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Academic Counselling in Distance Education: IGNOU Experience

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Abstract : *This article intends to study the role of academic counselling in distance education system with special reference to IGNOU Regional Centre, Koraput. The paper mainly focuses on the characteristics of learners in distance education, different kinds of learner support services available to the distance learners, the role of Academic Counselling in distance education, and the Academic Counselling system in IGNOU Regional Centre, Koraput. The author, on the bases of her experience, suggests some measures to improve the practice of academic counselling being provided at different Study Centers under IGNOU Regional Centre, Koraput, Odisha.*

Keywords: *IGNOU, Academic Counselling, ODL, Distance Education*

Introduction

Distance system of education has now become a very powerful, sophisticated and rich medium of instruction for supplementing the mainstream face-to-face teaching learning process. With its tremendous potential to enhance reach and equitable access and inherent characteristics of learner centred flexibility, it has ushered a silent revolution in democratising education and creation of a just society. Distance Education provides access to higher education to a large segment of society. The need for distance education can be attributed to the information explosion to an increasing population and to its cost effectiveness. The Open and Distance Learning (ODL) now caters to every fourth enrolment in the higher education system of the country. The conventional system of education, even today, has not been able to cope with the increasing demand for education. It has well been realised that it is not possible to serve the learning needs of a large section of Indian youth, who want to continue their learning after senior secondary education but are not able to continue to study in regular conventional institutions for various reasons. Distance education provides access to higher education to adults who are willing to learn on their own and at their own pace. Distance education is cost effective. The major cost is study material which is well prepared and printed or given in the form of CDs or other electronic media. The teaching is built into the study material, and overheads, salaries, and physical buildings comprising the infrastructure are minimal as both infrastructure and faculty are drawn from the existing resources available in established educational institutes of repute. But the

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question of quality of distance learning programmes is paramount and learners will be attracted to distance learning institutions only if good quality programmes can be offered to them. There are certain factors which characterize distance education. The important ones are: (i) built-in flexibility; (ii) learner autonomy; (iii) democratization of education; (iv) use of modern technology in course delivery mechanism, (v) absence of peer learning group; (vi) separation between the learner and the teacher; and (vii) the heterogeneity of the learners.

Instructional System

The major feature of distance learning system is separation between the learner and the teacher. The teacher in a distance learning scenario is not visible. The faculty in the schools in the main institute are far removed from the learner. The teacher is in built into the self-learning study materials that are prepared with great care. The academic counsellor, however, acts as a teacher but meets the learners occasionally at the counselling sessions and/or interacts with the learners through the comments written in the assignment responses submitted by the learners. Hence, the learner and the teacher are physically separate in the ODL scenario.

Characteristics of Distance Education

The group of learners enrolled for any distance learning programme is quite heterogeneous unlike any conventional programme of study as the learners may be drawn from various categories such as: (i) Working persons wanting to upgrade their knowledge and skills; (ii) Persons living in remote areas; (iii) Students interested in parallel learning; (iv) persons who are house-bound, physically or mentally challenged persons; (v) Neo-literates; and (vi) those who had earlier dropped out and who now want to continue their education after a long gap. Despite these differences distance learners have certain specific characteristics. S/He is sufficiently motivated and has, therefore, enrolled for a course with a specific objective. However, s/he is isolated and may be in need of human contact to help him cope better with his study programme. S/He may have several other commitments and hence may have opted for a distance learning programme of his choice as it offers adequate flexibility assuring him an opportunity for further study. ODL learners may not be able to reach libraries or other academic resources. This means that they may need to have resources made available in different ways

Learner Support Services

Learner support services are important components of the ODL system. In distance education, there is the geographical separation o teacher and learner. In addition to it, socio-psychological factors affect the learners in their learning and completing courses. Distance learners, therefore, need various support services that would help them to be successful learners. Learner support services designed to take account problems of distance learners at pre-entry stage, during the course of studies and at the course completion stage. The mechanisms are built into the system to help the learner cope with learning and to help them sustain their initial motivation. These include: (i) self instructional learning materials; (ii) academic support services; (iii) assignments; and (iv) media and technology.

Self-instructional Learning Materials

The course materials are significant inputs of learning in distance education system. These are specially designed and prepared and are highly structured materials usually in print form. They form the backbone of the Distance Learning mechanism and are provided to each learner. These materials are normally developed by the experts and experienced persons keeping in view distance learners' background, their needs and problems, course objectives or expected outcome of a course. It is easy to read and

understand and there are several access devices inbuilt in the materials to help the learner navigate through the material.

