

Assessment of Academic Counsellors' Feedback on the Curriculum, Syllabi, and Delivery of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Programs: A Study of IGNOU

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Abstract

The present paper attempts to evaluate the feedback from Indira Gandhi National Open University's (IGNOU's) academic counsellors who conduct counselling sessions for various courses on the curriculum and syllabus. We developed this research paper based on the feedback we received from the academic counsellors using a Google form questionnaire. We analysed the academic counsellors' responses on various issues, including content coverage and illustration, conceptual clarity, language, difficulty level, self-check exercises, assignments, and media components in the self-learning material, to arrive at a valuable conclusion. The responses of academic counsellors on various aspects of counselling sessions (theory/practical) and soft copies of self-learning material were also analysed to present an overall view of the curriculum and syllabus of IGNOU courses.

Keywords: *Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), Self-Learning Material (SLM), Open and Distance Learning (ODL), Learner Support Centre (LSC).*

Introduction

The academic counsellors are the backbone of open and distance learning systems. The main functions of academic counsellors are informing, advising, and counselling distance learners. In addition to the aforementioned duties, academic counsellors also participate in continuous and terminal evaluations. Academic counsellors primarily carry out the continuous evaluation by assessing and documenting the marginal and global comments on assignments. The marginal and global comments written by academic counsellors provide an opportunity for learners

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to improve their performance. Term-end examination answer scripts serve as the basis for the terminal evaluation. This allows us to observe that academic counsellors who are engaged in a variety of activities within ODL. The conventional system produces the majority of Indira Gandhi National Open University's (IGNOU's) academic counsellors, who possess minimal understanding of ODL and its methodology. These academic counsellors require rigorous training and orientation on the various aspects of their role and responsibilities in IGNOU. The training and orientation of academic counsellors is required to be a continuous process.

Review of Literature

Self-Learning Material (SLM) is at the core of Open and Distance Learning (ODL), which plays an important role in the teaching and learning process. Face-to-face academic counselling sessions and continuous evaluation through assignments further enhance it. Despite the heavy emphasis on online learning in recent years, print is still an important medium for course delivery in distance education (Fung, 2005). Despite the potential of new information technologies, printed learning materials are still the dominant delivery format. "Embedded Support Devices" (ESDs), such as schemes, illustrations, examples, pre- and post-questions, tasks, and margin texts, enrich printed materials to support the learning process (Martens et al., 1996). Further, research indicates the importance of self-directed learning (SDL) skills in facilitating the achievement of the learning outcome (Song & Hill, 2007).

Face-to-face counselling in a distance education programme plays a major role in connecting learners with the counsellor (teacher) as well as with each other. It serves as a platform for learners to clarify their doubts about their study programme. Studies have identified student concerns about the lack of participation in class discussions and interaction with lecturers (Furlonger & Gencic, 2014; Long & Koehler, 2021). In line with these findings, Furlonger and Gencic (2014) found that 71% of distance education students cited a lack of connection with classmates as a major source of frustration when studying online. We can understand these findings within the framework of Moore (1993) states theory of transactional distance, which outlines the need to overcome differences in 'perception and understandings' caused by geographical distance for successful learning and course satisfaction. Moore (1993) further argues that all education involves some transactional distance issues, and that the significant separation in distance education necessitates stressing key organisational variables such as 'dialogue' and 'structure' to counterbalance the disadvantages of distance education. Additionally, students must master 'autonomy' for the success of DE programmes (Moore, 1993). In distance education and open

learning, tuition and counselling play a crucial role in individualising the mass product, aligning with adult learners' notions of adult status at the micro level and supporting democratic educational practices at the broadest level (Tait, 1988).

The ODL incorporates assignments to facilitate two-way communication between the teacher and the student. Studies by Evans and Saxe (1996) suggested that the time element involved in the communication between teacher and student might be one of the main reasons for loss of interest and, ultimately, dropout (Hanewicz et al., 2017). The majority of the learning process for distance learners was facilitated by assignments that they prepared according to a given schedule. On the other hand, assignments are also a component of the formative assessment process in the assessment of distance learners (Akhter & Ali, 2016).

