

Student Opinion of Counselling : The Experience of Indira Gandhi National Open University

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Distance teaching derives its strength from two-way communication, whether postal, telephonic or face to face. As advances are being made in improving the quality of distance tuition and self instructional materials, it is becoming more and more clear that distance learners require much more than distance tuition and self instructional materials. In spite of the high quality of self instructional materials, most distance learners generally seem to need human support at some stage during their academic pursuits.

Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) was established in 1985 for the promotion and coordination of distance education in India for providing equal opportunities for higher education to large segments of the Indian population. IGNOU has been offering a variety of need-based courses to provide general, professional and continuing education through a multimedia instructional system, supplemented by student support services through its regional and study centres. It has a network of 17 Regional Centres (mostly located at State capitals), 255 study centres and around 14,500 part time counsellors who are attached to various study centres to provide both academic and administrative support to distance learners. From the very beginning, IGNOU has recognised the importance and need for counselling and has allotted 10 % of the total study hours required to complete a programme for counselling alone.

This paper describes the results of a study conducted at IGNOU, Regional Centre, Bangalore and attempts to critically evaluate the student opinion on counselling offered to distance learners by IGNOU.

Introduction

The highly structured teaching package offered by IGNOU can only be limited and finite in what it offers and to compensate for infinite variations in the learners the importance of contact sessions cannot be denied. Print material and audio-video cassettes can be used for transmission of subject matter, as these are the tools of teaching at a distance. Education is more about learning than teaching and only the

human element can adapt to provide an individualised structure for student needs. An academic counsellor is not a teacher but a facilitator of learning i.e., helping the students in their educational endeavour.

Distance students are independent, and also lonely. They are independent to the extent that they need not attend the classes at regular timings and do not depend on the oral instruction of a teacher. They can study at their own homes and choose their study hours. But they are dispersed and separated physically from the institution as well as their peer groups. They cannot get immediate clarification for the doubts that come up during their studies. They may not be in a position to discuss their academic problems with their fellow students. Similarly, they may not possess the study skills necessary to cope with the requirements of courses offered by a distance teaching institution. If the distance students happen to live in economically and technologically backward societies, they may not be able to make use of the audio-video programmes, nor the educational broadcast, since the majority of the students will not have access to the media in their homes. Apart from these, the students may like to know many things regarding the scope of their courses, their performance in assignment responses, examination pattern, the modes of assessment and evaluation, the attitude of their peer group, etc. Precisely to meet such needs of the distance students, study centres are established and face to face contact sessions are arranged at these study centres. Thus, contact-cum-counselling sessions give the distance learners the opportunities to discuss their problems, academic and personal, with their teachers and also their peer groups. IGNOU offers a combination of general counselling and tutorial. General counselling is related to personal and individual needs and tutoring is basically course centred. In a counselling session, the academic counsellor informs, advises or counsels. In a tutorial, s/he primarily teaches or discusses the course content. IGNOU combines both, and calls it 'Academic Counselling'.

Organisation of Counselling Sessions at IGNOU

Academic counselling is the most important function of the study centre. In IGNOU 10 % of the total study hours required to complete a programme are allotted for counselling alone. Counselling sessions are held mostly on Sundays and Public holidays at the IGNOU study centres. Each session is of 2 – 2 1/2 hours duration. The counselling schedule is prepared on the basis of guidelines developed by Schools of Studies and despatched to the distance learners soon after they receive the self instructional materials.

IGNOU appoints experienced subject experts or professionals as Academic Counsellors. Most of these Counsellors are drawn from the conventional educational system. In order to make the counselling sessions meaningful, the University organises Orientation Programmes for the newly appointed Academic Counsellors where they are given an exposure to the skills of tutoring, counselling and evaluation of assignments.

Counselling sessions are not lecture sessions. Since the printed materials are self-instructional, the distance learners are supposed to read the specified course materials as mentioned in the schedule. The distance learners should utilise the opportunity given to them, i.e., to interact with SIMs more effectively through the agency of the Counsellor during counselling sessions.

