

Academic Counselling at the Indira Ghandi National Open University (IGNOU): Counsellors' Perception

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Abstract

Presently 60 teachers from the conventional system are performing the role of Post Graduate Diploma in Distance Education (PGDDE) academic counsellors at 45 Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) study centres. All of them have attended a 2 day orientation programme conducted by the IGNOU in order to perform the tasks of counselling, tutoring and assignment evaluation. The impact of the two day orientation programme on the PGDDE academic counsellors is sought. The proposed investigation was planned to study whether these academic counsellors have been able to deal with the complexities of academic counselling (counselling and tutoring) and provide distance teaching to the PGDDE learners through comments on their assignment responses.

Abstrak

Pada masa ini terdapat 60 orang guru daripada sistem konvensional sedang menjalankan peranan sebagai kaunselor akademik untuk kursus Diploma Pasca Siswazah dalam pendidikan jarak jauh di 45 buah pusat pembelajaran Indra Ghandi Open University (IGNOU). Kesemua mereka telah menghadiri program orientasi selama dua hari yang dikendalikan oleh IGNOU untuk menjalankan tugas kaunselor, tutor dan penilai tugas. Kesan terhadap program orientasi 2 hari ini terhadap kursus Diploma Pasca Siswazah dikaji. Kajian yang dikemukakan ini dirancang untuk melihat sama ada kaunselor akademik ini mampu menangani kompleksiti kaunseling akademik (kaunseling dan tutorial) dan menyediakan pembelajaran kepada pelajar kursus Diploma Pasca Siswazah melalui komen terhadap tugasan pelajar.

Introduction

IGNOU appoints experienced teachers from established educational institutions and even professionals on a part-time basis to serve as academic counsellors at its study centres. The academic counsellor has the combined role of providing general counselling as well as tutoring to the IGNOU learners assigned to him/her.

As a general counsellor, he/she is supposed to guide learners to study at a distance, familiarise them with the system and try to help them to over-

come their academic problems that are hindering their process of learning. As a tutor he/she assumes a role of a subject specialist where the emphasis is on dealing with problems related to the subject. The academic counsellor has another major responsibility of providing distance teaching/tuition by writing tutor comments on the learners assignment responses.

In order to make the counselling sessions more meaningful, the university organises an Orientation Programme for the newly appointed academic counsellors, where they are exposed to the skills of tutoring, counselling and evaluation of assignments. Counselling sessions are not lecture sessions. Since the printed study materials are self learning, the distance learners are supposed to have read the course materials before coming to the session.

Presently there are more than 20,000 counsellors working at over 600 study centres spread throughout the length and breadth of India (IGNOU, 2001). The counselling schedule is prepared by the Study Centre in consultation with the counsellors and in accordance with the guidelines provided by various Schools at the Headquarters.

The Regional Centres periodically monitor the conduct of counselling sessions at their study centres. The study centres submit monthly counselling reports to the Regional Centre. In addition to the face-to-face sessions, tele-counselling is also provided to IGNOU students through (IGNOU, 2001): teleconferencing at over 160 receiving stations (which are at Regional Centres and Study Centres), an Educational TV channel, namely Gyan Darshan, phone-in radio counselling is being provided through nearly 190 radio stations including FM stations all over the country (IGNOU, 2001).

E-support is being specifically provided to the Bachelor in Information Technology and Advanced Diploma in Information Technology students. They have not only received their courses online but are being counselled through e-mail (asynchronous) and chat mode on Internet (synchronous). Since some of the distance learners do not have a computer at their homes/workplaces, IGNOU has set up tele-learning centres with the state of art infrastructure to facilitate the effective delivery of programmes through the e-support (Srivastava & Parhar, 2000).

In the science and technology-based programmes such as the Bachelor's of Sciences, Programmes in Computing, Library and Information Sciences & Nursing, the practical sessions are an essential and compulsory component. In all laboratory practical-based courses 70% to 80% attendance is compulsory.

