



Evaluation of the conditions of the Psychopedagogical Office of the Universidad de Cienfuegos in the management of virtual guidance services

Evaluación de las condiciones del Gabinete Psicopedagógico de la Universidad de Cienfuegos en la gestión de servicios de orientación virtual

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ABSTRACT

The constant transformation of society and the phenomena that have occurred globally in recent years have underscored the increasing relevance of incorporating technologies into guidance and, consequently, the virtualization of the service. The transition to virtualization requires the identification of strengths and weaknesses of guidance offices or departments for managing virtual psychoeducational guidance services. This paper presents the results of an empirical study carried out in the Psychoeducational Office of the Universidad de Cienfuegos, which demonstrated the conditions for the development of the guidance process mediated by technologies. Based on observations, interviews, surveys, document review, and triangulation of results, the human and material resources available to the office and the level of preparation of managers and collaborators to carry out the process were determined, as well as potential users and guidance demands in accordance with their interaction contexts. The study represents the first stage in facilitating the deployment of virtual guidance actions, contributing to the socio-emotional well-being of the educational community.

Keywords: counseling, social welfare, human development, pedagogical guidance, educational technology.

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INTRODUCTION

The complex situations individuals face throughout life and the constant need for help conditioned the emergence of counseling as a professional practice (Bledsoe et al., 2021; Jamal et al., 2020; Maulod & Lu, 2020; Powers & Duys, 2020). In its beginnings, around the 20th century, it was understood as a one-off help in the transition from school to work (Baker et al., 2021; Romijn et al., 2021). Subsequently, the scope of this process broadened, to encompass the totality of the efforts of the educational system to help the individual to achieve personal and professional success through a better knowledge



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of himself and the possibilities of the environment (Chu et al., 2019; Poza-Vilches et al., 2019).

The last decades imposed new needs, and, in the meantime, the transformation of guidance activity was required (Pérez, 2022; Hays et al., 2021a; Hays et al., 2021b). Greater comprehensiveness was required in educational interventions with a higher scope in aspirations (Spurk et al., 2020), resulting in the need to expand areas contexts and use new techniques, methods, and psycho-pedagogical resources (Dahir et al., 2019; Lai et al., 2020; Ridley et al., 2021).

Thus, using information and communication technologies (ICT) has become an effective tool and alternative for developing guidance actions (Sampson et al., 2020; Situmorang, 2020; Young, 2022). The incorporation of digital platforms, social networks, and web pages in the activities developed by educational psychology offices is an innovative trend that confirms the possibilities of ICTs in educational activities, especially those that become a resource and a tool to implement, complement, accompany and reinforce guidance processes and practices, deployed in educational institutions (Gonzalo, 2020).

Gonzalo Josserme is one of the authors who defends the trend toward consolidating a hybrid model of technological mediation in educational guidance. In this sense, it is necessary to consolidate experiences and learning linked to how educational guidance teams, areas, or departments appeal to various virtual resources and tools to support their functions (Gonzalo, 2021, 2022).

However, focusing practices on guidance with ICT and not through ICT (Del Mazo, 2020) and the shortcomings in the comprehensiveness of the services of the offices highlighted the need to undertake initiatives that, from virtualizing the service offered by the Psychopedagogical Offices, viable alternatives are promoted to concretize the guidance influence of specialists in Pedagogy-Psychology. For this purpose, it is essential to know the human and material resources available to the counseling offices, departments, or teams, infrastructure, usual procedures of the counselors, level of preparation, collaboration, and networking, and these professionals' main interests and expectations.

In this regard, research in the last decade stands out, although it mainly focuses on using particular digital tools. In Spain, Muñoz and González (2014, 2015) identify contents, resources, and materials disseminated from the websites/platforms of Secondary School Guidance Departments, revealing the little use of the advantages of ICT and the need to prepare guidance counselors for it. For their part, Sebo et al. (2023) carried out a study on the usefulness of the metaverse for counseling, demonstrating the potential of incorporating technological innovations and virtual spaces into the work of the guidance counselor. Del Olmo (2021) formulated a proposal to improve the digitalization of the counseling services of the University of Valladolid, considering the scarce use of digital resources for counseling. However, he highlights it as a booming process with broad perspectives.

