

## **'Selection' as an Input for Counsellor-Training : Some Reflections**

K. MURUGAN

Senior Lecturer in Distance Education, STRIDE  
Indira Gandhi National Open University  
Maidan Garhi, New Delhi - 110068

*The issue that is a veritable cause for concern in training is that of relating theory to practice. Training programmes for counsellors, for instance, purports to provide the counsellor-in-preparation with the 'knowledge' to become an effective practitioner. The intending counsellors are thus expected to take this 'knowledge', which is often theoretical in nature, to real-life situations and apply it in practice. Though it sounds quite logical, literature in this area and experience abound with evidence that it simply does not work. The gap between actual practice and the theoretical inputs imparted in laboratory situations with the intention of guiding practice is so substantial that the relevance of counsellor preparation programmes often receives flak. This is so, mainly because, the paper argues, training is seen in isolation and not in the institutional context. To this effect, the paper raises various issues and takes up for discussion just one i.e., the selection processes of potential counsellors, which is normally taken for granted, and explains the processes involved in the collaborative selection of counsellors. (The terms 'training' and 'orientation' have been used interchangeably for the present purpose). This paper will contribute significantly to the debate on counsellor training in the context of India as well as comparable situations in other developing countries.*

### **Background**

Since 1987, the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU, for short) has been conducting counsellor orientation/training programmes at its Regional Centres across the country. (In the IGNOU context, counsellors are part-timers who facilitate face-to-face interaction). By and large, the number of these programmes organised in a given year largely corresponds to the number of courses launched in the immediate past and/or being considered. For every course (# 435) at least two counsellors are identified, though it is not a norm. Full-time faculty of the University — both at the Headquarters and at the Regional Centres—conduct these training programmes, the duration of which is 2 or 3 days. Normally, training/orientation programmes are scheduled on different months or different dates in a month in order to facilitate the movement of the core-faculty from one Regional Centre to the other. Approximately, 25 trainee-counsellors, representing most of the Study Centres (# 255) that come under the Regional Centres (# 17) participate in each training programme. As of May 1996, the total number of part-time counsellors, most of whom are tertiary level teachers in the conventional

educational set up, are 14,542, of which nearly 50% have undergone the training. (The student enrollment in the academic year 1995-1996 is 1,30,228 and the cumulative number of students on rolls is 3,10,000).

### **Counsellor-Training**

Training, in general, is mainly concerned with increasing the effectiveness of individuals and their contribution to organisational productivity. Usually, the need for training is felt when an employee lacks the knowledge/skill/attitude to perform an assigned task satisfactorily. Thus, training needs have usually been seen in terms of work performance — essentially, *performance discrepancies* or *deficiencies*. Holding this view will mean ascribing the customary 'giver' 'receiver' role respectively to the trainers and trainees. However, training to be purposeful should be designed in such a way as to build on the existing potential of the trainee. This would suggest that training in isolation will not help serve the intended purpose — may it be individual skill development or institutional growth. Every aspect of training and related factors should, as a rule, be paid attention. Put differently, institutional goals should guide the training contexts. It is against this backdrop that the training under consideration is viewed.

The components of a typical two-day, approximately five hours a day, counsellor-training programme in the present context are:

- *the concepts of open/distance education*: the implication/relevance of these concepts in the higher educational scenario of India; the feature of open/distance education, etc.
- *the role of assignments and the importance of tutor - comments on the assignment responses*: assignments as a teaching tool (and not merely a tool for evaluation); how to comment on assignment responses, etc.
- *the notion of academic counselling*: the difference between what is called 'counselling' and teaching; the differing role domains of teachers, etc.
- *specific content subject areas*: how materials have been prepared; the role of self-instructional materials, etc.

Usually, the first two items are considered on the first day and the last two on the second day. Evidently, the assumption of such a programme is that conventional teachers with some exposure to distance education can assume the role of a counsellor. In other words, the notion underlying the training is that the teachers, if given theoretical orientation, will be able to transfer it to real situations. How tenable is that assumption?