In addition to face-to-face counselling, a number of academic programmes have been provided with project work as a compulsory component of the programme generally as a separate course. Basically this component is to provide an experience of ground realities in the field of the academic programme which a learner has chosen. Academic counsellors are to assist and supervise learners to pursue their project work. In some professional courses field visits, workshops and seminars are prescribed such as for the Bachelors of Education, Masters of Library and Information, Post Graduate Diploma in Journalism and Mass Communication, Master of Library and Information Sciences (Srivastava & Parhar, 2000).

Counselling Support for PGDDE Programme

IGNOU's PGDDE learners are attached to one of the 45 study centres located throughout the country. IGNOU has appointed 60 counsellors at these study centres for conducting face-to-face counselling sessions. The PGDDE programme has 5 courses of 6 credits each. Normally 10 sessions of 2 1/2 hours duration are held for each course (50 sessions in all) (STRIDE, 2001).

Those who have successfully completed the PGDDE programme with good performance are appointed as PGDDE academic counsellors. Recently (in 2000) the criteria of selection was expanded to attract professionals in the area of media and technology, instructional design, open and distance education and learner support. Hence, even those who have not completed PGDDE programme of IGNOU but have at least 5 years experience in any of the above mentioned areas could be appointed as counsellors for the PGDDE programme. From time to time the Regional Centres conduct interactive radio counselling sessions for the PGDDE learners. Tele-counselling is provided by the Staff Training and Research Institute of Distance Education (STRIDE) faculty members on demand.

Existing academic counsellors also provide support to the PGDDE learners through letters over telephone and if required even spare their valuable time for them at their places of work/home.

The rapid expansion of the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system in India has provided a vast and ever-growing field to introspect and explore, and to find out the contribution of academic counsellors in the teaching-learning process. There is a need for research and empirical evidence to influence the policy makers in order to correct the weaknesses of ODL

system with a view to improving the conduct and organisation of academic counselling and assignment evaluation and thereby enhance the learning activeness of the learners. Hence the present study was undertaken.

Objectives of the Study

This study would enable us to:

- ◆ List the types of professional development programmes undergone by the PGDDE academic counsellors.
- ◆ Identify the methods used by the PGDDE academic counsellors in conducting academic counselling sessions.
- ◆ Analyse their experience in the writing of tutor comments.
- ◆ Assess the turn around time taken by the academic counsellors in providing feedback to the PGDDE learners.
- ◆ Describe their views on IGNOU's multimedia instructional system.
- ◆ List their views on support services offered by IGNOU.
- ◆ Specify the benefits accrued to them as a consequence of serving as academic counsellors of PGDDE programme.

Methodology

Descriptive and documentary method of research was used for this study. The design mainly used the survey technique. Schedules were canvassed to collect data. Interviews were conducted to supplement and corroborate the data. Data collected was then subjected to descriptive analysis using appropriate techniques.

The data collected from the schedules were analysed using SPSS and subjected to descriptive analysis using simple percentage, graphics and diagrams. The data has been presented under the following sections:

- ◆ Professional development of PGDDE academic counsellors
- ◆ Conduct of academic counselling
- ◆ Two-way communication through assignments
- ◆ Feedback on support services
- ◆ Benefits accrued

Universe of the Study

The PGDDE academic counsellors appointed and approved by IGNOU formed the universe of the study. These 60 academic counsellors were invited to attend a refresher programme conducted by STRIDE in March

and August, 2000. Out of 60, 36 attended the refresher programme who were selected for the study. Schedules were canvassed to the 36 academic counsellors to collect data. Out of 36, 30 of them completed the schedules and returned them to the researcher. Only 33.3% of them (12 academic counsellors) could be interviewed personally to supplement and corroborate the database due to lack of time.

Response Rate

Table 1 Response rate

| Total number of PGDDE academic counsellors appointed by IGNOU | Number of PGDDE academic counsellors attended reorientation programme | Number of PGDDE academic counsellors responded |
|---|---|---|
| 60 | Region Bhubaneswar 3 Calcutta 2 Guwahati 3 | Region Bhubaneswar 3 Calcutta 2 Guwahati 3 |
| 60 | Region Patna 3 Lucknow 1 Ranchi 1 Delhi - 1 - Delhi - 2 - Bhopal - Dehradun - Srinagar - Shimla 3 Karnal 2 Jammu 2 Ahmedabad 2 Jaipur 1 Hyderabad 3 Chennai 3 Bangalore 2 Kochi 2 Pune 3 | Region Patna 2 Lucknow 1 Ranchi 1 Shimla 2 Karnal 2 Jammu 2 Ahmedabad 2 Jaipur 1 Hyderabad 2 Chennai 2 Bangalore 2 Kochi 1 Pune 2 |
| Total | 36 | 30 |

Limitations of the Study

- ◆ Data was collected from the PGDDE academic counsellors who attended the re-orientation programme conducted by STRIDE in 2000.
- ◆ The study is limited to the academic counsellors of PGDDE programme who attended the refresher programme.