In Cuba, Crespo et al. (2021) argue the use of educational technologies in the process of pedagogical vocational professional guidance (OPVP) in Cuban Higher Education and its incorporation into the Psychopedagogical Offices so that these become a space for shared help and construction of knowledge. Pérez et al. (2022, 2023) recommend the use of the Moodle Platform as an essential space for the development of the orientation function of university teachers, proposing a program aimed at facilitating the configuration of life projects and a conceptual guide for the improvement of the psychopedagogical office -career link.

Thus, an approach to the work of the Psychopedagogical Office of the University of Cienfuegos, as part of the improvement to update and resize the services offered and the resources for it, diversifying and expanding the guiding scope of this space, revealed the need to make a diagnosis about its conditions to move to virtual guidance, delimiting dimensions, techniques and subjects involved. The present work aims to expose the results of the diagnosis carried out at the University of Cienfuegos to determine the conditions of its Psychopedagogical Office for the management of the virtual guidance service.

METHODS

The research was developed in the Psycho-pedagogical Office of the University of Cienfuegos "Carlos Rafael Rodríguez." This structure carries out and manages actions to generate improvement in this institution of Higher Education and its educational influence radius, from the management and development of orientation and psycho-pedagogical intervention activities as a specialized orientation service.

For the fulfillment of your social responsibility, the cabinet has a total of 55 members (N=55) who, for this study,

constitute the intentional sample in its entirety according to the purpose of the study (Hernández & Mendoza, 2018). The sample comprises professors of the Department of Pedagogy Psychology, Bachelor's Degree in Education and Pedagogy Psychology students, and recent graduates of the same career who are in training. They are organized according to the assigned tasks, in collaborators, advisors, and managers that allow coordinated, collaborative, and systematic work.

The research had a mixed sequential embedded design (Creswell, 2009). In the study, the qualitative approach is privileged in that quantifiable data serve as support. However, it constitutes the understanding of the actual conditions of the data analysis, which are mainly qualitative (Hernández & Mendoza, 2018). Data analysis is presented from an integrative perspective that advocates triangulation.

Based on the results of a previous study conducted in the institution (Pérez et al., 2022), the following dimensions were taken into account to determine the strengths/weaknesses pair in the virtualization of the guidance service: technological, procedural, and personal. The technological dimension contains the elements that condition the proper technological functioning (technological conditions and infrastructure, accessibility, functionality, interoperability, successful design), and the procedural dimension comprises the system of actions and procedures developed and executed in favor of users (identification, diagnosis, intervention, and follow-up). On the other hand, the personal dimension deals with the aspects related to the working relationships and the teamwork, collaborative and networked methods of the team members, their needs, interests, motivations, and expectations in the virtualization of the guidance service.

Different techniques and empirical methods were used to investigate and analyze each dimension's behavior, as shown in Table 1. It should be noted that the techniques applied were designed to provide objective and accurate information on each dimension based on the collection of information on the most relevant aspects of the virtualization of the guidance service for subsequent processing.

Table 1.
Research dimensions, criteria and techniques

Dimensión	Criterios	Técnica	Objetivo	Sujetos
Tecnológica	Condiciones materiales e infraestructura tecnológica para el uso de herramientas, sitios y páginas web accesibles, funcionales, interconectadas y con un diseño acertado.	Entrevista	Identificar las principales condiciones tecnológicas para la virtualización del servicio de orientación	Gestora principal
		Observación	Comprobar la funcionalidad de la infraestructura tecnológica	
Procedimental	Proceder para identificar, diagnosticar, intervenir y dar seguimiento a los usuarios (orientados).	Entrevista	Conocer los procedimientos de trabajo del gabinete	Gestores Asesores
		Encuesta	Identificar las posibilidades y necesidades para el perfeccionamiento del proceder	Usuarios beneficiarios (orientados)
		Análisis de documentos	Constatar las principales necesidades de orientación y las actividades desarrolladas	
Personal	Relaciones de trabajo y método de trabajo en equipo, colaborativo y en red. Necesidades, intereses, motivaciones y expectativas.	Encuesta Entrevista	Identificar las relaciones y métodos de trabajo entre los miembros del equipo a partir de las necesidades, intereses, motivaciones y expectativas.	Gestores, asesores y colaboradores seleccionados

Source: Own elaboration.