This question is not so innocuous as it sounds to be. It is naive to consider training-inputs in terms of content the sole basis on which a training programme is adjudged as efficacious or otherwise. In the immediate context, various issues as listed below need to be addressed to :

1. Has the provision for a face-to-face component in the overall instructional scheme of the university been taken as 'given' ?

2. What should be the purpose, nature and function of this provision? (That it facilitates face-to-face interaction is no answer. If it were, a further question would be : what might be the purpose of this interaction?)
3. Taking for granted the purpose, how frequent should be such meetings? What might be the rationale for the frequency assigned?
4. What is the criterion/criteria used in the selection and appointment of the academic counsellors who are involved in the conduct of these sessions?
5. Assuming that there are clear statements of criteria for the selection of counsellors, do they need training — most of them being tertiary-level teachers? (Some of the counsellors have been drawn from industries/companies as well).
6. If they need training, what might be the nature of inputs for that training? Does it assume that their role domain would change? If it is assumed so, what would be their new role domains? (If there is no perceptible change in the role domains, what is the need for 'orientation' at all — given that most of them are teachers?)
7. What is the rationale for fixing the duration for the 'orientation' at 2/3 days ? If the assumption is that the role domain of the personnel engaged in academic counselling is different from their traditional roles, will the duration in practice at present be sufficient to effect the required change?
8. What might be the quality/effectiveness of the training? Related to this are the questions : how does one judge the quality/effectiveness of the training or what should decide the effectiveness or otherwise of the training and who would judge it?
9. If the counselling sessions are the manifestations of the quality of the training given, what should make a counselling session effective? Assuming that catering to the needs of the students determines the quality of the sessions, are the students, who are the consumers, given any 'orientation' so that they would know that they should expect from the counselling session?
10. Who might impart training? What might be the eligibility criterion/criteria to become a trainer? In other words, what are the skills/attributes expected of a trainer? What kind of training would the trainers themselves need/have?
11. Is there any built in feedback mechanism to evaluate training for purposes of improvement?

Admittedly, the list of questions presented here is not exhaustive. In any case, that is not intended either. However, they are representative of the issues involved in the conduct of training.

## Counsellor Selection

Appointment of personnel in various fields, by and large, is made depending mostly on the educational qualifications without taking into consideration skills, aptitudes, attitudes, etc. Usually, the process of the appointment of counsellors reflects this contemporary social reality. This is not to deny the significance of content knowledge. But content expertise alone cannot be considered a determining factor. Typically, what happens in a distance teaching institution is that a faculty which launches a programme informs the student service unit of its requirement in terms of counsellor-inputs. This unit, in turn sends out communications to all its branches across the country for identifying counsellors for the programme. Though it is customary to specify educational qualifications for the appointment, there might be occasions when these are not prescribed leaving the option to the liaisoning agencies. The initial responsibility of identifying potential counsellors will invariably rest with the field coordinators.

A diagrammatic representation of the process is given below :