Expected Outcomes

It is expected that the outcome of this study would elucidate the performance of academic counsellors in the ODL system. The study is expected to highlight the deficiencies/gaps in the system and suggest appropriate measures to improve the functionality of the system in general and academic counsellors in particular.

Professional Development of PGDDE Academic Counsellors

The professional development undergone by the PGDDE academic counsellors are generally of 2 types, namely through professional programmes such as PGDDE, Masters of Arts in Distance Education (MADE) and; by attending a two day orientation programme organised by IGNOU for its newly appointed academic counsellors.

All of them have undertaken the PGDDE and 12 of them have also completed the MADE programme which STRIDE introduced in 1992 as the next level after completing the PGDDE programme.

Only 20 out of 30 respondents attended the two-day orientation programme conducted by IGNOU. Since STRIDE conducted the last orientation programme nearly 10 years ago, therefore, academic counsellors appointed thereafter had never attended any such programme.

The components of a two-day orientation programme at approximated five hours a day, are (Murugan, 1996):

- ◆ *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.
- ◆ *The role of assignments and importance of tutor - comments on assignment responses:* Assignments as a teaching tool (and not merely a tool for evaluation); how to comment on assignment responses.
- ◆ *The notion of academic counselling:* The difference between what is called 'counselling' and teaching; the differing role domains of teachers.

- ◆ *specific content subject areas*: how materials have been prepared; the role of self-instructional materials.

The counselors normally pursue the MADE upon the completion of the PGDDE in the first year.

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.

Therefore, these academic counsellors who had attended the programme have outlined some benefits that they derived from it, which are listed below.

Benefits derived from the orientation programme:

- ◆ Understood the role of an academic counsellor.
- ◆ Assisted in identifying the needs of individual learners.
- ◆ Understood the difference between teaching and counselling.
- ◆ Developed the skills of tutoring and counselling.
- ◆ Helped towards self development as well as professional development.
- ◆ Learnt more objective and scientific evaluation methods.
- ◆ Upgraded their knowledge about multimedia instruction.
- ◆ Improved communication and teaching skills.

10 of them has never attended the orientation programme and therefore had no practical knowledge/skills of academic counselling. They had been mainly exposed to the theoretical aspects of ODL which have been covered in the PGDDE courses.

Conduct of Academic Counselling

63.3% (19) of the respondents had conducted counselling sessions. 13.3% (4) of the respondents mentioned that they were newly appointed, hence had not been given an opportunity to conduct counselling sessions. 23.3% (7) of them had not been invited to take counselling sessions due to less number of students enrolled for the PGDDE programme at those particular study centres. Hence no counselling sessions were organised for PGDDE programme and instead the PGDDE learners were attached to a Distance Learning Facilitator, appointed by the university for low enrolment programmes in the region.

All of them had unanimously agreed to the need and necessity for conducting counselling sessions. They had listed many reasons which have been given below:

- ◆ Learners come from conventional system and learn more about the distance education system at counselling sessions.
- ◆ Counselling sessions help them in completing the programme on time.
- ◆ It lessens dropout rate.
- ◆ It provides the learners opportunities to meet and interact with their peer group.
- ◆ It provides them opportunities to clarify their doubts and resolve many of their learning problems through human intervention of the counsellor.
- ◆ It also helps the learners in answering their assignments and ultimately appearing in the term-end examinations. They can make use of audio-visual aids during counselling sessions.
- ◆ It is a highly motivating experience for the learners.