Note: the table appears in its original language.

RESULTS

The triangulation of the different instruments applied made it possible to identify the conditions of the Psycho-pedagogical Office of the University of Cienfuegos for managing virtual guidance. In this sense, regarding the technological dimension, an interview was conducted with the leading manager and coordinator of the Psychopedagogical Office. The interview aimed to identify the main technological conditions for the development of the virtual guidance service. In addition, the functionality of the web pages, sites, and tools used and the possibilities

of these to function as an ecosystem of influences of the guidance action were verified through observation.

Thus, it was learned that the Psychopedagogical Office has the necessary technological infrastructure and material conditions to take on the challenge of virtualizing the guidance service. The interviewee agrees that the office has the physical space and the indispensable conditions for the members to develop their work. Likewise, it has the hardware and software necessary to develop the virtual guidance action (electronic devices, connection to the network and sites, pages, and tools), which allows the implementation and improvement of the guidance service.

However, it is necessary to broaden the scope, perfect the design, adjust the functionality of each space created, and design and implement new spaces. In this aspect, we agree with the results reached by Pérez Gamboa et al. (2022), who state that information literacy is a necessary element in the sensitization phase of a guidance program. In this regard, it was found that there are several spaces in different social networks and platforms through which the guidance service is offered in a limited way. Among these, the use of the messaging platforms Telegram and WhatsApp, the social network Facebook, and the Reflejos platform for creating blogs stood out.

In addition to the above, the need to create a web page that combines the different services of the Psychopedagogical Office and, especially, the guidance service was also recognized. Similarly, it ratified the need to articulate the different spaces, identify the resulting potential users and the oriented subjects, and improve the designs and strategies for using each space. In other words, to generate scenarios for the articulation of the organizational portfolio in order to facilitate access to all the services for the interested parties.

On the other hand, the observation of the functionality of the technological infrastructure, especially the various spaces created, made it possible to verify their existence and previous experiences of their use. In this regard, the following were observed: a Facebook page, a Telegram channel, and a blog. From the observation, the spaces lack guides and guidelines on the operation, information about the guidance services provided through them, and the ethical rules followed. In this regard, two spaces have rules of coexistence and relations among users.

Similarly, there needs to be more functionality and integration of influences between the spaces. A previous study pointed out this limitation, whose authors determined that each space operated independently and lacked the integration and complementarity required in the actions and services (Pérez et al., 2022). Limitations of the designs, functionalities, and accessibility were appreciated from communicative, aesthetic, technological, and psycho-pedagogical criteria. In addition, the quality of the multimedia resources used, the writing and spelling, and the communicative relationships established with users were recognized.

These results referred to the limitations coincide with other similar studies. Pérez et al. (2023) recognized the difficulties caused by the conception of educational guidance as a process disconnected from the other processes that take place in the university and propose the need to create what they call a "mixed guidance figure," an integrating concept that suggests the combination of the actions of different agents and values the use of virtual environments. Another approach is adopted by Ibáñez and Alonso (2022), who propose a competency-based model of student care, which also considers the impact and importance of virtual environments.

Concerning information security, privacy, and the possibility of anonymity, some spaces make this difficult, as is the case of social networks, due to their own characteristics and data hosting. Despite this, strict ethical standards are followed in the exchange of information that could be sensitive. Following this idea, there are areas for improvement in protecting resources under distribution licenses, which could represent legal difficulties concerning property and copyright.

However, the systematicity of some actions, lines, or themes of guidance and the growing number of users that follow the spaces is worth noting. Similarly, the possibility of perfecting the spaces created and their potential to be integrated into a single guidance service, functioning as an interconnected ecosystem as a virtual service, was noted.