Methodology of the study

The current study employs a descriptive survey research design, in which a well-structured Google Form questionnaire with closed-ended questions is developed and distributed it to academic counsellors across India. The questionnaire was designed in such a way that it covers questions on the general profile of academic counsellors, content coverage and illustration, conceptual clarity, language, difficulty level, self-check exercises, assignments, media components in the self-learning material, various aspects of counselling sessions and e-learning material, etc. 3,456 academic counsellors received the questionnaire, and 736 of them responded. The responses received from academic counsellors were classified, tabulated, and presented in the form of tables with the help of various analytical tools. We collected the secondary data from various published sources.

Analysis and Interpretation

Basic information about academic counsellors:

The analysis of the profile of academic counsellors provides valuable demographic and professional insights. Analysis of the profile of academic counsellors revealed that a majority 75% belonged to the General category, followed by 17% from the OBC category, 5% from SC, and 3% from ST. This clearly shows that academic counsellors of all categories participated in our research.

Regarding gender, 70% of respondents were male, and 30% were female. The age distribution showed that 34% were between 36–45 years, 29% between 46–55

years, 19% in the 25–35 age group, and 18% were 56 years or older. We also observed that academic counsellors across all age groups (25 years and older) showed interest in responding to our questionnaire. More than eighty (80) per cent of academic counsellors are thirty-six (36) years of age and above, which reflects that academic counsellors at IGNOU are experienced teachers.

In terms of experience, more than half (54%) had over five years of experience, while 19% had 1–3 years, 17% had 3–5 years, and about 10% were newcomers with less than a year of experience. This implies that our research will focus on academic counsellors who have more than five years of experience.

Orientation status indicated that 53% had not received orientation training, while 47% had undergone orientation. These findings highlight the need for consistent training and capacity building among counsellors. The aforementioned analysis reveals that approximately fifty-three (53) per cent of academic counsellors lack orientation, while the remaining forty-seven (47) per cent follows orientation. The academic counsellors in IGNOU are normally drawn from conventional education, and therefore, their orientation is a must.

IGNOU is offering student support services to its learners through a strong network of sixty-seven (67) regional centres and more than three thousand (1800) learner support centres spread all over India.

The questionnaire was sent to academic counsellors of all the regional centres, out of which academic counsellors of thirty-four (34) regional centres spread over all the parts of India responded.

Regional Centre (RC)-wise details of respondents:

Expanding on the distribution of responses, Regional Centre-wise responses indicated that nearly 30% of the counsellors were from the Bhubaneswar Regional Centre. 11% from Delhi-1, 8% each from Kolkata and Khanna, and 6% from Srinagar. Together, these five Regional Centres accounted for around 62% of all responses.

The remaining 38% of responses were distributed across 29 other regional centres, indicating nationwide participation. This wide coverage strengthens the representativeness of the findings and allows recommendations to be applied uniformly across India.

Programme level-wise number of academic counsellors who responded to the questionnaire:

Looking at programme-level engagement, programme-level responses revealed that 29% of academic counsellors were associated with undergraduate programmes and 26% with postgraduate programmes. Around 22% were involved in both UG and PG programmes. Together, this shows that nearly 77% of counsellors were engaged with degree-level programmes. The remaining 23% were linked with certificate, diploma, and PG diploma programmes. This trend reflects IGNOU's greater emphasis on UG and PG programmes and the higher enrolment of counsellors in them.

Different aspects of Self-Learning Material (SLM)

Self-learning material (SLM) plays a vital role in the overall success of learners. Currently, everyone can access a free soft copy of SLM through the E-Gyankosh/IGNOU e-content app. All learners who opt for it receive the hard copy of SLM.

