The Status and Prospects of Counsellor Training: The IGNOU Experience

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Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) has been aportioning a sizeable chunk of its resources for Student Support Services. Besides the Regional Services Staff at the Headquarters, Regional Centres and Study Centres, about 10,000 part-time Academic Counsellors are involved in assisting IGNOU students in their learning. But, are the Counsellors sufficiently equipped to carryout their tasks? Murugan argues that the present training imparted to counsellors is insufficient, and the university should think of a comprehensive training programme for the Counsellors. We expect this article to generate new ideas and even debates on the issue of training counsellors.

INTRODUCTION

The focus of this paper is on counsellor training as it is currently practised at the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU, for short), India. Delineating the programme available, the paper suggests that it needs to be revamped in terms of inputs.

Irrespective of target clientele and well designed materials it has by and large been agreed upon that face to face component should form an integral part of any distance education system. The IGNOU does not seem to be an exception to it. Face to face sessions, locally called 'counselling' are made available to a strong student population through 225 study centres spread across the country. As of today, nearly 10000 counsellors are engaged in this task. The sessions are generally conducted in the evenings, on weekends and holidays in order to accommodate a heterogenous student clientele. The counsellors are part timers who hold permanent positions in the conventional educational set up. It implies that they have a considerable period of teaching experience and are themselves content experts. However, teaching in the distance education system warrants different skills from teaching in the classroom. Obviously they need to undergo some training.

At the IGNOU, the practice has been and still is to conduct a two day orientation programme for potential counsellors at the close of every budget year (i.e. April-March). The trainers are the full time faculty of the University. Questioning the tenability of the assumption that any one, by virtue of being in the system is *ipso facto*, qualified for a trainer, the paper affirms the imperative need for training the trainers. Moreover, it clearly identifies areas in which the full time faculty can contribute substantial inputs. The paper also considers building a feedback mechanism in the training programme. However it points out that whatever is suggested should not be construed an ideal training programme. Nevertheless, the need and the scope for improvement are brought to the forefront.

IGNOU STRUCTURE

Established by an Act of the Indian Parliament in September 1985, the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) has a twin-role to play in the higher educational scenario of India:

- as a University offering academic programmes leading to Certificates/Diplomas/Degrees, etc.,

- as a Governing Body monitoring and coordinating the standards and functions of distance education institutions across the country. (However, because of various operational factors within IGNOU and without, it has not until recently developed a fullfledged mechanism to effect this role).

Predictably, the organizational structure of the University is different from that of other Indian Universities — nearly 190 in total, of which 42 have departments/directorates of distance (correspondence) education attached to them. Besides, 4 Open Universities are functional at the State level.

As a University, IGNOU functions in a three-tier system of Headquarters, Regional Centres and Study Centres. The core faculty in various academic Schools at the Headquarters is engaged in the task of initial planning, designing and development of course materials. The support system evolved in the form of Divisions assists the Schools in Programme-launching. While the task of course preparation rests with the Headquarters, the actual implementation of the Programmes is the primary concern of the Regional Centres. It is effected by coordinating and academically auditing the functions of the Study Centres, where, among other things, face-to-face counselling sessions are made available to the distance learners.

COUNSELLING AT IGNOU

At the IGNOU, the learning materials, though hypothetical, are considered to be self-instructional in nature and are designed in terms of credits — one credit is equivalent to 30 hours of student study time which

includes reading the materials supplied, writing assign-ment-responses and attending face-to-face sessions that are, however, optional. As of now, no empirical evidence is available to clearly state how much of learning time a unit of study warrants. The current practice, however, indicates that roughly two and a half hours, out of 30 hours, have been allocated for face to face sessions. In the context of IGNOU face to face sessions are meant for psycho-academic purposes, i.e., 'informing', 'advising' and 'exploring', depending on the demand from the student. And so, they are thought to be legitimately called 'counselling' sessions. Nearly 225 Study Centres, under 16 Regional Centres, which cater to a student population of 1,80,000, are operational across the country for counsel-ling purposes. At an average there are 41 counsellors in each Study Centre.

An analysis of the attendance of students for the counselling sessions conducted between January-June 1991 for various Programmes reveals that the attendance is a moderate 23% (Singh, 1991). Various reasons can be attributed to the 'thin' attendance. One obvious reason is that the sessions are optional. Besides distance learners being adults, their social obligations assume priority over education, notwithstanding the fact that they are motivated and have come to distance education by choice. Geo-graphical inaccessibility to Study Centres would be another reason to be considered. The low attendance may also reflect on the quality of counselling sessions. A mere conduct of counselling sessions obviously does not guarantee quality. Quality of Counselling therefore directly relates to the realm of counsellor-training. Let us turn to the seminal aspects of counsellor training at IGNOU.