Considering the procedural dimension, the procedure is to identify, diagnose, intervene, and follow up with the oriented users in virtual spaces and the communication between the counselor and the oriented. To this end, interviews with two managers and four counselors were used to learn about the work procedures of the office. Twelve beneficiary users (beneficiaries) were surveyed to identify the possibilities and needs for improving the procedure. Likewise, the primary guidance needs and the activities developed were identified by analyzing documents.

From the techniques used, it was possible to know that the integration of ICT to the guidance service -to develop it virtually- is aligned with the aims and objectives of the office and its strategic projection. 100% of the interviewees agree that the growing use of ICT in the guidance service has allowed for the expansion, diversification, and transformation of the guidance action developed since, as indicated by Gómez et al. (2017), the competitiveness of educational systems in modern times is highly linked to the incorporation of new technologies.

In general, social networks and messaging platforms are identified as the most widely used and accepted due to the constant expansion of the topics covered and the growth in the number of users. This was confirmed in the Plan of Activities of the Cabinet 2021 and 2022 analysis, where all the activities were conceived for their development in virtual spaces. However, the actions are only reflected in the Facebook group "Psicopedagogos Cienfuegos," leaving the other spaces to spontaneity, lacking intentionality in orientation. In addition, isolated guidance actions are appreciated without a clear, integral, and systematic conception of the guidance service. It was found that there needs to be coherence and systematicity in the actions developed before, during, and after the request for the service or the identification of a problem and the deployment of the actions. However, these are developed following the general guidance stages, so an adjustment to their development in virtual spaces is needed.

On the other hand, it was agreed that the primary users and beneficiaries of the guidance service are the oriented subjects to whom it is offered. In this regard, the interviewees reported that the office's actions had been directed mainly at adolescents and young people, those in pre-university or the first years of university careers, teachers of all educational levels, and, in particular, psycho-pedagogues. To a lesser extent, and only occasionally, to the elderly and other family members, although actions have recently been intensified for these user groups.

The interviewees affirm that a significant number of orientation actions are directed to a diverse and unidentified public, which makes it challenging to determine potentialities and needs to develop group and individual orientation activities and personalized attention, which was corroborated by 33% of the surveyed users who affirm that the actions did not adjust, or adjusted moderately, to their needs and interests. In addition, it was found that there needs to be more intentionality in the identification of potential (targeted) users and the gradual growth of the scope of the actions and procedures for identifying potential needs for the adjustment of the service to them.

About the areas and themes most addressed in the guidance activities in virtual spaces, it was found that the daily publications by guidance areas are continuous advice to teachers, families, and managers. The design of the content of the guidance action is aimed at promoting positive behaviors through accompaniment in coping situations. This approach addresses different categories and guides the psycho-pedagogical treatment of different pathologies. It also includes commemorations of important dates related to psychological and educational aspects or those that contribute to the integral formation of the students.

In this sense, it was found that more than 60% of the actions developed during the year 2021 were referred to guidance for prevention and development. However, in the areas of attention to diversity and professional guidance, there needs to be more systematic actions in the last year. There are limitations in using the potential of the different spaces created; there needs to be more intentionality and integrality of the actions in different spaces, increasing the scope of educational influences. In correspondence with the criteria of the surveyed users, only 41% state that they have received some complementary help through different channels and virtual spaces.

In terms of the areas that can be covered by the cabinet, preventive, general, problem-specific, and demand-driven actions have been developed. Although inclusive in design, this approach is aimed at all users, broadening the beneficiaries. Likewise, it allows the design of many actions in response to the risk factors diagnosed by the cabinet, the university, or other educational agents. In this order of ideas, orientation activities are also enhanced to optimize personal growth in all aspects. However, therapeutic activities focused on difficulties in interpersonal and social relationships - from a remedial or corrective perspective - have been developed in a limited way, according to the interviewees. This result coincides with what was stated by Pérez (2022), regarding the need to overcome the care-centered, corrective and remedial approach.