Academic Support Services

Academic support services are provided through tutors, counsellors, mentors and distance learning facilitators to solve various academic problems of students. The academic counsellors provide different kinds of academic support at the initial stage of studies, during the course of studies and towards the completion of studies.

Assignments

Assignment is an important component of distance education system. This is because it is expected that the evaluator will offer valuable feedback and constructive positive tutor comments to the learner. They give proper guidance as how to prepare assignments, and how to identify suitable resources for preparing the assignments. These help the learner to know what his shortcomings are and give him inputs for improvement. The assignment is a compulsory component and also helps the learner to prepare for the final exam.

Media and Technology

Multi-media learning facilities are treated as integral part of instructional system. The radio broadcast programmes through Gyan Vani serve local specific needs of distance learners. Gyan Darshan programmes enrich learning experiences through audio-video live demonstrations. It helps learners to avail various opportunities. The audio-video cassette based lessons and down linking facilities in Study Centre promotes distance media based support to the learners. Demonstrations of practical components, expert guidance through live telecast programmes, skill based exercises and learning packages create opportunities to excel in their learning. Thus, a multi-media approach to learning is available to learners, improving the learning process and making it interesting and enjoyable.

Counselling Needs of Distance Learners

Distance learning students are usually older compared with typical students engaged in campus-based programs. Hence, they encounter more psycho-social problems which might affect their academic progress necessitating the need for counselling in order for them to pursue their studies unhindered. Distance learning students have also little free time to pay attention to the details of assignments. Therefore, instructors should provide them with a clear and detailed syllabus. Instructors should understand that their students may be busy with work and family and sometimes have no time for assignments. Therefore, any attempts to provide counselling services should note the limited geographic reach and limited time that ODL students have.

Academic Counselling and the Counsellors

Academic Counselling in Distance education include both counselling and tutoring to the distance learners. Counselling in distance education is widely used for giving advice, both academic and non-academic, to learners. Many learners experience both academic and non-academic difficulties of some kind during their studies. There are some students, who freshly enter the open system, will require general counselling to a large extent along with a small component of tutoring. This combination of general counselling and tutoring is known as academic counselling in distance education, particularly in IGNOU system. Academic counselling is basically learner-centric unlike teaching which is mainly course-centric. It also includes non-academic areas, i.e. specific difficulties pertaining to pursuing the

course. The Academic Counsellor, therefore, is expected to perform an important role of assisting the learners to cross barriers and hurdles or obstacles in the path of completion of their academic programme.

Major activities of Academic Counselling

Academic counselling constitutes three activities such as informing, advising and counselling.

Informing

Informing includes giving appropriate and correct information to learners. It isw basically institution based knowledge that is of importance. For example, the learner may want to know about courses offered by the University, pre-entry qualifications for the course or she may want to know the regulations of the university. Here the counsellor requires to have accurate and appropriate information, as well as ability to communicate it clearly.

Advising

Advising involves suggesting appropriate course of action to learners perhaps offering several options but recommending one, especially for the particular learners. But the knowledge of the needs and requirements of that particular learner is very important before suggesting something to her/him.

Counselling

Counselling is helping learners clarify their needs, feelings or motivations so that they can make an appropriate choices and decisions for themselves. Counselling, e.g. a learner ready to withdraw perhaps due to difficult work. Has he/she found the course difficult because it is a wrong choice for him / her Is he / she not able to devote enough time to the course?. Getting the problem clarified is a step towards offering counsel to the learner, which may end up in the learner deciding whether to remain in the course or to dropout. Counselling, hence is entirely learner dependent, rather than knowledge and institution based.

Media of Counselling in Open and Distance Learning

There are various media used in academic counselling. Distance learning takes place through both as an individual's interaction with the Self Learning Materials and social interaction with peers/tutors. All these communication takes place through various media. Some of the media used in Open and Distance Learning are as follows:

1. Face to face counselling
2. Counselling through Assignments
3. Counselling through Telephones
4. Counselling through Letters
5. Counselling through Internet
6. Counselling through Broadcasting (Radio/ Television)
7. Counselling through Self Instructional Materials

IGNOU Regional Centre, Koraput

The Regional Centre is a connecting link between the University and the local Study Centres. Regional Centres are not there in all distance teaching institutions. Large open universities have generally Regional Centres to have greater efficiency in administration and academic affairs. Regional Centres

have important administrative functions such as appointment of academic counsellors, admission of students, training of study centre staff and counsellors, distribution of study materials to the learners, organisation promotional activities in the region, organisation of convocation.