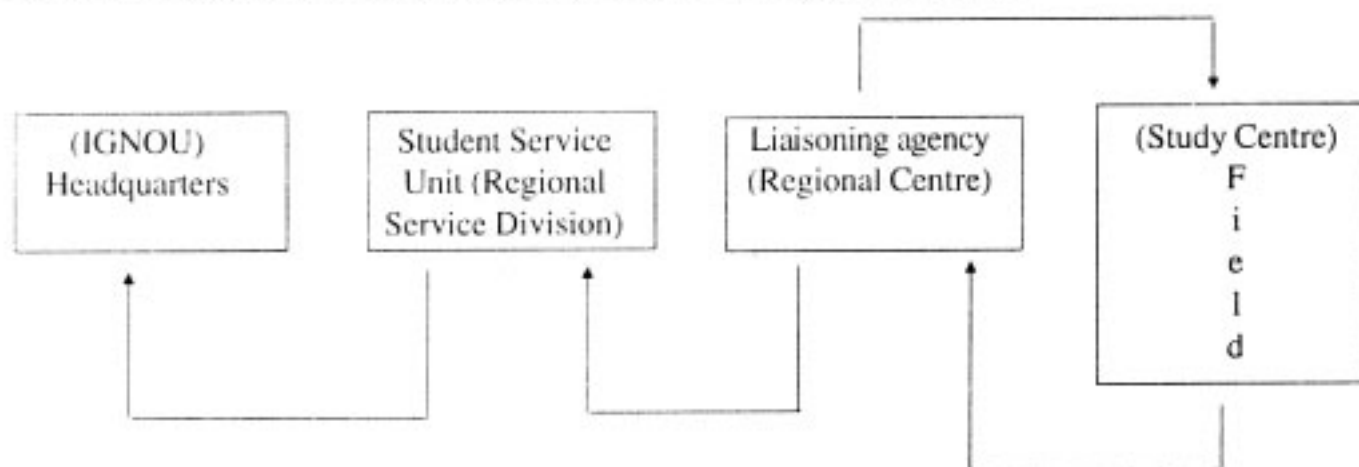


Figure 1 : Customary procedure to select IGNOU Counsellors.

Issues to be looked at in this context are

- The level of communication between the faculty concerned and the student service unit : a) does the faculty prescribe any other criteria besides content expertise, represented by academic qualifications, for appointment of counsellors? b) what role does the student service unit play, besides being a conduit point between its service branches and the faculty?
- the role being played by the liaisoning agencies/service branches : a) do they involve themselves in identifying potential counsellors? b) do they play any role in the final selection processes, besides forwarding the *bio data* sheets?
- the criterion used for selection of counsellors : a) can content expertise alone be adequate for a teacher to perform the functions required of a counsellor? b) if it is considered adequate, what is the rationale behind this supposition? c) if it is not so considered, what might be the other requirements and how can they be imparted?

The procedure illustrated in Figure 1 does not appear to need any change and therefore can be retained. However, the nature of work of each of the operational units should be defined properly. In a pyramidal power structure of the kind distance teaching institutions inherit, maintaining free flow of information, which is considered a crucial factor for *total quality management* across Schools and Divisions is difficult. Consequent on which, the faculty and service units, represented usually by Schools and Divisions respectively, seem to operate independently of the other, which gets manifested in the wide gap between the industrial and the servicing aspects of the institution under discussion. The situation does sound distressing. Increase in faculty-interest in student support servicing is the only way through which the servicing component can be strengthened.

The change being envisioned should thus originate from the particular Schools themselves which plan to launch academic programmes. A natural tendency is to feel complacent with the production of course materials, which represents the manufacturing industrial process with its systems approach; division of labour; mass production, etc. Production of course materials should not, however, be considered the end of the distance teaching activity; it is just a part of it and in fact a beginning. In other words, the faculty should also look into the service industrial process of the institution.

One way of getting the full-time faculty involved in the servicing sector is to make them participate in the selection and appointment of counsellors, who generally are part-timers. The institution should consider the following steps for the purpose :

- Step One** The faculty members of a particular School should *reflect* individually on the processes that have gone into the production of learning materials such as why a particular topic/theme has been highlighted, for example, in a particular course-unit; what a theme intends to convey to the learners; why a particular pattern is followed in the arrangement of topics/themes; what areas might pose some conceptual problems to the students, etc.
- Step Two** Those involved in the production (or even other faculty members, depending on the need) collectively should discuss individual 'reflective sheets' and arrive at a consensus. (For example, why something has been done the way it is).
- Step Three** Based on the consensus arrived at earlier, i.e., steps 1 and 2, in step 3, similar process should be repeated to decide on what one expects from an academic-counsellor. And on this basis, guidelines should be prepared as regards the prerequisites of a counsellor. (Naturally, content expertise that currently is the determining factor for counsellor appointment will become just one of the many factors).
- Step four** In this step, the list of guidelines prepared for the selection of counsellors, following the first three steps suggested above, is to be sent

to the student service unit for onward transmission to its liaising agencies, for example, Regional Centres.