The analysis of the data reveals that more than ninety-three per cent (93%) of academic counsellors strongly agree/agree that content coverage in the SLM is adequate, whereas around six per cent (6%) of academic counsellors are either neutral or disagree/strongly disagree on this issue. This means overall content coverage in SLM is up to the mark.

More than ninety-one per cent (91%) of academic counsellors strongly agree that examples, figures, and diagrams/charts effectively illustrate the content of SLM. Around seven per cent (7%) of academic counsellors are neutral, whereas two per cent (2%) either disagree or strongly disagree on this issue. The response of academic counsellors clearly reflects that SLM is well illustrated for the better understanding of the learners.

Around ninety-two per cent (92%) of academic counsellors either strongly agree or agree that there is conceptual clarity in the content of the course. The remaining eight per cent (8%) of academic counsellors are either neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree on this issue. This further demonstrates the conceptual clarity of the SLM's content.

About eighteen per cent (18%) of academic counsellors strongly agree, fifty-six per cent (56%) agree, nineteen per cent (19%) are neutral, six per cent (6%) disagree,

and one per cent (1%) strongly disagree that the difficulty level in the course is as per the programme level. This needs attention so that the difficulty level in the course can be reduced to a minimum.

Ninety per cent (90%) of academic counsellors strongly agree or agree that the course units' language is easily comprehensible. Around ten per cent (10%) of academic counsellors are either neutral or disagree/strongly disagree on this issue. The learners enrolled in IGNOU programmes are of diverse backgrounds, and a large number of learners from rural backgrounds take admission to its various programmes. In the above circumstances, the language of SLM is very important.

Around ninety-one per cent (91%) of academic counsellors strongly agree/agree that self-check exercises provided in the unit facilitate learning. Only about nine per cent (9%) of academic counsellors are neutral or strongly disagree on this aspect. With the help of self-check exercises, learners can evaluate themselves before the term-end examination, and therefore, these exercises provide a chance for learners to improve their performance.

About nineteen per cent (19%) of academic counsellors strongly agree, forty-nine per cent (49%) agree, twenty per cent (20%) are neutral, eleven per cent (11%) disagree, and one per cent (1%) strongly disagree that learners are keen to use the e-learning material for studying the course. Due to the non-availability of a smartphone, laptop, or computer to many of our learners, they are not in a position to use the e-learning material.

More than sixty-seven (67%) academic counsellors strongly agree or agree that learners express difficulties related to course content whenever they interact with them. Around thirty-three per cent (33%) of academic counsellors are either neutral or disagree/strongly disagree on this issue. It seems that there are many learners not expressing difficulties about the course content. These learners are not very serious about completing their programmes in the minimum duration.

Issues related to counselling sessions

IGNOU typically organises counselling sessions at its learners' support centres. Gyanvani Radio Stations and Gyan Darshan Channel, among others, assist in organising the counselling sessions in person. The university also organises the counselling sessions online.

In IGNOU, theory counselling sessions account for 10% of the total study hours. For eight (08) credit courses, a total of ten (10) counselling sessions of two (02) hours are conducted. About fourteen per cent (14%) of academic counsellors strongly agree, forty-two per cent (42%) agree, twelve per cent (12%) are neutral, twenty three percent (23%) disagree, and eight per cent (8%) strongly disagree that the prescribed number of theory counselling sessions is adequate. In order to enhance the performance of ODL learners, it is imperative that the number of theory counselling sessions be increased. This is due to the fact that they receive the most support during these sessions.

On non-print media components, 63% agreed they were available for counselling, while 37% noted challenges such as lack of technical support or power issues at some centres. Overall, the data suggest strong implementation of counselling sessions but also highlight the need to increase their frequency and strengthen technical support.

More than fifty-four per cent (54%) of academic counsellors strongly agree/ agree that the prescribed number of practical counselling sessions is sufficient. Approximately forty-six per cent (46%) of academic counsellors are either neutral or strongly disagree on this matter. It appears that a significant number of students are in favour of increasing the number of practical counselling sessions for a variety of courses.