IGNOU Regional Centre , Koraput started as Sub-Regional Centre way back in 2004 and was subsequently elevated to a Regional Centre in 2005. Starting with only 12 Study Centres, now it is in possession of about 40 Study centres spread across nine districts of Odisha and 6 districts of Chhatisgarh. By now, more than 40 thousand students of this region have availed the facilities of higher education being offered by this University. In recognition of its role in furthering the ambitions of people for higher

Academic Counselling in Regional Centre, Koraput: Issues and Concerns

There are 70 programmes activated in IGNOU Regional Centre, Koraput. Out of that Academic counselling sessions organised for MA and Bachelors Degree Programmes. In 41 active Study Centres of the Regional Centre 1422 Academic Counsellors appointed from different disciplines for various programmes of IGNOU according to their experiences and specialisation. Counselling sessions although beneficial are not made compulsory in all kinds of IGNOU programmes. This is because there may be many learners, who have other equally important commitments, and it would become impossible for them to continue with their studies and they would eventually be pushed out if attendance at counselling sessions is made compulsory. Attendance at counselling sessions helps the learner to overcome obstacles, both of academic and non-academic nature.

In order to study the perception of tutors and students towards the conduct of academic counselling session in the region a survey conducted in 10 study centres where the views of the academic counsellors and students enrolled in various programmes of IGNOU collected in the form questionnaire. The common views of the learners and academic counsellors are presented below:

Perception of Academic Counsellors towards Academic Counselling Sessions

- The learners do not attend counselling sessions maybe due to paucity of time on account of other commitments

- They may not find the Counselling Sessions useful and interesting

- The learner feels that he does not need counselling

- Learners are tongue tied as they are not used to attending counselling sessions and are diffident and do not easily open up in front of others

- The Counsellor being drawn from conventional system is unable to overcome biases and easily reverts to the lecture method, instead of initiating a good dialogue amongst the learners present

- Sometimes it is difficult to handle the learners from heterogeneous backgrounds

- They do not evaluate assignments on time and return them with no detailed comments for better performance

- Low attendance at the sessions leads to suspension of regular counselling sessions because the number of learners attending and present is less than the prescribed number of ten learners.

- The learner who wants support and is present is penalized because the other learners who do not feel the need for counselling or are unable to come remain absent.

- Counselling is conducted mainly for the compulsory courses where the number of enrolled learners is quite large as compared to the optional or elective, specialization courses where the learners get split into lesser numbers.
- The need for Counselling is felt much more for the specialization courses but often does not take place.
- Lack of regular orientation programmes for the counsellors at various study centres in a given region.
- Lack of adequate advance information about counselling schedules to the learners and adherence to the schedules.
- Review and renew all appointments of counsellors, systematically and regularly to weed out
- In IGNOU, monitoring becomes a very difficult task and if it is not done well, it becomes meaningless.

Perception of Learners on Academic Counselling

The learners opined that counselling sessions help the distance learner in the following ways.

- Counselling sessions help to break the sense of isolation of the learner. During counselling sessions, the learner is able to come in contact with other learners whom he does not meet often.
- The first induction meeting as a counselling session is an icebreaker, as the learner is made familiar with the study centre set up, library, multimedia facilities, staff and academic counsellors.
- Doubts and queries are answered properly by the functionaries. Some of them opined that tips are offered on how to study as an independent learner in the distance learning mode.
- Counselling sessions although beneficial are not made compulsory.
- Attendance at counselling sessions helps the learner to overcome obstacles, both of academic and non-academic nature.

Conclusion

Providing good student support services to distance learners is an issue of great concern in order to prevent attrition and encourage retention. Large number of dropouts in distance learning is an accepted fact, but we cannot afford to be complacent. Learners tend to drop out and feel that they are incapable of completing the programme when they face problems and difficulties. The human element in learner support is very vital and cannot be overlooked, whatever the scope and speed of technological advances but the learner usually feels satisfied and comfortable when he receives oral instruction. Because distance learning students are usually older comparing with typical students engaged in campus-based programs. Hence they encounter more psycho-social problems which they encounter which might affect their academic progress necessitating the need for counselling in order for them to pursue their studies unhindered. The reason why people use ODL as a means of study is because they want a chance to advance in their careers while they earn an income. In order to ensure that counselling needs of its distance learners are met. Therefore, academic counselling plays a major role in distance education system.

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