



Impact of counseling session in distance education

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Abstract

Counseling is very important aspect in teaching learning process of distance education system. Students counseling begins with the pre-admission period, continues through the duration of the programme or the course, and it is helpful even after the course is completed. Student counselors, by personal contact or through correspondence, help student to reach the right process at the right time. Counseling is a short cut for an otherwise long trip. The counselors help students to know their own minds. Even after getting enrolled, some students feel that they are in a blind alley, they are tempted to drop out. If someone will listen to the problems of students and suggest possible solutions, confused students are at least less confused. The counselor should devote sufficient time for advising students requiring it.

The term distance education is an educational process in which a significant proportion of teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and / or time from the learner. This means that an intermediary is always used in the contact between tutor and students. From the above definition it appears that the term distance education covers various forms of study at all levels which are not under the immediate supervision of tutors. Such education includes the use of books, radio, television and postal services.

Keywords: Education, Counseling, Distance

Introduction

“Counseling is personal and dynamic relationship between the two individuals one of whom is older or more experienced than the younger, who together approach a more or less well defined problem of the younger or less experienced or less wise, with neutral consideration for each to the end that the problem may be more clearly refined and that the one who has the problem may be helped to a self-determined solution it”

Distance students are required to meet the entry requirements as laid down by AIOU. They are taught by the part time teachers (called tutors), and follow the same programs as offered in the formal system. Likewise, they take the examinations like formal students. This arrangement is intended to maintain parity of standards between formal education students and distance education students. The arrangement implies that distance education students may be provided with adequate tutoring, counseling and support facilities as (and probably more than) formal education students.

Counseling is a personal and dynamic relationship between two individuals (one of whom is order or more experienced wiser than the other), who altogether approaches a more or less well-defined problem of the younger or less experienced or less wise, with mutual consideration for each other to the end that the problem may be clearly defined and that one who has the problem may be helped to a self- determined solution of it, [12].

The consultant serves the student as a confidential counselor, professional advisor, well-informed resource and loyal advocate and supporter [9]. Moreover, numerous contacts with individuals can be used to provide him assistance in solving his issues. Whereas "Counseling is the application of the

personnel resources of the school or other institutions to the solution of the problems of individuals."

The counseling is vitally related to learning. As in learning we are concerned with the modification of behavior, so is counseling. The role of the counselor is to discover the dissatisfactions (may be called problems) of the counselee, help him set up some goals and guide him through difficulties and problems [7]. Anyhow, counseling is a process in which a counselor is approached by the pupil on an individual basis for arriving at a solution. Counseling comes in when emotions are at stake. Counseling can be done by interview or by post and even by telephone. However, counseling relationship refers to the interactions which: 1. Occur between two individuals called "counselor" and "client". 2. Take place within a professional setting; and 3. Is initiated and maintained as a means of facilitating changes in the behavior of the client, [4].

The term counseling entails situations that helps individual to more appropriately settle himself in the environment, [11]. On the basis of above mentioned definitions, it can be concluded that the aim of counseling is self-realization. This involves helping the individual to understand what he can do and what he should do to strengthen his best qualities, to handle his difficulties rationally rather than being driven by unconscious forces to find suitable channels for his emotions, and to move toward his more acceptable self.

There are five important characteristics of counseling and they are (1) it is a purposeful learning experience for the client or the subject or the counselee, (2) it is a private interview between the counselor and the client (3) it is a one-to-one relationship, a relationship based upon the mutual confidence of the parties concerned and growing out of the recognition of the subject of an existing need for help and presence in the

school of an adult who is ready to assist, (4) the counseling process is structured round the felt needs of the counselee, (5) the main emphasis in the whole of the counseling process is on the counselee's self- direction and self-acceptance.

For establishing a meaningful counseling relationship with a distance student, it is very essential to find out a suitable means of communication. The means employed will be determined by a large number of factors like the residence of the students and density of numbers, the accessibility of counseling points, the number of counselors, the range of counseling skills available and the level of educational technology which the distance education system can invoke to support its program.

Research study

Counseling and support Services through Correspondence. This is the most popular means of counseling and support service in distance education in Pakistan. For making the best use of this medium, it is necessary to have an efficient postal system. It may be stressed that postal delays are likely to cause a great deal of anxiety in the minds of learners who are in great need of counseling at the time of writing their assignments.

Counseling and support Services through Audio-Cassette. With the advances in the scientific and technological fields, it will be possible in the near future to make use of audio-cassette for counseling purposes. Three advantages are claimed (a) it appears to be more personalized than written comments, (b) students regard the information through it as being more complete and comprehensive and (c) this medium significantly improves the learner's level of academic achievement.