Hence 50% of them had suggested that attendance at counselling sessions should be made compulsory. The 50% who were against making it compulsory were of the view that any kind of compulsory attendance was against the philosophy of ODL. However, the other 50% of the counsellors felt that at least 25% of the counselling sessions should be made compulsory so that all distance learners would understand the importance and role of academic counselling in the teaching-learning process and take advantage of it.

The majority (70%) of the academic counsellors had stated that the attendance at counselling sessions was below average, i.e. less than 30% of them found it to be average. The major reasons given by the respondents for low attendance at counselling sessions are:

Table 2 Reasons for not attending counselling sessions

| Reasons for not attending counselling sessions | % of opinion |
|---|--------------|
| (i) Lack of compulsory provision of attendance | 55% |
| (ii) Pre occupations of learners with household and office responsibilities | 50% |
| (iii) Learners do not feel the necessity of counselling sessions | 20% |
| (iv) Indifference/lack of interest of learners | 18% |
| (v) Study centre not centrally located | 10% |
| (vi) Information regarding counselling sessions reaches late | 3% |

Except for 3 academic counsellors all of them had made efforts to contact the absentee learners. The major medium used was through of letters (80%) followed by telephone (75%), personal comments on assignment responses (72%) and word of mouth, sending messages through friends (20%).

Irregular distance learners had also made attempts to contact the counsellors by visiting the counsellors at their place of work (70%) and through letters (30%).

Interestingly 88% of the counsellors used lecture and discussion method in counselling sessions. Around 60% used group interaction and moderation method. Barely 34% made use of audio visual aids during the sessions. The reasons quoted by them regarding the non-utilisation of audio and video programmes are given below in Table 3.

Table 3 Reasons for non-utilisation of audio-visual aids

| Reasons | % of non-users |
|--|----------------|
| (i) Scarcity of equipment | 80% |
| (ii) Non-availability of equipment | 70% |
| (iii) lack of co-operation of study centre staff | 30% |
| (iv) lack of training | 5% |
| (v) power failure | 3% |

When asked to specify the group learning techniques utilised by them to make the sessions interactive, 12% have mentioned that they did not utilise any such method as barely 1 or 2 students would turn up for the sessions. Some of them used role play and brainstorming. The devices used were blackboard charts and atlas.

Two-Way Communication Through Assignments

30% of the respondents had never evaluated any assignments. 70% of them who had evaluated assignments had written tutor comments, both marginal and global comments and sometimes even personal comments.

The opinions regarding the writing of tutor comments are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4 Opinion of counsellors regarding writing of tutor comments

| Opinion regarding writing of tutor comments | % of opinion |
|---|--------------|
| (i) Requires training and retraining | 90% |
| (ii) One needs to cultivate these skills | 75% |
| (iii) Increases the learners motivation and improve their performance | 60% |
| (iv) Good method of communicating with distance learners | 50% |
| (v) Absence of monitoring has reduced the role of tutor comments into an ornamental one | 20% |

70% of the respondents adhered to the prescribed (by the University) turn-around time, provided for assignment evaluation and feedback to the learners. 30% of them found the time provided insufficient. They mentioned that all assignments were handed over to them just a few days before the examination. Hence, they could not evaluate and return them to students in time.

On an average the academic counsellors required 30 to 45 minutes to evaluate a single assignment response. A few exceptions (16.6%) said that they required 1 hour to 1 1/2 hours to evaluate one assignment.

75% of the respondents preferred grading system to the marking system. 25% of them who gave more credence to marking felt that marking was more accurate than grading. However, they (25%) found grading suitable for examinations. The reasons given by 75% of the respondents for preferring the grading system were:

- ◆ It was a fairly objective system.
- ◆ It was more rational as it decreases foul competition.
- ◆ It was more satisfying to the learner as its lessens the chance of variation.
- ◆ It had less scope for wrong judgments.
- ◆ It also prevented discrimination among learners.

Feedback on Multimedia Instruction

Self Instructional Materials (SIMs)

The majority of the academic counsellors (60%) found the PGDDE printed course materials good, 37% found them satisfactory and 3% unsatisfactory.

Feedback revealed that 83% found the printed materials really self instructional. 80% of them found them very comprehensive. 60% found the language simple and easy to understand and 40% were just about satisfied. 37% of them are just satisfied with the explanation of new ideas and terms; explanation difficult concepts; use of pictures and diagrams; and adequacy case studies and examples.