Importantly, the whole process being suggested here warrants that the interests of the clients, i.e., students, should be kept at the centre of the activity.

The number of counselling sessions and the nature of content areas should also be discussed and rationalised. For this purpose, the student service unit should liaise with the School(s) concerned. This is to see whether or not the demands of the School(s) can be met. The implication is that both the School and the service unit should be able to appreciate local problems, if any, at the Regional Centres, such as availability of expertise, etc. Ideally, interaction with the Regional Centres should be carried out when the Schools and the service unit are in the process of discussing the issue. This would help sort out the constraints and act accordingly. This further suggests that right from the beginning, all the participatory units will be involved in planning the counselling sessions.

The whole process thus helps identify the *right* counsellors. The role of Regional Centres in this context involve the following :

1. Having received the list of requirements of the School concerned through the service unit, the Regional Centres should communicate the same to the field offices, for example, Study Centres and ask for a list of potential candidates. (As in the present practice, the initial identification will continue to be the responsibility of the Coordinators of these Study Centres).
2. On an appointed day, the candidates should be met in their respective field centres by the full-time faculty members at the liaising agent, i.e., Regional Centres. This initial meeting is for the purposes of (a) ice-breaking and (b) getting to know the attributes and attitudes of the candidates towards, for example, the open/distance education system, students in general, counselling, etc. (It is, therefore, necessary for the Regional Centres to keep ready interview-schedules and the like).
3. With an introductory note on each of the candidates and, if possible with a taped conversation, academic-staff at the Regional Centres should meet and discuss each of the candidates. This is mainly to facilitate objectivity in the selection. (Even marks can be awarded to each of the items that are being looked for from the candidates).
4. After receiving the approval from the School and the service unit, the Regional Centres should issue appointment orders for a period of one year which can be renewed, depending on the performance of the counsellors. (It should be mentioned here that even at present, appointments are made only for a year initially and are renewed subsequently. The suggestion, therefore, may not be novel. What is being driven home

however, is that the Regional Centres should have some criteria to monitor the performance of a counsellor and accordingly take a decision on the question of renewal. By implication, right now such criteria-statements as mentioned are not available). The involvement of the Regional Centres in the process of counsellor-selection and their interaction with the counsellors will be more than what it is at present.

5. On receipt of the acceptance of the offer from the candidates, Regional Centres should send them separate booklets on distance education; a profile of the institution; assignment evaluation; use of media; counselling; the role of a counsellor; clientele-type, etc. They can be sent along with 'reflective sheets' in instalments. It is important that the counsellors complete the task of going through the materials and sending back their 'reflective' questions within a particular period of time. The following is a list of sample 'reflective questions' :

***Questions about the session***

- What did I set out to 'teach' ?
- Was I able to accomplish my goals?
- What 'learning' materials did I use?
- How effective were they?
- What techniques did I use?
- What grouping arrangements did I make?
- Was my session 'teacher-dominated' ?
- What kind of teacher-student interaction occurred?
- Did anything amusing or unusual occur?
- Did I have any problems with the session/course materials?
- Did I do anything differently from usual?
- What kinds of decision-making did I employ?
- Did I depart from my session-plan ? If so, why?
- Did the change make things better or worse?
- What was the main accomplishment of the session?
- Which parts of my presentation/lecture/interaction were most successful?
- Which were least successful?
- Would I conduct the session differently if I try again?
- Was my philosophy of 'teaching' reflected in the session?
- Did I discover anything new about my 'teaching' ?
- What changes should I make in my 'teaching' ?