Counseling through telephone is regarded as the most effective tool of distance teaching and learning. It is capable of humanizing, individualizing, personalizing and optimizing instruction. It is a two-way communication system. It saves effort, money and time involved in traveling. Its additional advantage is that it avoids embarrassments in certain delicate situations which are caused in face-to face counseling.

Students in distance education system are particularly much more free to set their own learning goals. Many students of distance education are presumably proficient in setting realistic short-term and long-term educational goals. However, some may not be so proficient and may consistently set goals which are either impossible to achieve or far below their capability. Both types of behavior may be due to an exaggerated fear of failure along with an acquired tendency to ascribe out-comes as being due solely to a ability and look rather than personal effort. Both types of un-realistic goal-setting have a high probability of resulting in non-completion of a particular course or more drastically termination of all education endeavors.

The tutor of the distance education students can diagnose and help the learner change his self-defeating behavior. To do this, the tutor must have comprehensive information regarding the background of students. A student with a record of failures or incompletes needs special help in overcoming the adverse motivational effects of past failure. The tutor can guide him in selecting learning tasks etc. here the role of tutor will be of a counselor too.

Tutors go to the study centers and conduct tutorials to supplement the reading material. They also help the students to solve their educational problems and difficulties. Such practice also helps the tutors in having a deeper insight of students' problems. "Experience of the past few years has shown that students whose interest and otherwise waned and were on the verge of giving up their studies, have had their interest revived by such visits ^[14]."

Likewise, the AIOU has also arranged surprise visits to workshops for monitoring purpose. The academicians normally visit different regions of Pakistan and come up with certain proposals to improve not only the students' support services but also have the knowledge about other problems of students. Annual report) ^[1] said that, "Semester end workshops provide an opportunity to the learners to recapitulate what they have studied during the semester, which definitely help in the preparations for examinations".

The facility of financial support to students is provided by student's Affairs to deserving students via regional circle of AIOU. There are two categories of financial assistance, i.e. general students and AIOU's employees. In spring and Autumn 2012 Semester Rs.1,59,29,085/- were given to general students and during these semesters Rs.20,45,415/- were provided to university employees who enrolled in various courses, ^[1].

The tutoring by correspondence "... is exacting since it demands the ability to write full, fair thoughtful probing comments on the work of someone the tutor may possible never meet ^[13]." Even the academicians of Open University did not take interest to guide the tutors on how to tutor in the system of distance education and to give comments on the students' assignments. Although the Open University is trying its best to provide adequate counseling to the tutor through tutor briefing session, yet there is need to strengthen this aspect.

Open University must respond to a student as soon as possible. A friendly, responsive letter can claim ruffled nerves and sooth ragged spirits. If a question requires research and cannot be answered immediately, courtesy demands that the student be thanked for writing and informed that an answer will follow as soon as available. Then be sure to get that answer and send it. Great importance must be attached to the fact that local customs differ not only among countries, but also between provinces, regions, and even local neighborhoods with a city. Family relationships, the status of women, the choice of profession or job – each makes its own demands upon every student. The counsellor's responsibility to assist the one in trouble whether that difficulty stems from physical, mental, social or emotional causes.

Often money is the problem. Surely it is far wiser to respond to a student by extending credit for a limited time or by counting a "leave of absence" from sending in work projects until the emergency has passed than to allow someone to drop out by default or from embarrassment. Students are more important than money. A counselor must be familiar with the aims and subject-matter of each course. Sometimes the counselor may be asked to restate passage in the study material in simpler language.

Finally, the counselor must enjoy dealing with people and their emotions. He/she must take the initiative in establishing

a one-to-one relationship which can inspire a student to complete a difficult course, perhaps enroll in another course, and even eventually achieve a career goal.

Discussion

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 conventional system of education has not been able to cope with the increasing demand for education. The open and distance learning mode has several advantages and has become quite popular due to several factors. Through distance education it is possible to serve large sections of society wanting further studying but who are not able to continue to study in regular conventional institutions for various kinds of reasons. Distance education provides access to higher education to adults who are willing to learn on their own, 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 medium. 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. The conventional system of education has not been able to cope with the increasing demand for education.

Classroom strength is restricted and it is also necessary for learners to be present full time for their studies. The distance learning mode allows for many aspiring learners who find it difficult to attend regular programmes of study. But the 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. These are (1) built-in flexibility, (2) learner autonomy, (3) democratization of education, (4) use of modern technology in course delivery mechanism, (5) absence of peer learning group, (6) separation between the learner and the teacher, and (7) the heterogeneity of the learners.

