

Academic Counsellors' Awareness of Distance Education Instructional Concepts and Practices

B. SUKUMAR

IGNOU Regional Centre, Cochin, India

Abstract: *Counselling is a complex activity; and in Distance Education, it is very important for the success of the system. This paper presents the results of a survey amongst academic counsellors of IGNOU Regional Centre, Cochin, India, to ascertain their awareness about instructional concepts of Distance Education and Counselling practices. The study reveals that academic counsellors need training to be effective and make Distance Education a success.*

Introduction

One of the major problems that a new distance teaching institution has to face, especially when the system of distance education itself is relatively new to the country concerned, is to find the right type of academic counsellors, who can contribute to establish a wide network of effective student support services. Counselling is a complex activity involving a range of skills, informing and advising. Thus, academic counsellors in distance education institution must be more than mere technical or subject matter experts. A distance education institution's success to a large extent is reflected in its academic counsellor's awareness, involvement and interest. Anyone with a doctorate and a certain degree of expertise, can not be an effective academic counsellor. Quality of distance education, no doubt, depends on quality of academic counsellors. Thus, it is necessary to identify, nurture and orient academic counsellors to be fully effective.

Objectives

The present study was conducted in the operational area under the Indira Gandhi National Open University Regional Centre, Cochin with the following two fold objectives:

1. To assess the extent of awareness of academic counsellors about distance education instructional concepts; and
2. To ascertain the use of instructional practices by academic counsellors.

Methodology

This study concentrates on the academic counsellors of IGNOU Regional Centre, Cochin. Primary data were collected through a questionnaire. Tabulation, classification and percentage calculations were used for data analysis.

The study was carried out with the help of 120 academic counsellors of different programmes offered at IGNOU Regional Centre, Cochin. The group of these academic counsellors varied from teachers working in the conventional system, retired teachers, and executives working in reputed firms.

Results and Discussion

Awareness about Distance Education Instructional Concepts

In order to assess academic counsellor's awareness on major distance education instructional concepts, they were asked first to define certain terms used now-a-days in instructional transaction such as difference of correspondence and distance education, multi-instructional media and motive of counselling. Their responses were evaluated and categorised as "Ambiguous", "Limited Perspective" and "Comprehensive."

Table 1 : Awareness about distance education instructional concepts

Type of responses	Concepts		
	Difference of correspon- dence and distance education	Multi-instructional media	Motive of counselling
Ambiguous	66 (55)	12 (10)	44 (36.7)
Limited perspective	42 (35)	88 (73.3)	68 (56.7)
Comprehensive	12 (10)	20 (16.7)	8 (6.6)

Figures in parenthesis indicate percentage

Table 1 shows, majority academic counsellors (55%) had ambiguous idea about the difference between correspondence and distance education system. Only 73.3% and 56.7% academic counsellor's responses can be attributed as limited perspective on the concept of multi-instructional media and motive of counselling. Multi-instructional media and motive of counselling were perceived in an ambiguous manner by 10% and 36.7% respondents respectively. Only 6-17% respondents had a comprehensive awareness about distance education instructional concepts.

This illustrates academic counsellors' awareness and perception on the basic concepts in the distance education system and the extent to which they are away from the true perspective.

Awareness about Learning Theories

Academic counsellors were asked to identify learning theories out of a given list of five theories. As shown in Table 2, only 15% and 10% are aware about concept of learning and behaviourism while a very negligible per cent could identify cognitive approach, synthesis of behaviourism and cognitive approach and levels of learning outcomes.

Table 2 : Learning theories identified by academic counsellors

Learning theory	Frequency	Percentage
Concept of learning	18	15
Behaviourism	12	10
Cognitive approach	4	0.33
Synthesis of behaviourism and cognitive approach	4	0.33
Levels of learning outcomes	8	0.66

Table 3 : Qualities of successful academic counsellors

Qualities	Frequency of respondents	Percentage
Knowledge of subject	34	28.3
Knowledge on counselling components	32	26.7
Personal attributes	29	24.2
Communication skills	25	20.8

Qualities of Academic Counsellors

A majority (28.3%) of academic counsellors responded that knowledge of subject is an essential quality, followed by knowledge on counselling components (26.7%), and personal attributes (24.2%). Only 20.8% respondents felt communication skill is not as essential as those of other skills (Table 3). This shows that knowledge on subject, counselling components and personal attributes are more essential qualities than communication skills.