Purpose of the Study

This study is a part of the broad evaluation of distance education at the IGNOU, Karnataka State undertaken by the authors. The main objectives of the study are to examine critically the:

- pattern of attendance at counselling sessions,
- usefulness of counselling sessions,
- reasons for not attending counselling sessions,
- activities undertaken at counselling sessions,
- preparations made by students before attending counselling sessions.

Methodology

Operational area under IGNOU Regional Centre, Bangalore formed the universe of the study. The University is offering postgraduate (PG) and undergraduate (UG) courses, in addition to Diploma and Certificate courses. Diploma and Certificate courses are excluded from this study. The students enrolled at the University for the Postgraduate (MBA) and Undergraduate (BA and B.Com.) courses during the academic year 1992 form the universe. There were 2036 students enrolled for these two PG and UG programmes of IGNOU excluding the students enrolled from the Goa state under the Bangalore Regional Centre. Using the random sampling technique, 25 %, i.e., 509 students have been selected for the study from the total universe of 2036. The 1992 batch students have been deliberately selected as they have been enrolled into the system since 1991 and their opinion would be more valuable than that of the freshly enrolled students.

Schedules were canvassed to collect data from distance learners. In depth interviews and case study techniques were also used to supplement the database from distance learners, staff of the study centres, Academic Counsellors and the Academic Staff of the Regional Centre.

Out of 509 sample students 192 (37.7 %) have responded. Of the 192 respondents 108 (56.3 %) are from the UG level and 84 (43.7 %) are from the PG level. Of the total respondents, 36.5 % females, 7.8 % SC/STs, 8.9 % rural students.

Limitations

1. Although IGNOU is a National Open University with its operations spread throughout the length and breadth of the country, the study is

confined to only one Regional Unit of IGNOU namely the Regional Centre, Bangalore, excluding the students registered in Goa State.

2. Data from the distance learners have been collected from only one batch of students, namely, 1992 batch.
3. The study is limited to the postgraduate (MBA) and undergraduate (B.A. and B.Com.) students.
4. In IGNOU no students below 25 years age have been selected for PG programmes because the minimum age requirement for the PG courses is 25 years. Hence, there are no students in the aforesaid group under PG.
5. Data on rural-urban break up of students are much less firm, because the classification does not follow the pattern of rural as defined in the census. However, on the basis of the addresses of the residences of students, they have been classified as rural and urban.

Opinion of Distance Learners

Pattern of Attendance at Counselling Sessions

62.5 % of the respondents have attended counselling sessions. Agewise analysis shows that the participation in counselling sessions is cent percent in the case of learners who are in the age group of above 60 years, 80 % in the 46–60 years, 66.7 % in the below 25 years age group and 54.5 % in the 26–45 years age group. The percentage of women and men who have attended counselling sessions is identical i.e., 62.5 %. However, only 50 % of the rural residents attended counselling sessions as compared to 66.7 % of the SC, 50 % of the ST and 60 % of the BC, respondents have attended sessions as compared to 63 % of the general category learners.

Usefulness of Counselling Sessions

39.7% of the respondents found the sessions as useful, 39.0% to some extent useful and 21.3% not at all. The respondents have given highest rating to the point relating to meeting with fellow learners at sessions which created more enthusiasm to complete the course on time viz., 45.3%. The next point i.e., counselling sessions encouraged further readings and increased the interest in the course (32.8%) as an important reason, for attending sessions. 29.7% found the sessions useful because of the fruitful discussions at counselling sessions on assignments, 28% of the respondents found it useful because of the audio-visual aids used by the Counselors. 23.4% said that their doubts were clarified; 29.1% found the discussions comprehensive; 20.3% felt the sessions covered more content than is given in the lesson, scripts/units and 26.6% were happy at the convenient time chosen for the sessions.