Distance education is characterized by flexibility in terms of time, pace and place. All programmes are allowed a minimum and a maximum duration. Hence the enrolled learners can complete a programme at any time within the maximum duration. Attendance is compulsory only for practical sessions and laboratory and other practical work which is necessary for skill development. It is not compulsory to attend the theory counseling sessions although it is advisable to do so. Hence the learners most of whom have other important commitments are enabled to conveniently their chosen programmes at their own pace and place too.

A learner may have a transferable job or s/he may be often on tour. In such case, s/he is facilitated to change the study centre or exam centre as the jurisdiction of the distance learning institute may be state-wide or nation wide and study centres are established in several places at convenient locations. There is a relaxed entry level too in several cases. For example, any adult who is literate and wishes to complete Graduation need not face the terrifying prospect of going to school and sitting

in class with many younger students. S/he can complete a Bachelors Preparatory Programme which facilitates the learner to enroll for a Graduation or Diploma programme of his/her choice.

There is more academic freedom accorded to the learner because the ODL (Open and Distance Learning) system is more learner centric. In a conventional classroom, the teacher determines what s/he will teach, whereas in a counseling session, the discussions can be directed by the learners according to their needs.

Distance education provides for easy and equal access to all learners desirous of pursuing their dream of obtaining quality education. It cuts across all barriers of caste, class and creed and gives equal access to all people thereby democratizing education and taking it to the doorsteps of the learners.

Computer aided learning, online learning, satellite based instruction through teleconferencing, interactive radio lessons, audio and video lessons through CDs and the television are all made possible in the ODL system. A multi-media approach in programme delivery using the latest technology is possible through the ODL system. In fact, the world is now moving towards blended learning system.

Learners rarely congregate together in a classroom situation except for the counseling sessions. Since counseling sessions are not made compulsory it is rare for the entire learning group to come together. Thus the learner is often in isolation, but s/he is encouraged towards independent individual learning.

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 also in built into the self-learning study material which is especially prepared with great care. The academic counselor also acts as a teacher but meets the learners occasionally at the counseling 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.

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 (a) Working persons wanting to upgrade their knowledge and skills, (b) Persons living in remote areas, (c) Students interested in parallel learning, (d) persons who are house-bound, physically or mentally challenged persons, (e) Neo-literates, and (f) those who had earlier dropped out and who now want to continue their education after a long gap.

Distance learners should have certain specific characteristics. S/He is sufficiently motivated and has therefore enrolled for a course with a specific objective. However 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. S/He is part of a heterogeneous group of fellow learners and s/he may or may not have had any previous educational experience.

Such a learner would require a lot of support to help him

whenever he faces obstacles or difficulties of various sorts during his period of study. This support would be academic, administrative and also socio- psychological or emotional in nature. The support could be drawn from the study centre and Regional Centre functionaries and Academic Counselors who have adequate knowledge about the subject matter and are qualified teachers having experience of teaching at the appropriate levels in the conventional university education set up.

Significance of the study

Self-instructional Learning Materials (SIMS) 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. The size of the materials and the content are such that materials can be easily carried by the learner and tries to simulate the class room setting. 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. Self check exercises help the learner to know what he has learnt and to recapitulate what he has studied and learnt.

Counseling sessions. These are organized at the study centres with the intent of providing the human face to the learner. These are coordinated by academic counselors who are experienced and qualified teachers drawn from the conventional system of education and those who have been teaching the subject in reputed institutions. The number of counseling sessions is predetermined.

The assignment component is very important and is a very good teaching tool. This is because it is expected that the evaluator will offer valuable feedback and constructive positive tutor comments to the learner. These have great pedagogic value as it helps the learner to know what his shortcomings are and gives him inputs for improvement. The assignment is a compulsory component and also helps the learner to prepare for the final exam. It is a formative evaluation and part of the Continuous Evaluation Scheme.

Interactive Radio Counseling. This is an innovative tool which can be effectively used to reach out to learners who are spread out. The learners can note the Radio Counseling schedule and set aside that time for listening in and participating through the telephone lines. This mode is being used for learners who are in prison by the newly established Regional Centre in Nagpur. The prisoners are brought to a classroom within the prison and the supervisor asks questions and seeks clarifications on behalf of the learners in prison. Since anyone who tunes in to the radio channel can listen, this is also a very good method of creating general awareness among the population at large.