The practice has been to conduct a ten-man-hour orientation programme for counsellors, who are part timers holding permanent positions in the on-campus educational set up. It presupposes that they are content experts. The input during the orientation programmes therefore pertains to distance education practices — exposition of preparation of self instructional materials and the rationale behind the content density, assignment-evaluation leading to 'two-way communication', and counselling which includes the use fo audio/video teach-ing materials catering to the affective domain of learning. The full time faculty at the Regional Centres and the Headquarters are involved in imparting training.

In this context the following question-clusters assume significance:

- Who are the personnel engaged in counselling? Corres-pondingly, 'counselling' being a new phenomenon in India, do the counsellors need training? If they do, what is the training input and how is it imparted? Does what is imparted match what is required? How effect-ive is the training imparted?

- Who are the personnel who train the counsellor? Do the trainers also need training? What should be the training input for the latter?

- Considering the educational tradition, is 'counselling'

acceptable to students? How much of the sessions are actually utilised by the students? In other words, does 'counselling' serve the purpose for which it is intended?

The list of questions presented is not exhaustive. However, in broad terms, they represent a whole range of questions to be considered in order that the practice of counselling can be rationalised.

A field survey of a few orientation programmes indi-cates that there are recurrent practical problems, pertaining to target clientele, trainers, inputs for training, absence of feedback for evaluation, etc.

PROFILE OF IGNOU COUNSELLORS

Mostly, the counsellors have a considerable period of teaching experience, though in the classroom setup, with a proper sense of their own qualifications. Some of them do not fully recognise the need for training. Even if some do perceive the need, they are reluctant to devote the amount of time required for it. And, a few of them discount some of the training because they believe what they receive from the personnel of the University is a manifestation of their own little obsessions. Whether their belief is valid or not, it is a pointer that identification of potential counsell-ors, by itself, is a major task, though it is embarrassingly obvious that the University tries to employ the best talent for the job, it should be quite certain about what makes for that 'best talent'. It should know, and the counsellor should be made aware of, that content-expertise is only one of the relevant criteria for appointment. In other words, recruitment process should be clearly defined and made liable for evaluation from time to time. It will also provide credence to the decision of the University that the appointment of counsellors should be renewed every year.

TRAINING NEEDS

Training needs have been looked into and discussed at various forums, and most of them are based on introspection. A study was conducted at the IGNOU in 1989 with the objective of identifying and developing strategies for meeting the demonstrated needs of specific target groups involved in distance education. The following table, taken from the study referred to above, concerns the needs of part time counsellors:

The content and strategy suggested here conforms, by and large, to the content of and duration for the present orientation programmes. Obviously there must be some other needs which have yet to be identified and met.

Besides a clearly written handbook or a manual of instructions, the counsellors need to be given proper and uniform training in terms of inputs. Currently the trainers are those full time personnel available at the Regional Centres and those who are deputed from the Headquarters for this purpose. However, it can hardly be accepted that anyone in the system *ipso facto* is well qualified for counsellor-training too.

Table 1 : Training the Counsellors: Objectives, Contents and Strategies

	Objectives	Contents	Strategies
1.	To talk knowledgeably about the distance education system	How different open/distance education is from the conventional and correspondence education, etc.	A pamphlet
2.	To appreciate the need for SIM in the distance mode of teaching/learning	Need for SIM and knowledge about course structures and how they are interlinked: rationale behind unitization, etc.	Lecture-cum--discussion (2 hours)
3.	To integrate audio/video materials effectively in the counselling sessions	Role and purpose of audio/video materials in the system	A video
4.	To evaluate and write comments on assignment-responses	Role and purpose of assignments; significance of comments, knowledge about the grading system, etc.	A video followed by a discussion (3 hours)
5.	To handle counselling sessions effectively; thorough understanding of course materials and assignments	What counselling entails and how it is different from lecturing/tutoring, etc.; philosophy behind the overall structure and content of the course concerned and the corresponding assignments	A pamphlet and a video followed by a discussion (3 hours)
6.	To listen to students' problems sympathetically	Significance of establishing useful rapport with the students (to break the sense of isolation)	Lecture (1 hour)
7.	To maintain a corrections file and keep a record of student attendance, performance, etc.	Need for a corrections file and how to maintain it; need to keep a file for student-profile	A pamphlet
8.	To efficiently schedule time	How delay in sending the responses, etc. would cause frustration in students	A video