In this regard, it was learned that more than 70% of the activities developed had been carried out in groups, corresponding with the difficulties in identifying potential users and developing individual actions. The interviewees reported that, in the case of individual actions, these have been isolated and spontaneous in the face of specific problems; most of them have not been planned, so they have lacked follow-up and comprehensiveness, making it difficult to evaluate the evolution and effectiveness of the service.

In line with this idea, it was found that there is a need for criteria and a procedure for evaluating the quality

of the service. According to the interviewees and the document analysis results, the criteria used are variable and based on scientific results, publications, and user feedback. Despite not having instruments for an accurate evaluation of the service, 91% of the surveyed users rate the aids and the service as adequate and very adequate, which corroborates its acceptance.

Regarding the team's working relationships for the development of the actions of virtualization of guidance as an office practice, it was found that both in the methodological documents and the Activity Plan 2021 and 2022, the roles and responsibilities of the team members still need to be identified. However, in the practical implementation of the service, collaboration and cooperation among the members, with the support and complementation of each action undertaken, prevails.

Regarding the personal dimension, we learned about team members' relationships and working methods based on their needs, interests, motivations, and expectations. For this purpose, the 15 members of the work team of the office selected for the research were surveyed and interviewed. As a result, it was learned that the office has a heterogeneous work team regarding training, specialization, and experience. Among the professionals working in the team are pedagogues, psychologists, and psycho-pedagogues with ample possibilities for teamwork, cooperation, and learning in their work dynamics.

The work team comprises 22 professors, seven recent graduates, and 26 students. These have various roles and responsibilities within the team, corresponding to a central manager, three managers, seven advisors, and 44 collaborators grouped by orientation areas. At the time of the research, the managers are working on the delimitation of roles and responsibilities of each member.

About collaborative work, 100% of the respondents say they collaborate with another member. They recognize that, on occasion, they promote orientation actions accompanied by another member or support actions developed by others. They also refer to providing and sharing information, resources, and materials for specific topics necessary for the members' preparation. Similarly, they recognize the help of more experienced teachers who are advisors in the work, promoters, and guides in the projects, activities, and actions carried out.

Respondents stated that preventive and developmental group orientation has been the most encouraged. In this sense, the main work strategies followed have been linked to identifying thematic or problematic issues, based on which a system of regular actions is established. In this regard, the interviewees pointed out the advantages of this alternative, highlighting the coherence in the influences and orientations.

In addition, it was found that various guidance strategies have been used, among which group dynamics, guidance workshops, and participatory techniques, among others, were identified by the respondents as having been beneficial in developing guidance actions. However, they recognize the limitations in using the guidance strategies and techniques designed to develop a helping relationship in person. They have adapted to the new scenarios, often limiting their results and hindering the helping relationship.

About the team's main activities in virtual spaces, according to those interviewed, the following stand out: counseling, guidance, consultation, and tutoring; motivation, stimulation, emotional support; and information, socialization, and exchange of resources. In this sense, the activities of evaluation, diagnosis, and self-diagnosis and the development of rehabilitation and intervention programs are the least frequently developed activities, requiring more excellent skill development by the team.

Regarding working methods, it was found that the thematic lines or areas of orientation are assigned according to the interests of the team members, and collaborative relationships are established, occasionally resulting in spontaneous collaboration. Communication, coordination, and consultation are daily work actions that encourage participation and decision-making based on consensus. On the other hand, coordinating responsibilities in specific spaces or projects is another strategy adopted to achieve a more significant presence of actions in seldom-used spaces.

Respondents recognize the main obstacle or difficulty for the work of the team and the development of a higher quality guidance service, as well as the costs and possibilities of access to technology. In addition, problems directly related to the guidance activity, such as preparation, procedures, and resources for guidance, are highlighted. Likewise, the preparation of guidance counselors for teamwork and the development of guidance action in virtual spaces is crucial. The interviewees agree on the importance of preparing professionals. On the other hand, they

agree that they need more training in ICT applied to guidance, which was corroborated by the 80% of respondents who claim not to have received training in using ICT in guidance. Hence, 60 % of the total respondents assess their preparation as little and somewhat prepared.