These are prepared as supplementary material and are available at the study centres. Learners who may be interested can also purchase them from the IGNOU headquarters at a reasonable price. Thus a multi media approach to learning is available to learners, improving the learning process and making it interesting and enjoyable.

Television broadcasts related to topics of general interest but which are course based are also available at fixed time on the National Doordarshan channel. Besides this, 24 hour TV channels are now available which broadcast various

programmes having educational and information value for various target groups like students from technical backgrounds, neo-literate groups, school students etc.

Teleconferencing including one-way video and two-way audio teleconference system via satellite mode. This system is available at all the Regional Centres and some study centres. Learners can visit the receiving centres and interact with the experts who are based in the studio at the Headquarters. These sessions are found to be very much useful in professional programmes like post B.Sc (Nursing), Post Graduate Diploma in Higher Education and other Medical programmes where the learners across the country get an opportunity to learn from experts who would otherwise be inaccessible to them at far off places.

Guidebooks including Practical Manuals and Project Guides. Learners in several programmes having a project component are given the specially prepared practical manuals and project guides which help them actually do and complete their projects. Supervisors are available at the study centres and they supervise and guide the learners in their practical activities.

In all programmes having a practical bias, practical sessions are well structured and offered to the learners. The number of sessions and the activities which are expected to be performed by learners during these sessions are well spelt out, leaving little scope for ambiguity but yet allowing for individual variations. For instance, in the Post Graduate Diploma Programme in Maternal and Child Health or in Geriatric Medicine, the learners visit the Programme Study Centres which are Medical College Departments about three or four times a year for stretches of seven to ten days each.

Conclusion

The skills which they are expected to learn and develop are demonstrated to them in the hospitals. Similarly learners also attend practical sessions in Computer Science, Education, Nursing and Engineering and many other programmes. Hence although these are distance learners, they are given a practical exposure, the quality of which is comparable to the regular full time conventional programmes.

In the skill development centres or their own work places or for school based activities and self activities in case of Nursing students, the learners practice what they have been taught and try to become adept at these skills and activities. Here too there will be supervisors or mentors who assist the learners and supervise their work. There is an added advantage that in most programmes having practical content, the learners must have previous knowledge and experience in their own fields.

Counseling sessions help to break the sense of isolation of the learner. During counseling sessions, the learner is able to come in contact with other learners whom he does not meet often. The first induction meeting as a counseling session is an icebreaker, as the learner is made familiar with the study centre set up, library, multimedia facilities, staff and academic counselors. Doubts and queries are answered boosting confidence. Tips are offered on how to study as an independent learner in the distance learning mode.

Counseling sessions although beneficial are not made compulsory. 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 counseling sessions is made compulsory. Attendance at counseling sessions helps the learner to overcome obstacles, both of academic and non-academic nature.

The Academic Counsellor plays a very important role in distance education process. Who can become an academic counselor and what would be the traits of a person who wishes to perform the task of an academic counsellor ? He is a qualified experienced person who is already teaching at the appropriate similar level in the conventional system of education. He is usually is a full time lecturer of the host institution where study centre is located or a person with expertise on the subject and invited from outside the host institution. He must be willing to spare his leisure time on holidays for the distance learner. He must be a committed teacher always ready to help learners. The qualities expected of an academic counselor are warmth, genuineness, acceptance and empathy. Such a person would make an excellent counselor. A person who is doing academic counseling only for the sake of additional money that it brings in will not do justice to the task that he has undertaken leaving his learners the poorer in experience and learning.

There can be various types of counseling including individual counseling according to specific needs for instance by telephone/mobile, via e-mail, through teleconference, interactive radio counseling, and through tutor comments on assignments. The Academic Counsellor is expected to perform an important role of assisting the learner cross barriers and hurdles or obstacles in the path of completion of his academic programme. He is a friendly figure, a guide, a mentor, a tutor and an advisor, who helps the learner navigate through the study material provided. He offers help on how to attempt and work on the assignments and also encourages use of appropriate additional CDs/audio/video cassettes. He evaluates the assignments submitted by learners and provides feedback through constructive critical comments.

Increasing enrolment alone cannot be an indicator of success of an institution. Providing good quality 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. They are less likely to seek help when they find that the system is not responsive.

The human element in learner support is very vital and cannot be overlooked, whatever the scope and speed of technological advances. There exists a very strong bias for human contact, particularly in the Indian context. However explicit written instructions are, it has been noted that the learner usually feels satisfied and comfortable when he receives oral instruction. Learner satisfaction and success rate is far more important for the credibility of the institution. The role of good quality academic counselors fits in here.

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