Interestingly, 31.3% felt that the sessions did not cover more content than the printed materials; 18.7%, the sessions did not encourage further readings; for 17.2%, discussions on assignments were not fruitful and for 15.6% the time was inconvenient. Usefulness of counselling sessions is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 : Usefulness of Contact Sessions: Students' Opinion

Reasons	Yes (%)	To some extent (%)	No (%)
a. Doubts were clarified	23.4	39.1	07.8
b. Discussions were comprehensive	29.1	40.6	12.5
c. Counselling sessions encouraged further reading	32.8	23.4	18.7
d. Audiovisual aids were beneficial	28.1	32.8	10.9
e. Sessions covered more content than in the printed material	20.3	21.9	31.3
f. Discussions on assignments were fruitful	29.7	25.0	17.2
g. Meeting the fellow learners created more enthusiasm to complete the course on time.	45.3	20.3	07.8
h. Time devoted for the contact programme was suitable and convenient	26.6	28.1	15.6
Average (a to h)	39.7	39.0	21.3

Source: Field data

Interestingly, all the respondents of the above 45 years age groups have found the sessions useful whereas 75% of the below 25 years and 57.6% of the 26–45 years age groups have found them useful. The responses of the rural and urban group is almost identical viz., 67.2% urban and 66.7% rural respondents have found counselling sessions useful. All the S.C respondents, 50% of the S.T, 60% of the B.C and 66.7 % of the general category found the counselling sessions useful. More men (70%) as compared to women (62.5%) have found the sessions useful.

Inferential Analysis

Null Hypothesis: There is no significant difference between the opinion of distance learners with regard to usefulness of contact/counselling sessions in relation to normal frequency distribution.

Yes to some extent	Yes	To some extent	No
Frequency observed	39.76	39.04	21.28
Frequency expected	20.33	59.34	20.33

The computed χ^2 25.678 is higher than the table value of 5.99 for df 2 and level of significance 0.05, hence the null Hypothesis of no difference between observed frequency distribution and normal frequency distribution is rejected. Hence the re-

search hypothesis that the distribution is in favour of accepting the statement. Thus, the students of IGNOU opine that the counselling sessions are useful.

Reasons for Not Attending Counselling Sessions

The respondents who have not attended counselling sessions have also given their reasons for not attending the sessions. 45.3% have expressed that they could not attend sessions as the study centre was too far away for them to attend sessions; 29.7% could not attend due to demands of full employment; 21.9% found that the sessions were not upto the mark, 21.9% had no difficulty with the SIMs, 17.2% could not attend due to family duties; 14.1% felt that the counsellors were not well-versed with the SIMs; 10.9% due to inconvenience of tutorial time and 7.8% due to financial difficulties could not attend the sessions. Reasons for not attending counselling session is given in table 2.

The major reasons given by the urban respondents (44.8%) for not attending sessions was that the study centre was located too far away though the centre was located within the city itself. The rural respondents (50%) have also given the same reason. In addition, to that 50% of them also felt that they had no difficulty with regard to the SIMs. 80% of the SC/ST students could not attend due to demands of full employment. 37.5% women felt that the study center was too far away, 32.5% said that they could not attend sessions due to demands of full employment and 25% of the women respondents could not attend due to family duties. The lowest income group whose annual income was below Rs. 10,000 could not attend sessions as the study centre was too far away (57.9%). However, second income group (Rs. 10,000 to Rs. 25,000) and the third income groups could not attend the sessions due to demands of full employment (See table 2).

Activities During Contact/Counselling Sessions

It is interesting to note that 50% of the respondents have mentioned in the questionnaire that they listened to lecture/discussion and even took notes whereas 15.6% only listened to the lecture/discussion. 46.9% participated in the sessions by asking questions, 45.3% by participating in the group discussions, 40.6% by talking to their peer group, 35.9% by watching video cassettes and 15.6% by listening to audio cassettes (See Table 3 for activities during counselling sessions).

50% of rural and urban respondents took notes during the discussions but in all other aspects the urban respondents have been more participative than their rural counterparts. SC/ST learners have actively interacted in the counselling sessions by listening to the discussions and taking notes (80%), and participating in the group discussion (60%). Sexwise analysis shows that men have been more participative than women, except for one activity of taking notes in the sessions where the ratio is fifty-fifty (See Table 3).