**Questions about students**

- Did I 'teach' all my students today?
- Did students contribute actively to the session?
- How did my counselling respond to different students' needs?
- What do I think students really learned from the session?
- What did they like most about it?
- What didn't they respond well to?

**Questions about oneself**

- What is the source of my ideas about counselling?
- How am I developing as a counsellor?
- What are my strengths as a counsellor?
- What are my limitations at present?
- Are there any contradictions in my counselling?
- How can I improve my counselling?
- How am I helping my students?
- What satisfaction does counselling give me?

In the main, this 'reflective' exercise will help the trainees (and trainers as well) stand back from what they have been doing and think about what it means for their own learning and what it entails for their work as 'teachers' of others. Obviously, most would find this a difficult task to complete. (There is a need to be cautious in assuming that the written comments accurately represent the extent of the reflective thinking which the task may have prompted).

6. The reflective questions should be discussed at the Regional Centre. This helps (a) to prepare a profile of counsellors (b) to identify the materials essential for training and (c) to decide on the content and focus of training. (By implication, the present system of a generalistic type of training would be inadequate. Depending on the subject and counsellors, the nature of training varies. Further, the customary two-day programme also will undergo a change. For example, some training may go on for a week, some for two days, etc. But, then, the punch line is that before the commencement of the face-to-face training, the counsellors would have undergone *distance training*).
7. Counsellors should be asked to attend at least three actual counselling sessions before they are invited for training. On attending the sessions, they record their observations in the 'journals' they are asked to keep. These observations should also be sent to the Regional Centres. Moreover, those counsellors who actually conduct the sessions would also be sending their 'journals'. These should be discussed during train-



ing. Some of the 'senior' counsellors locally available should also be involved.

The whole process clearly indicates that even before the face-to-face training commences, activities of this kind prepare the trainee-counsellors for the task they would be assigned. This being what it is, the training scenario will change considerably. One instance is that more time will have to be spent on discussion/sharing of experiences. Obviously, however, to perform all that has been suggested, the trainers themselves should be resourceful.

The *ad hocism* that seems to be prevailing currently in the appointment of counsellors, *training per se*, trainers and counselling will, therefore, undergo a qualitative change and a sense of professionalism thus can be infused into the whole activity. In the case of students, along with the customary offer-of-admission, a questionnaire in order to collect their expectations from counselling sessions should be sent. On the day of 'induction', they should be met with an analysis of these responses. This would immensely help all those involved in counselling get useful insights into what needs to be provided/expected from face-to-face interaction.

The implication is that before the actual counselling session beings

- the counsellors are identified;
- initial 'cutting of ice' would have been over by the time face-to-face training commences and that changes the orientation of the training; and
- students would have been given an orientation so as to prepare them study with ease in the open distance education context.

The process, however, does not stop here. The counsellors would interact with the Regional Centres *continuously* through their 'journals' and would in turn receive feedback on them. Every month, at least one counselling session conducted by a particular counsellor should undergo this journal study. Besides, every three months, all the counsellors should be met at the field level. The meetings can be recorded and discussed at the Regional Centre. In essence, it is a continuous process. This would help

- identify the problems of the counsellors/students, etc.,
- identify a common pattern, if any, of the queries, problems, etc.,
- identify areas for the ensuing training,
- provide feedback to the institution on various aspects,
- establish a rapport with the counsellors/students and infuse a sense of belonging,
- the faculty members at the Regional Centres take up short-term research projects for local purposes. (The findings can be circulated to other Regional Centres to facilitate exchange of ideas).
- the full-time faculty to become professional trainers.

