults above thirty years of age indicated that they were more comfortable with ODL because it enabled them to balance their academic, professional and family responsibilities.

The respondents who indicated that they were not comfortable with the ODL mode of learning were younger adults who were mostly in their first and second years of study. The study revealed that these students had not yet adjusted to ODL effectively and were having challenges with assignments and some academic concepts. These students indicated that they expected more assistance from the lecturers rather than the limited tutorial hours they were getting through ODL.

4.10 Measures to improve the ODL mode of education

The respondents suggested the following as measures that the ODL institution should take to improve the attractiveness of the ODL mode of learning;

- Increase tutorial time and improve on the quality of tutorials
- Introduce bulk sms facility for easy and quick communication
- Utilise multimedia for instruction delivery
- Provide all modules required on time
- Improve personal communication with the students
- Avail past examination papers to aid preparation for examinations and assignments
- Help students find attachment
- Consistent supervision on practicum
- Open more centres in districts and rural areas
- Review fees

4.11 Evaluation of the usefulness of the Bsc Counseling Honors degree in practice

The study revealed that 49% of respondents were learning while practicing Counseling at their workplaces or in other areas of social life. The other 51% were not practicing Counseling professionally but indicated that they had intentions of utilising acquired knowledge practically. For the students who indicated that they were professionally practicing Counseling, 80% indicated that they had been able to effectively utilise practically the theoretical knowledge they had acquired. Respondents testified of their improved proficiency in assisting victims of HIV/AIDS, victims of domestic abuse, accident victims and other community members who needed professional Counseling. The other 20% indicated that they were unsure of the effectiveness of theoretical knowledge at their work places.

V. Conclusions

A review of the findings of this study shows that demographically, the Bsc Honors Counseling degree programme offered by ZOU has more female students than males. The programme attracted students from diverse age groups and the most predominant age group was the 30 to 40 years. Research results also show that the majority of the students were married and as such had a number of the dependents under their care. The demographic characteristics show that the Bsc Honors Counseling degree is attracting mature students. This means that there is a high chance that these students are likely to complete the programme because they enrol with the determination to graduate.

Academically, the majority of the students were diploma holders, notably the diploma in education or counseling. It was interesting to note that the Bsc Counseling degree programme enrolled students with advanced degree qualifications such as the Masters degree. All the students had the pre-requisite O 'levels required as the minimum entry qualifications by the University in line with the Zimbabwe Higher Council of Education criteria. However, most of the students did not have Mathematics. This means that they faced challenges in courses such as statistics which had a strong mathematical component.

The motivations to study the Bsc Counseling degree by students were equally diverse. The study revealed that the main motive for embarking on the Bsc Counseling degree was for career advancement. The majority of the students believed that the Bsc Honors Counseling degree qualification offered an opportunity for accelerated career advancement. Since the majority of the students were in the care giving sector, which required counseling skills, the Bsc Counseling degree programme further honed their skills making them more effective counsellors.

The majority of the students were satisfied with the ODL nature of the Bsc Counseling degree offered by ZOU. This was because the majority of the students are working and they felt that the ODL mode of the degree programme allowed them to work and pursue their studies with minimum inconveniences. The ODL mode thus offers flexibility and convenience for working students. This explains why many of the students enrolled in the programme are in the working class category. These students can work and study during their spare time.

Students studying the Bsc Counseling degree with ZOU faced numerous challenges. The major challenge repeatedly stated by the students was financial constraints. Most of the students felt that due to the economic crisis currently prevailing in Zimbabwe, they were finding it difficult to pay the high tuition fees demanded by the University. The other constraint mentioned by the students was that the modules for the degree programme were inadequate. This adversely affected studying. It is needless to mention that studying is made difficult if not impossible if one has inadequate study materials. In some instances some students faced the challenge of timetable clashes especially when they work during weekends. Most of ZOU's tutorials are conducted during weekends and this means that those students working during the weekends are unable to attend. This may affect their academic performance if they do not take remedial measures to compensate for their absence at tutorials.

The study revealed that a number of students were dropping out from the programme. Again the reasons for dropping out were many. However, the main reason attributable to the high drop-out rate in the degree programme was that most students were experiencing financial constraints. The prevailing economic crisis in Zimbabwe has made it extremely difficult for the general populace, particularly students to pay for their education. Tuition fees are considered too high and many students are finding it difficult and unsustainable to enrol for the degree programme considering that they are parents who also have other familial responsibilities. This has forced a considerable number of students to drop out of the programme. Some students felt that the Bsc Honors Counseling degree programme offered by ZOU was being oversubscribed resulting in a drop in market value, hence this diminished its attractiveness as an academic qualification so they dropped-out. The study also noted that some students dropped-out from the Bsc Honors Counseling degree programme on the grounds of poor service delivery. Service delivery in the context of the Bsc Counseling degree offered by ZOU cover the quality and quantity of services such as tutorials and the support in the form of modules as well as access to tutors at the regional centres.

Students felt that the Bsc Honors Counseling degree could be made more attractive through adopting several strategies. There was a unanimous call to increase tutorial time and the quality of the modules used to deliver the programme. The students stated that supervision during practicum should be strengthened in order to make it worthwhile and beneficial to them. There was also a suggestion that they should be further

decentralisation of the programme so that tutorials are conducted as close to the students as possible. This entailed opening district facilities where students could easily access services.

Overall, the Bsc Honors Counseling degree programme was found to be a useful qualification by the students. It prepared them to be effective counsellors, enhanced their career prospects and helped them to deal with psychosocial problems they might encounter within their families and society at large. They cited the socio-economic problems that Zimbabwe was experiencing as needing trained counsellors who have the skills and knowledge to offer effective Counseling services to the growing number of distressed people in their communities and society at large.

VI. Recommendations

- While the majority of the students are deemed mature, the Bsc Honors Counseling degree programme should also aim to attract immediate school leavers from A 'Level who constitute a fairly large number. The increased number of students is likely to result in improvement in the quality of the Bsc Honors Counseling degree programme as more resources in terms of module development and tutorials will be allocated to the degree.
- The Bsc Honors Counseling degree programme should have a bridging programme for students without mathematics as this will encourage those without the subject at O 'Level to enrol for the programme and also enhance the pass rate in courses such as statistics where those without mathematics face challenges.
- Since most students perceive the Bsc Honors Counseling degree to be a career enhancing degree the courses offered under the programme should be constantly reviewed to make them relevant to the needs of the stakeholders. This means proactive research and development of new courses that are in line with modern trends and thinking in the Counseling industry.
- Employers and non-governmental organisations in the Counseling fraternity should offer subsidies for tuition fees for students to encourage enrolment and retention of students to mitigate the problem of drop-outs. ZOU as a University can also provide a student- friendly tuition payment scheme which does not overburden the student.
- ZOU needs to improve service delivery of the Bsc Counseling degree programme by ensuring quality in the preparation and availability of modules, delivery of tutorials and supervision during practicum. As an ODL programme, latest technologies such as skype, whatsapp and viber could be adopted to enhance communication between the lecturers and students. This could greatly elevate the status of the degree programme and attract more students.
- The University should play a proactive role in promoting the Bsc Honors Counseling degree programme through aggressive marketing. This will help dispel myths, misunderstandings and even apprehensions that may be associated with the programme.

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