TABLE 2

Table 2 : Reasons for not attending counselling sessions — Response of the target groups

Student profile	Demands of full employment	Financial difficulties	Venue of session is too far	Family duties	Sessions are not upto the mark	No. difficulty with Study material	Tutorial time is inconvenient	Lecturer/Counsellor not well versed with subject
<i>Age:</i>								
Below 25 years	20.8	16.7	37.5	12.5	16.7	20.8	16.7	12.5
26–45 years	39.4	03.0	54.5	18.2	30.3	21.2	09.1	15.2
46–60 years	20.0	—	40.0	40.0	—	40.0	—	20.0
Above 60 years	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
<i>Residence:</i>								
Urban	29.3	06.9	44.8	19.0	24.1	19.0	12.1	15.5
Rural	33.3	16.7	50.0	—	—	50.0	—	—
<i>Category:</i>								
SC/ST	80.7	20.0	60.0	33.3	20.0	20.0	20.0	20.0
BC	20.0	20.0	60.0	—	20.0	—	20.0	—
General	25.9	05.6	42.6	18.5	22.2	24.1	09.3	14.8
<i>Sex:</i>								
Male	32.5	07.5	50.0	12.5	27.5	22.5	10.0	17.5
Female	25.0	08.3	37.5	25.0	12.5	20.8	12.5	08.3
<i>Income Group:</i>								
upto 10,000	10.5	15.8	57.9	21.1	15.8	10.5	15.8	10.5
upto 25,000	28.6	14.3	14.3	—	28.6	—	14.3	14.3
upto 50,000	57.1	07.1	28.6	28.6	14.3	42.9	—	14.3
Above 50,000	29.2	54.2	54.2	12.5	29.2	25.0	12.5	16.7
Total	29.7	07.8	45.3	17.2	21.9	21.9	10.9	14.1

Source: Field data. Note: SC/ST: Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe, BC: Backward Caste.

TABLE 3

Table 3: Activities during contact/counselling sessions (%)

	Asked questions	Only listened to lecture/discussion	Listened to lecture/discussion	Participated in the group discussion	Watched Video cassettes	Listened to Audio Cassettes	Talked to other students
Age:							
Below 25 years	45.8	29.2	50.0	37.5	33.3	12.5	45.8
25-45 years	39.4	06.1	45.5	39.4	27.3	18.2	30.3
45-60 years	100.0	20.0	80.0	100.0	100.0	20.0	80.0
Above 60 years	50.0	—	50.0	100.0	50.0	—	50.0
Residence:							
Urban	50.0	13.8	50.0	48.3	36.2	17.2	43.1
Rural	16.7	33.3	50.0	16.7	33.3	—	16.7
Category:							
C/ST	20.0	20.0	80.0	60.0	20.0	—	20.0
BC	60.0	—	60.0	60.0	20.0	20.0	20.0
General	48.1	16.7	46.3	42.6	38.9	16.7	44.4
Sex:							
Male	57.5	07.5	50.0	57.5	30.0	15.0	45.0
Female	29.2	29.2	50.0	25.0	37.5	16.7	33.3
Total	46.9	15.6	50.0	45.3	35.9	15.6	40.6

Source: Field data

Note: SC/ST: Schedule Caste/Schedule Tribe; BC: Backward Caste

TABLE 4

Table 4: Preparations for counselling sessions (%)

	Read the material		Attempted Self-Check Exercises		Listed the Questions / Doubts	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Age:						
Below 25 years	58.3	12.5	58.3	12.5	45.8	25.0
26-45 years	45.5	18.2	33.3	30.3	33.3	30.3
46-60 years	100.0	—	100.0	—	40.0	60.0
Above 60 years	50.0	50.0	50.0	50.0	50.0	50.0
Residence:						
Urban	55.2	17.2	48.3	24.1	37.9	34.5
Rural	50.0	—	50.0	—	50.0	—
Category:						
SC/ST	60.0	20.0	20.0	40.0	40.0	40.0
BC	60.0	—	40.0	40.0	20.0	40.0
General	53.7	16.7	50.0	20.4	38.9	31.5
Sex:						
Male	60.0	15.0	47.5	27.5	40.0	35.0
Female	45.8	16.7	50.0	12.5	37.5	25.0
Total:	54.7	15.6	48.4	21.9	39.1	31.3