The same study conducted in 1989 at the IGNOU also suggests the training-needs of full-time faculty of the University as follows

Table 2 : Training for Full-time Faulty: Objectives and Contents

	Objectives	Contents
1.	To specify the work domains of the different categories of academics working at the IGNOU	What each academic's job consists of in general, as well as subject-specific job demands
2.	To identify the characteristics of a distance learner	The heterogeneity, psychology of distance learners, and adult learning theories
3.	To plan, design, develop curricula and prepare SIM and programme guides	Presenting a case for launching a programme; identification of needs of the target group; how to decide the objectives, level, course-content, duration and credit value of a course; awareness of the resource constraints; how to decide media choice and the evaluation system for a course, and how to design interdisciplinary and application-oriented courses; principles of SIM, etc.
4.	To prepare and monitor assignments and question banks	The purpose of assignments in the DE system; how to formulate the objectives (TMA or CMA) and prepare an assignment, how to evaluate it, different kinds of comments, how to utilise the monitoring of assignments for monitoring the course and the counsellors; collection and testing of questions, etc.
5.	To identify areas to be tackled by the A/V medium;	Media selection, and media mix. Write media notes etc; participate in production process
6.	To explain the functions of a counsellor	What the purpose of counselling is, the tutoring and counselling; functions of counsellors; the difference between counselling and tutoring; how to orient the counsellors for general and specific (discipline) purposes
7.	To edit/maintain/revise/ withdraw a course	How to obtain post-production feedback from students and counsellors and how to utilise it for revising or withdrawing a course, and maintaining a correction-evaluation file; Pretests & Posttests
8.	To evaluate a programme	Purpose of evaluation, designing evaluation programmes, criteria for evaluation, collection an analysis of data to evaluate the evaluation system

It clearly spells out that the full time faculty should be trained in assignment-monitoring and imparting inputs to counsellors. The needs identified are yet to be realised. Under these circumstances it is in the interest of the University to exercise utmost care in deputing personnel for the orientation programmes for the counsellors. Alternatively, a training kit may be prepared for this purpose. It will help ensure some approximation to uniformity in information-dissemination, irrespective of the personnel involved in the training.

The onus of making an orientation programme rich and purposeful lies with the permanent staff of IGNOU. Their jurisdiction of operation should not limit itself to course-production, which unfortunately is the case at present. They should get themselves involved at the stage of implementation too, which entails visits to Study Centres, sitting through counselling sessions, getting reactions of students/counsellors about the course-input, monitoring assignment evaluation, etc. The feedback thus collected can well be fed into the orientation programmes/training kit. It will help make the orientation meaningful in that the counsellors will more likely to respond to the past reactions of the students to the very courses on which they offer counselling than to merely respond to general comments on student needs, though they need to know about this too. For instance, it will help the counsellors know what particular area/areas the students rate as having a heavy work load, and so on.

Thus, it is the responsibility of the permanent staff to evolve effective evaluation tools, and pass on their findings directly to counsellors. Besides, senior/experienced counsellors should also be involved in the orientation programmes. They can inform the IGNOU staff on what approaches they have found most effective, etc. Involving the counsellors would, at a later stage, help identify resource persons in every study centre.

Further, the students are especially sensitive to the degree of the counsellor's supportiveness, the relevance of their comments on assignment responses and the extent they help them in their studies. Student's comments on the above issues should be collected and passed on to counsellors. One major purpose of making available these

comments to the counsellors is to remind them that their work is being monitored. However, they (the counsellors) should be reassured that it is no arbitrary policing.

At the level of feedback, the full time faculty at the Regional Centres can play a vital role. Continuous assessment through assignments is a useful medium through which feedback can be provided to students and counsellors about their performance and the institution about its objective-related achievements. This being what it is, a lot of attention needs to be paid right from the stage of preparation of assignment questions through assessment of assignment responses to computation of grades awarded and standardising the turn-around time for sending back the responses to the students after evaluation.

PROPOSED MODEL FOR COUNSELLING AND EVALUATION

The current practice is that assignment questions are prepared by the School concerned and sent to the students from the Headquarters. Having been attached to particular Study Centres, the students send their responses to the assignment questions to the coordinators of Study Centres. The coordinators in turn, distribute the responses for evaluation among the counsellors identified for the Programme. After evaluation, the counsellors send them back to the study centres for onward transmission to the students. And, copies of the required percentage, i.e., 2% of the evaluated responses are sent to the School concerned for purposes of monitoring. However, the Schools have not yet taken up this task. And, unfortunately, the Regional Centres do not find a place in the whole process. The practice currently in use, therefore, seems to provide feedback only at one level, i.e., feedback to students' performance. However, in the absence of any monitoring of assignment evaluation, the effectiveness or otherwise of the feedback cannot be adjudged.