Various benefits in practising the activities suggested here can be summed up under the following categories :

**Information on trainee-counsellors :** Before developing any kind of training, it is imperative on the part of an institution to find out as much as possible about the target population. It includes the number of prospective counsellors, their distribution (where they live and work), their age range, the types of job they do, their interests, any other important information. Needs analysis helps determine the starting point of the training programme and shapes the programme itself. For instance, it will help determine which examples are most likely to fit, what vocabulary to use, what instructional media and procedures to adopt, etc. That is to say, if we spend a tenth as much time thinking about and describing our trainees as we do thinking about the subject, a powerful tool for ensuring the effectiveness of the training will be developed. Besides, in the present context, it helps identify employee difficulties and performance problems and important topic areas. These areas might become modules in the training programmes.

**Information on attitudes to training :** Even a cursory survey of the outcome of the exercise suggested will provide valuable information on the attitudes of the potential counsellors about the topic and the proposed training. Attitudes dictate skills and the acquisition of skills often needs to go hand in hand with the acquisition of appropriate attitudes. If people do not believe they need to change, or perceive no inconsistency between what they are at present and the desired state proposed, then change is difficult. When people recognize and accept that a need exists, they will try to redress that need. Through the activities suggested, it is possible to come across moments of truth : that they are unaware of the value of training; the kind of factors that influence negatively on a new counsellor; how the trainers themselves can improve their own skills in imparting training to the counsellors, etc. Moreover, the very fact that attempts are being made to survey the needs conveys to those involved the importance of training and gives an opportunity to collect suggestions that will help conduct the training programmes more effectively.

**Increase in counsellor/trainer involvement :** When a survey is conducted, it brings the full-time faculty into contact with the prospective trainees at the formative stage itself. Further, the potential counsellors will feel more involved and motivated, if they see that training is being geared as closely as possible to their specific needs.

**Contact with subject specialists :** The activities suggested above would help identify personnel for help in the development and implementation of training. When starting to develop a training programme, it is often useful to consult the potential counsellors or get them interviewed or met. Then, during the training session, subject specialists might come in and give brief presentations on their own particular fields. After the orientation, the senior counsellors identified could act as **mentors**—

experienced staff who provide informal assistance to the newly appointed counsellors.

**'Cost' of training:** Carrying out the activities enumerated above would help find answers to questions of the following type: how important is the training? is the number of potential counsellors and faculty members involved critical here? who needs to be involved — trainers, specialists from other units, etc.? how long is it likely to take to develop the training? when must the training be ready and when can it be conducted? Further, it helps save time, money and resources. Obviously, time and money are wasted, if training is not targeted to serve the purpose for which it is intended, i.e., to provide quality counselling to students. By undergoing the processes enumerated in the survey, it is possible to find that training is not the best solution or is only one of the solutions to a problem. A training needs survey may further show that some problems may be solved by relatively simple and cheap methods

In essence, the collaborative effort in selecting counsellors would help arrive at a common understanding of the issues and make every one concerned commit him/her to the development of training and ultimately, the success of the programme. By identifying specific needs or wants and potential objectives, one can generate data that will be useful in measuring the impact of training.

## Conclusion

The training programme currently on offer demonstrates a 'buckshot' or 'ready-aim-fire' approach to training which often leads to a lot of irrelevant material in the programme fostering dissatisfaction and instilling boredom among participants. Most of the counsellor training programmes conducted seemed to have been filled with information that different Schools and Divisions of the University think counsellors should know. There is little effort to tailor this information to suit the needs of the participants. They are left to sift through what is presented to them and pick out what is relevant. Failure to profile the trainee-counsellors and accommodate the needs of both the participants and the organisation would certainly render the training programmes ineffective. It is time we took stock of the situation.

## Sources

1. Murugan, K (1996) : *Total Quality Training in Open Education*: Madras. Epic Publishers.
2. *Report of the Vice-Chancellor IGNOU Convocation*, May, 1996.
3. Richards, J.C. and Lockhart, C. (1994) : *Reflective teaching in second language classrooms*. Cambridge. CUP.
4. Schon, D. (1987) : *Educating the reflective practitioner*, San Francisco, Jossey Bass.
5. Sewart, D. (1993) : "Student support systems in distance education". *Open Learning*, 8(3) 3-12.