Source: Field Data

Preparations of Distance Learners for Attending Counselling Sessions

The active participation of the distance learners at counselling sessions is directly linked to the preparations they make before coming to the sessions. 54.7% of the respondents read the relevant course materials before coming to a session; 48.4% attempted the self check exercises before coming to the session; and 39.1% brought the list of questions they wanted to ask (See Table 4).

All the learners in the age group 46–60 years had gone through the relevant course materials, attempted all the self-check exercises but only 40 % had listed the questions to be clarified. The oldest age group i.e., above 60 years, only 50 % had read the SIMs, had done the self check exercises and listed out their doubts before coming to the session. The response of the below 25 years age group is also quite similar. There is no noticeable difference in the response of the rural and urban respondents, and SC/ST and general category respondents except for the fact that only 20 % of the SC/ST attempted the self-check exercises as compared to 50 % of the general category learners.

Sexwise analysis shows more men (60 %) had read the SIMs than the women (45.8%) before attending the session. But interestingly more women had attempted the self-check exercises than the men in terms of percentage. But it is the reverse in relation to listing of questions before coming to the sessions (See to Table 4).

Conclusion

Since tutorial support is not being utilised by students living far away from the study centres in remote and rural areas or even in cities where study centres are not activated, the University should provide an alternative to such students by organising intensive/block counselling once in 3 months (instead of regular sessions) throughout the year. It might be worthwhile to implement different forms of tutorial provision in different regions, keeping in mind the diverse socio-economic, geographic and educational factors in the country. In this context the new technologies such as telecommunication, satellite technologies will be more useful in organising telecounselling sessions to reachout all parts of the country. These models may be implemented initially for major programmes with large enrollment like Management and Computer Sciences on a pilot basis. The expenditure on counselling will come down drastically. Similarly organisational problems relating to counselling on the part of Study Centres will be reduced.

Those students who have not attended counselling sessions for various reasons may not have been able to benefit from the audio-video cassettes produced by the university. This problem could be overcome by increasing the time slot on national TV network *Doordarshan* and introducing IGNOU's broadcast on the All India Radio (AIR).

Academic Counsellors should be given more responsibilities to help students overcome their difficulties as independent learners participate more actively in the counselling sessions. Each Counsellor should be supplied with information about the learners attached to him/her. This will enable the Counsellor to attend to each one of them personally and to their individual needs/problems accordingly.

In order to make the counselling sessions more interactive, the Counsellors should be trained in the technique of "group controlled learning" at counselling sessions. Since most of the Counsellors are teachers in the conventional system, they are not familiar with the above techniques and also with the task of personal counselling. The clientele they are dealing with in IGNOU is so different from the conventional learners. Therefore, IGNOU needs to develop proper training strategies and methods, keeping in view the kinds of academic programmes introduced. Similarly, refresher courses in distance education methods need to be arranged for Academic Counsellors periodically to update their knowledge and information.

Most of the distance learners are not reading the relevant study materials (SIMs) before attending counselling sessions. Therefore, an induction programme should be made compulsory for all new entrants. Induction guidelines giving the integrated role of counselling sessions should be developed by the School concerned for distribution of learners along with the course materials. This would familiarise the distance learners with the modus operandi of the distance education system in general and IGNOU in particular. A similar exercise should be repeated before the commencement of the next semester in the same academic year.

Identification of the right Academic Counsellors without prejudice/favouritism will have a longterm positive impact on the system. Contrary practices to this will have severe consequences on the system. Secondly, renewal of Academic Counsellors should not be a ritual but should be based on the performance levels. The coordinator and assistant coordinator(s) and the academic staff of the Regional Centre can play a major role in identifying the right Academic Counsellors.