



Some Reflections on Learner Support for Distance Learners: Feedback from the Field

Kalpana S GUPTA
IGNOU Regional Centre, PUNE, INDIA
kalpanagupte@ignou.ac.in

ABSTRACT :

Learner support plays very crucial role on ODL system. Interaction with the learners in ODL is in-built through wide variety of means. SLM, counselling, assignment feedback, audio-video lessons, teleconferencing, interactive radio counseling, are some of the means through which learner - counselor interaction with each other is ensured. This paper is an attempt in this direction. Based on the field based feedback study of learners, counselors and study centre functionaries, this paper aims to find out the existing system in the field at the grassroots level and provides some innovative and practical suggestions to improve the operational aspects of the ODL system to bring in more interaction between the learners, counselors and coordinators of the study centre functionaries so that credibility and mutual respect to the teaching – learning process in ODL system is achieved.

Keywords: Learner Support; Counselling; Academic Counsellors; Assignments Handling; Feedback, IGNOU

1. INTRODUCTION

Distance Education has come of age and with the new technological advances, several innovations are being made. Online courses, e-learning and the use of computers, teleconferencing via satellite mode and Edusat have revolutionized the concept of distance education. Yet, these may be out of reach and inaccessible to our learners not only in the interior districts but also in the urban centres.

The Self Instructional Print Study Material and other conventional methods of Learner Contact, namely, Academic Counselling and Assignment Evaluation form the backbone of Distance Learning in India.

Both Counselling and Assignments are pedagogic tools that have been successfully used mainly due to the interactive element in them. Nevertheless, it has been observed that they are not being accorded due importance. In IGNOU, the number of learners present and attending determines the conduct of counselling sessions. If the number of learners at a given study centre falls below ten, regular counselling is suspended and intensive counseling sessions are organized. Consequently, both counsellors and learners gradually tend to lose interest. Assignment Submission is a compulsory component. While submitting the exam form, the learner gives an undertaking stating that he has submitted all the assignments. Many learners submit their assignments

just on or before the last date. Assignment handling at the end of the semester becomes a daunting task for the part-time study centre staff. If an evaluator does not return evaluated assignments on time, the learners lose their right to receive the assignment feedback before the exams and the pedagogic component in the assignment is lost.

An overview of the basic philosophy underlying distance education would be appropriate. Let us just look at what some of the distance education theorists have propounded. Borje Holmberg (1981) advocated “guided didactic conversation”, which may be real or simulated. John Baath’s (1980) emphasis on tutor comments and the two-way postal communication has great pedagogic significance that cannot be overlooked nor ignored. David Sewart (1978), was convinced about the immense significance of tutorial services in UK Open University and proposed a human element in the industrialized form of distance education. The major issues that he addressed were lack of immediate feedback and near total absence of peer group interaction. He contended that human support is vital in distance teaching-learning process and feels that any legitimate expenditure to include human support must not be grudged against.

Thus the Self-Instructional Printed Study Materials with their conversational style; the in-text self check exercises providing an in-built teacher and the tutor marked assignments with provision for feedback form the base of distance education. The Counselling sessions provide the human element and academic support much needed for learners to overcome the difficulties that they may face during the course of their studies.

Many conventional universities and private and deemed universities as well as other reputed institutions are entering the realm of distance education and foreign universities are opening up centres in the country. The increasing competition needs to be viewed as a challenge, making it imperative for all institutions offering programmes through distance mode to maintain a competitive edge by ensuring that the system is truly learner-centric.

The author has attempted to review the existing pattern of Academic Counselling and Assignment Evaluation in IGNOU and to identify the shortcomings with a view to suggest positive improvement in Learner Support. The views and opinions of a cross section of Coordinators, Academic Counsellors and Learners drawn from nine select Regular Study Centres in Maharashtra forms the basis of this exercise. Data generated through structured questionnaires administered to a random sample comprising 127 respondents has been analyzed and presented here.

The Maharashtra Regional Centre of IGNOU is situated in Pune. Maharashtra comprises 9.36% of the landmass covering an area of 307713 sq. km. The Population is 96.88 million comprising 9.4% of the total. The density is 257 per sq. km. Urban population is 42.43% comprising 14.4% of India’s population. The literacy rate is 76.88% in the State.

The State Open University, the YCMOU, offers distance education in the local language, Marathi, as well as in English. . The people of Maharashtra are liberal, secular, and tolerant. There are 35 districts. IGNOU has a presence in 14 districts and offers programmes in English and Hindi medium.

1.1. Nature of Study & Objective:

This paper is based on a cross sectional study of a random stratified sample drawn from Maharashtra with the following objectives:.