However, 6.6% were not at all satisfied with the explanation of terms, concepts and pictures/diagrams and case studies used. 70% found the progress check exercises and the references suggested at the end of the units adequate and good. They also made suggestions for improving the SIMs which are:

- ◆ Information needs to be updated.
- ◆ Multicolour printing and bigger font size, better quality, brighter paper would make a lot of difference.
- ◆ More recent case studies and examples to be used in the materials.
- ◆ More activities to be included.
- ◆ A section on new information technologies may be added.

83% of the respondents believed that the printed materials were self-learning that an average student could understand but would still need guidance and 17% felt that an average student could understand the matter on his/her own.

Audio-Video Programmes

Regarding the audio-video programmes their opinion was divided, 50% felt that they should complement the print materials. 50% of the respondents found the video programmes very useful and 33% found the audio programmes very useful. 23% found the videos fairly useful and 50% expressed the same opinion about the audios. 27% did not find the videos useful at all and 17% said this about the audios.

The respondents also suggested some topics that need to be covered through audio-video programmes in the context of the PGDDE programme, are:

- ◆ a global perspective of growth and development of distance education,
- ◆ development of SLMs,
- ◆ production of audio and video programmes,
- ◆ evaluation of assignment responses and writing of tutor comments,
- ◆ case studies of open universities,

- ◆ multimedia in distance education,
- ◆ practicals of counselling and tutoring,
- ◆ psychomotor aspects of learning, and
- ◆ theories of learning.

Tutor Marked Assignments (TMAs)

All respondents have expressed that submission of TMAs by a distance learner should be compulsory. The majority of them (75%) felt that the weightage of TMAs in the overall assessment should be increased from 25% to 40% because the distance learner has to put in a lot of effort (at least 2-3 hours per assignment) and the whole exercise proves to be very useful for the distance learner.

According to them TMAs:

- ◆ prepares the learners for the term-end examination,
- ◆ gives them practice in answering questions,
- ◆ helps them in mastering the units,
- ◆ reduces their anxiety during examinations, and
- ◆ motivates distance learners.

70% of them were of the opinion that the type of questions asked in the assignments are appropriate and make the distance learners write original answers with some analysis. 30% felt that the questions were framed in such a manner that they make the distance learners apply the knowledge that is given in the text in the form of case studies etc.

Teleconferencing

40% of the respondents had participated in teleconferencing but only in one or two sessions. They found teleconferencing very beneficial both from the learners as well as counsellors point of view, because of interaction with resource persons from HQs. However they expressed that teleconferencing cannot completely replace face-to-face counselling sessions as it does not fulfill the criteria of continuity of concern. Moreover teleconferencing facilities are available at very limited places.

The academic counsellors had suggested interactive radio counselling, cable TV networks and direct connectivity between the STRIDE faculty and the PGDDE learners through the Internet, as other media that could be utilised for instructional purposes. They particularly stressed on radio because of its outreach and affordability, and utility for these learners who do not

attend counselling sessions at study centres. Direct contact could be maintained between the learners and STRIDE through e-mail. Frequently asked questions (FAQs) could be posted on the STRIDE website which would be beneficial to both learners and counsellors.

Feedback on Support Services

IGNOU Study Centre

Barely 20% of the academic counsellors were satisfied with the support services provided by the IGNOU study centres. They had also given the reasons for their dissatisfaction which are:

- ◆ study centre staff are not regularly in contact with the counsellors,
- ◆ they do not have list of students attached to them,
- ◆ they lack space,
- ◆ the staff is not active and prompt,
- ◆ they do not provide the latest information to counsellors, and lastly
- ◆ they lack sensitivity.

70% of the respondents were not satisfied with the arrangements at the study centre for conducting counselling sessions. 60% of them mentioned that staff at the study centre, did not cooperate with them. Regarding their suggestions for improvement, all the respondents felt that the selection of the study centre coordinator was very crucial for the success of the system. The coordinator must have experience in distance education or should have at least completed the PGDDE programme.