When referring to the ways to achieve a higher level of preparation in this order, training and courses predominate as the fundamental ways selected by the respondents. In addition, they affirm that resources and methodological materials on technology and guidance, which prove to be accurate guides, need to be updated. This hinders the development of a working procedure and system to improve the performance of the guidance service. Regarding expectations and motivations, the interviewees highlighted the possibilities of working on the network, remote access and interaction, and the diversification of assistance and its approach to those in need in emerging situations. In the same disposition, they highlighted the possibilities of the web to develop different orientation activities for different audiences, mainly the youngest, who are the most active on the web, as this is a new way to establish a relationship of help.

The participants agree that the virtualization of services represents a necessity and an opportunity to adapt to the new social realities. Such an undertaking should respond to users' fundamental interests, needs, and possibilities, whether they are individuals, groups, or institutions. This approach makes it easier to contextualize and personalize activities, reflected in the dynamization of services and the impact of the intervention.

The triangulation of the instruments applied, and their results made it possible to determine the following strengths and weaknesses for virtualizing the orientation service of the Psychopedagogical Office of the University of Cienfuegos:

Strengths

- Essential technological support is present to design, adjust, improve, and effectively exploit the virtual spaces for guidance.
- Plural training and experiences of the office's work team members guarantee the projection of multi- and interdisciplinary actions.
- Intra and intergenerational linkage of young people, with more frequent integration of students as peer counselors and novice teachers, who are integrated into the work of members with more experience in the activities developed.
- Willingness, motivation, and commitment to participate in scientific, community, and entrepreneurial projects to improve the guidance service developed.
- Recognition of the value of ICT in the guidance service to expand, diversify, and transform the guidance action as an indicator of the quality of the different processes and the university as a whole.
- Systematization of experiences and introduction of results in preventive and developmental group guidance in virtual spaces, leading to more frequent and stable services.
- Expectations regarding the possibilities of working in the network, access and interaction at a distance, and the diversification of assistance and its approach to those in need in emerging situations. This strength constitutes one of the fundamental benefits of consolidating the link between university and society, based on the services of assistance, accompaniment, training, and counseling.

Weaknesses

- Lack of functionality, integration, and articulation of influences, actions, and strategies in virtual spaces. The fact that each space functions independently hinders interconnections that allow complementing actions and access to diverse services.
- Limitations in the spaces created in consideration of technological, design, and psycho-pedagogical principles.
- It is vital to identify potential users' target populations and design actions gradually, based on analyzing potentials and needs for the required transformation of the implementation models.
- Shortcomings in the integral and systematic conception of the guidance service in virtual spaces translate into a lack of coherence and systematization of actions, frequently showing a parallel character.
- Limitations in the criteria and procedures for evaluating the service quality and the users' evaluation and follow-up.
- Limited development of competencies for using ICTs, mainly due to a deficient training of counselors in ICTs applied to counseling and insufficient methodological work in this regard.
- Material and methodological outdatedness in the areas of technology and guidance.

CONCLUSIONS

Evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the Psychopedagogical Office of the University of Cienfuegos about managing the virtual guidance service revealed several vital factors. Among these, the existing technological conditions, the cheerful disposition towards change, and the experiences accumulated by the work team stand out. These elements form a solid foundation for further development and improvement of the service.

However, the need for more in-depth and specific team training was identified. This would include developing technical and digital skills and a deeper understanding of interaction and communication in virtual environments. In addition, the design and redesign of virtual spaces emerged as a critical aspect of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of online orientation. It is essential to create online environments that are both functional and welcoming to users while facilitating counseling tasks.

Identifying an appropriate methodological procedure also proved to be a crucial factor. The team needs to establish a coherent and practical approach to online guidance that fits the specific contexts and needs of the users. This will involve carefully reflecting and analyzing best practices and theories in online guidance.

Finally, the study highlighted the importance of establishing new working relationships. As the Educational Psychologist's Office moves toward greater virtualization of its services, team members must develop new ways to collaborate and coordinate their efforts online. This will also involve cultivating new ways of interacting and collaborating with service users.

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