Important Aspect of Counselling Session

Academic counsellors were asked to mention items to be included in an effective organisation of counselling session. As evident from Table 4, most of the academic counsellors (85%) felt that attendance of students is important. It was followed by student characteristics (80%), assignments (65%), work schedules (61.7), language of the material (56.7%) and actual sessions (46.7%).

Table 4 : Items for effective organisation of counselling session

Items	Frequency	Percentage
Work Schedules	74	61.7
Attendance of students	102	85
Actual sessions	56	46.7
Student characteristics	96	80
Language of the material	68	56.7
Assignments	78	65

Media Choice

As depicted in Table 5 face-to-face media was preferred by majority (86.7%) of the academic counsellors, followed by group discussion (59.2%), handbook (51.7%), letters (46.7%) and telephone (35%).

Table 6 shows a majority of academic counsellors responded that lack of time (60.8%) is the problem for non-use of A-V media, followed by lack of adequate knowledge (40.8%), procedural complexity (38.3%), lack of facilities (31.7%) and lack of encouragement from study centres (24.2%).

Table 5 : Preference of media for counselling

Media	Frequency	Percentage
Face to face	104	86.7
Group discussion	71	59.2
Telephone	42	35
Letters	56	46.7
Handbook	62	51.7

Table 6 : Difficulties faced in using Audio-visual media

Difficulties faced	Frequency	Percentage
Lack of facilities	38	31.7
Procedural complexity	46	38.3
Lack of time	73	60.8
Lack of adequate knowledge	58	40.8
Lack of encouragement from study centres	29	24.2

Table 7 : Communications used by academic counsellors for motivating students

Communications	Frequency of respondents	Percentage
Academic	48	40
Personal	39	32.5
Supplement	33	27.5

Methods to Motivate Students

Academic counsellors' responses in use of various communication techniques for motivating the students are depicted in Table 7. It reveals that majority (40%) of academic counsellors agreed that they use academic communication, followed by personal (32.5%) and supplement (27.5%) communication.

Academic counsellors were asked to indicate whether they followed certain instructional methods during counselling for motivating students, which is an essential component to stimulate learning among distance education students. Table 8 reveals that only a small section (35%) of counsellors said that they used good introduction highlighting scope, usefulness, purpose, relevance etc. of the topic. Briefing summary of last session, demonstration, asking questions as techniques are also used but the percentages are very low.

Table 8 : Methods used by academic counsellors for motivating students for attending counselling sessions

Technique	Frequency of respondents	Percentage
Demonstration	25	20.8
Good introduction	42	35
Briefing last session	33	27.5
Asking questions	20	16.7

Conclusion

The study shows general lack of awareness among academic counsellors about distance education instructional concepts and learning theories. Similar trend also seems in their use of motivational techniques and audio-visual media. All these calls for effective orientation/reorientation training for academic counsellors. Orientation programmes need to be conducted twice or thrice in a year in each region with the aim of accommodating all the academic counsellors. The orientation should not only take care of the subject, counselling and evaluation aspects but also how to improve their knowledge with regard to communication aspects, usage of audio-visual media, student psychology, teaching-learning, etc. Also it is suggested that attendance in orientation/reorientation programme be made compulsory for their renewal of appointment every year. Distance training methods may also be used to train counsellors.

[**Dr. B. Sukumar** has been working as Assistant Regional Director in IGNOU since 1992. He earned his Ph.D. in Physics with the specialization in semi-conducting field from Madurai-Kamaraj University, Madurai. His present research interest is on distance education area. *Correspondence:* IGNOU Regional Centre, Mamangalam, Palarivattom P.O., Cochin 682 025, India. Fax : 99-484-340204]