Staff at the study centre should be oriented and familiarised with open distance education methodologies from time to time and sensitised to the problems of distance learners and counsellors. Only then they would understand the importance of timely receipt of course materials, adherence to turn around time for providing feedback to the learners on TMAs and the proper organisation and conduct of counselling sessions.

Study Centre Library

60% of the respondents had mentioned that they had been using the library but not very regularly. 37% had been regular users and only 3% had not used it all. Unfortunately all the users of the library had expressed their dissatisfaction with the library facilities. Their reasons for dissatisfaction are given in Table 5.

Table 5 Dissatisfaction with library facilities

| Reasons for dissatisfaction | No. of respondents |
|---|--------------------|
| (i) No proper reading room facility | 21 |
| (ii) Catalogue is not available | 20 |
| (iii) Reference books are not arranged properly | 17 |
| (iv) Restricted library support (not allowed to borrow books) | 14 |
| (v) Reference books are not available | 11 |
| (vi) Sufficient SLMs are not available | 11 |
| (vii) Required TMAs are not available | 9 |
| (viii) Term End Exam (TEE) papers are not available | 9 |
| (ix) Study centre staff does not cooperate | 9 |
| (x) Library is closed during working hours | 9 |

From Table 5, it may be inferred that the major reasons for dissatisfaction expressed by nearly 70% of the respondents were the non-availability of catalogues and lack of proper reading room facility. Around 50% had expressed that reference books were not properly arranged and there was a lack of borrowing facility. Purposes for which library facility had been used by counsellors include for referring to books, referring to the SLMs, TEE papers and borrowing the audio-video programmes.

Problems Faced by Distance Learners

The respondents classified the problems faced by distance learners with regards to the programme into two categories: Personal Problems and Institutional Problems. The details are given in Table 6. Timely non-receipt of SIMs and TMAs made students face large number of institutional issues. Under personal problems 70% students expressed that the language used in SIMs was difficult and so on. Even though the counsellors expressed that the language used simple and easy to understand and so on.

Table 6 Problems of PGDDE learners

| Personal problems | % of opinion | Institutional problems | % of opinion |
|---|--------------|---|--------------|
| (i) Language is difficult | 70 | (i) Timely receipt of SLMs | 90 |
| (ii) Related to TMAs | 50 | (ii) Timely receipt of TMAs | 90 |
| (iii) Related to TE Exams | 30 | (iii) Unreplied queries | 50 |
| (iv) Content too dense and difficult | 20 | (iv) Non-availability of Audio Video Support | 40 |
| | | (v) Lack of non-availability reference books | 40 |

Benefits Accrued

Majority (66.6%) of them had over 10 years of experience as academic counsellors of IGNOU and 20% had less than 5 years of experience. 4 of them (13.4%) had no experience as they were newly appointed.

77% of the respondents mentioned that by being appointed as PGDDE academic counsellors, they had learnt more about the Open University system. 60% stated that this gave them an opportunity to apply the knowledge gained from the PGDDE/MADE programmes. 53% of them mentioned that this assignment gave them more confidence to carry out their permanent jobs (as conventional teachers) better.

50% felt that it had helped them to improve their career prospects and 46% felt that it had generated a new interest to keep their mind active. 23% said that it had helped them to get a job in an open university and thus get a promotion and a pay rise. 20% got an opportunity to re-enter the job market and hence improved their career prospects. Some (5%) had also stated that their involvement in activities of IGNOU widened their area of acquaintance.

Overall, nearly 50% stated that they derived some benefit; 40% derived enormous benefit and the remaining little or no benefit. All of them had stated that they really benefited from the PGDDE programme to function as academic counsellors. Hence, they had suggested that this programme should be made compulsory for all academic counsellors of IGNOU. It should be offered to them either free of cost or at very concessional rates.

Recommendations

Identification of the right academic counsellors would have a long term positive impact on the system. Renewal of counsellor's, appointments should not be ritual but should be based on actual performance of counsellors. The university should effectively monitor their performance.

In order to make counselling sessions more interactive, the academic counsellors should be given practical training in the conduct of counselling sessions and in the writing of tutor comments.

New training strategies need to be developed by STRIDE. Also, refresher courses in distance education methods need to be arranged for academic counsellors periodically to update their knowledge and information, and sharpen their skills.

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