Approximately twenty-one per cent (21%) of academic counsellors strongly concur, fifty-two per cent (52%) concur, thirteen per cent (13%) are neutral, twelve per cent (12%) disagree, and two per cent (2%) strongly disagree that students' attendance at counselling sessions is generally satisfactory. It appears that approximately two-thirds of the students are dedicated to their studies and consistently attend counselling sessions. This is a favourable sign for ODL in general and IGNOU in particular.

IGNOU supplements the majority of its courses with non-print e-media components in the form of audio/video. Approximately 63% of academic counsellors highly agree/agree that non-print e-media components in the course are available for counselling. The remaining 37% of academic counsellors are neutral or strongly disagree on this issue. It is possible that some learner support centres are unable to display e-media components during counselling sessions owing to poor technical assistance or power outages. Finally, the majority of academic counsellors provided positive feedback on the IGNOU-organised counselling session.

Response of academic counsellors on the effectiveness of assignments

Assignments in open and distance learning function as an excellent conduit for bi-directional communication between academic counsellors and learners. The academic counsellors provide marginal and tutor remarks on the assessed assignments. Students can enhance their performance through constructive feedback provided on their assessed assignments.

Finally, regarding assignments, assignments were viewed very positively, with more than 90% of academic counsellors agreeing that they serve the dual purpose of teaching-learning and continuous assessment. Only about 10% were neutral or disagreed.

Analysis of the data indicates that over ninety per cent (90%) of academic counsellors strongly agree or agree that the tasks in the course effectively fulfil the dual objectives of teaching and continual assessment. Approximately seven per cent (7%) of academic counsellors are indifferent, whereas three per cent (3%) disagree or strongly disagree regarding the aforementioned element.

The above analysis demonstrates that assignments effectively serve the dual function of facilitating teaching-learning and continuous evaluation, as over ninety per cent (90%) of academic counsellors expressed support for this assertion.

Suggestion of academic counsellors for bringing desired improvement in the system

- a) The self-learning material of all the programmes is required to be available in regional languages as far as possible.
- b) All the study centres are required to be equipped with digital resources.
- c) Most of the academic counsellors have requested a revision of SLM periodically so as to incorporate the latest changes.
- d) The number of academic counselling sessions, both for theory and practical, is required to be increased.
- e) Many academic counsellors had suggested the organisation of online counselling sessions with the help of the best available teacher. By doing this, we can save a lot of money and provide the experience of the best available teacher to a large number of learners.
- f) A mechanism is also required to be developed to take the feedback of the learners at the end of each counselling session.

- g) The self-learning material, both in the form of a hard copy as well as PDF, is required to be made available to the learners before the start of the counselling session.
- h) All the academic counsellors are required to be orientated and re-orientated from time to time.
- i) Assignment questions are required to be a mix of both objective and subjective.
- j) The remuneration of counselling sessions is required to be enhanced to attract the best available teachers.

Conclusion

This research analyses the input of academic counsellors regarding various parts of self-learning materials, counselling sessions, and assignments. Their feedback was utilised to enhance the system, thereby benefiting the learners. The majority of academic counsellors expressed satisfaction with the diverse elements of SLM. They recommended the prompt provision of SLM to the learners in both PDF and hard copy formats.

The academic counsellors commended IGNOU's efforts in organising the counselling sessions. The majority of academic counsellors recommended augmenting the frequency of counselling sessions. They proposed the facilitation of online counselling sessions, enabling academic counselors to assist numerous learners distributed across India.

Many academic counsellors concur that assignments fulfil both educational and evaluative functions. The academic counsellors advised the oversight of feedback provided on assessed work. It assists learners in enhancing their performance in the Term End Examination (TEE).

A significant number of academic advisors advocated for the establishment of robust technology infrastructure at both the Regional Centres and Learner Support Centres (LSCs). They proposed the gradual digitalisation of all learner support activities.

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