It is for this purpose, the Regional Centres should be involved in the process of assignment-evaluation. The schemata suggested here should explain how the Regional Centre can be accommodated in the process of assignment evaluation.
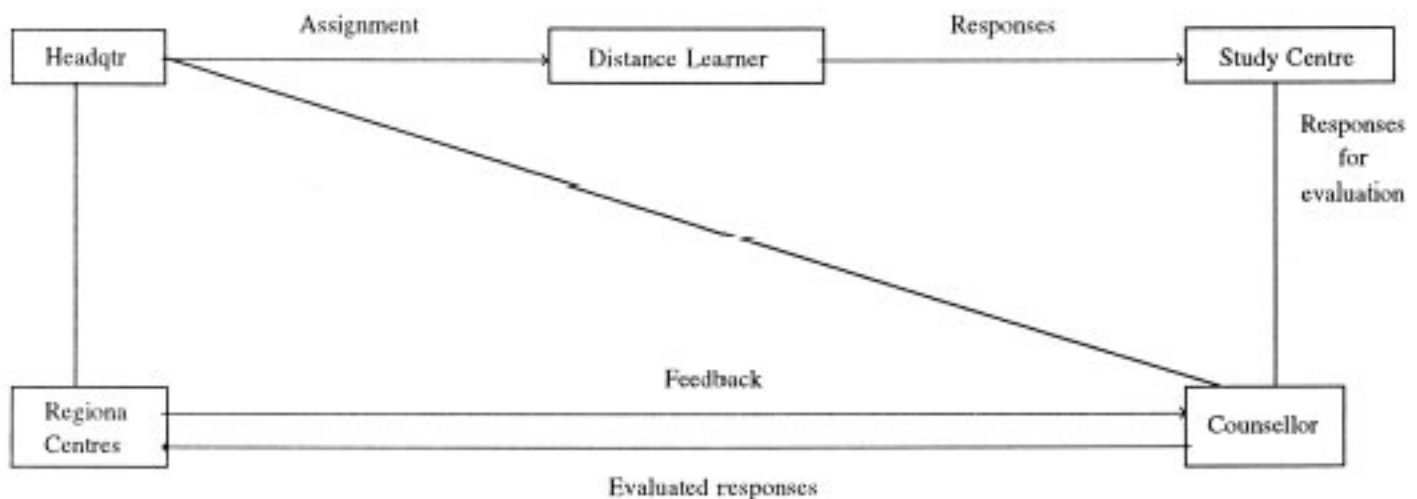

Fig. 1 : Counselling and Evaluation : A Model for Feedback

The stages in the proposed flow of assignment-responses are:

- the Study Centre has to inform the Regional Centre as to how many assignment-responses have been sent to whom and when?
- The Regional Centre has to check how many have been returned by whom and when?
- the Regional Centre has to go through the evaluated responses at random and send them to the students with the global comment sheets in original
- copies of required percentage of evaluated responses to be sent to the School concerned as a feedback to their questions/materials
- feedback to be given to the counsellors

The Schemata suggested here may seem to be demanding. It can be made less demanding once the appointment policy at the Regional Centres is standardised.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Interaction between the Regional Centre and the counsellors will help establish a useful academic rapport which in turn will help instil in them a sense of belonging. Further, the counsellors and the Headquarters also will have an opportunity to interact with one another. It should be noted here that the counsellors will get feedback from the Regional Centre and the Headquarters. The Regional Centres, for obvious reasons will not be equipped with expertise in all the subjects, and so monitoring at this level will be on the basis of distance education input, i.e., tutor comments, etc. And at the level of Headquarters, the counsellors will get feedback on the content. The whole exercise will help provide substantial input and feedback to counsellor-training. It is very vital in this context, lest the University will be left wanting in the area of training.

Various findings of the type described, if passed on, would certainly help the counsellors perceive the importance of their role and focus their minds on the success or otherwise of various aspects of the Programme. In addition, it helps them deepen their sense of responsibility towards the course and the individual students.

Though this paper does not purport to evolve an ideal counsellor-training programme, it clearly suggests that there is scope for improvement.

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