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- To ascertain the views and opinions of Coordinators, Academic Counselors and Learners toward Counselling, Assignment Evaluation and Feedback
- To identify the difficulties faced by learners with regard to counselling and assignments.
- To suggest measures to overcome the difficulties and provide better support services to learners with the ultimate aim of reaching out to the disadvantaged.

1.2. Methodology:

Sample: Nine Regular study centres spread across Maharashtra were selected. These have been in operation almost since the inception, with the exception of one centre in a remote and backward location. All these centres can be contacted with ease on e-mail making communication easier and quicker. Selected study centres are:

1. Mumbai Metropolis (Two)
2. Kolhapur (South),
3. Pune (West)
4. Nasik (North West)
5. Jalgaon (North) Aurangabad (Central Marathwada- Relatively Backward),
6. Nagpur (East- Vidarbha) and
7. Chandrapur (Vidarbha).

The Coordinator/Asst. Coordinator and Academic Counsellors and Learners selected randomly from each of these nine study centres were interviewed.

1.3. Sample Size:

- 1) Coordinators/Asst. Coordinators: 12
 - 2) Academic Counsellors: 39
 - 3) Learners: 76
- Total Sample size: 127.

1.4. Tools

- 1) Structured Questionnaires for each category
- 2) Personal interactions with persons belonging to the target groups.

1.5. Data Collection:

Questionnaires were sent as an e-mail attachment to eight study centre coordinators. They were asked to respond to the Questionnaire and were requested to get the questionnaires filled by about 3 to 4 academic counsellors and about 10 learners. The filled in questionnaires were returned by post. Visits to the Pune and Mumbai centres facilitated personal interactions too.

2. FINDINGS:

Two identical questions and were asked to all the three categories of respondents.

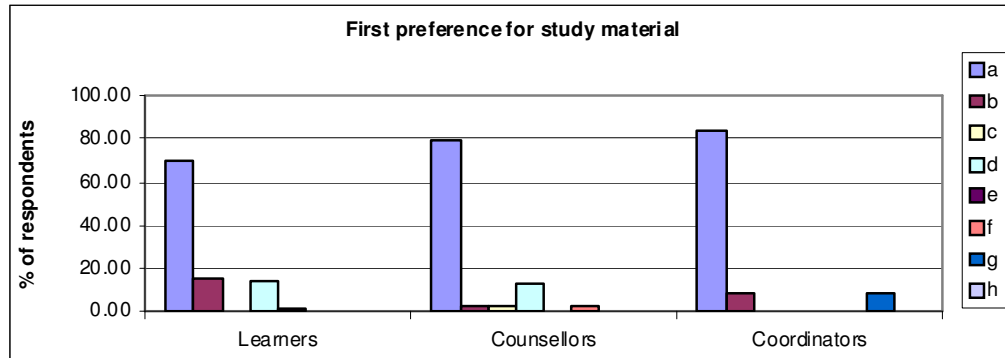
- 1) What according to you is the strength of distance education? List order of preference.

Table:1. First preference options given

| Options | Learners | Counsellors | Coordinators |
|-------------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Print Material | 69.44 | 79.49 | 83.33 |
| Assignments | 15.28 | 2.56 | 8.33 |
| Feedback on assignments | 0.00 | 2.56 | 0.00 |
| Counselling | 13.89 | 12.82 | 0.00 |
| Teleconference | 1.39 | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| Interactive Radio Counselling | 0.00 | 2.56 | 0.00 |
| Other | 0.00 | 0.00 | 8.33 |
| Total | 100.00 | 100.00 | 100.00 |

The table above indicates the first preference options given by the learners, counsellors and coordinators. There is obviously a heavy preference for the self-instructional print material, which enables the learners to learn at their own pace and place. 15% learners give preference to assignments and about 14% learners and 13% counsellors prefer Counselling as the first option as the strength of distance education. The Teleconference and Interactive Radio Counselling do not seem to have gained enough popularity. In other options, one coordinator mentioned flexibility as his first choice.

Figure 1



2) The respondents were given 15 statements and were asked to rate them on a three-point scale whether they fully agree, agree or do not agree with them. The table given below indicates the findings. The options fully agree and agree were combined as it was noted that the results showed significant indications.

The statements were as follows:

- a) Assignments are very important aspect of learning
- b) Feedback on Assignment is very important, particularly for distance learners.
- c) Counselling is very important in Distance learning
- d) Counselling should be made compulsory
- e) Learners are well aware of distance learning methods
- f) New learners must be initiated into distance learning through induction methods

- g) Induction meetings should be in face-to-face mode.
- h) Induction meetings should be in teleconference mode.
- i) Besides Induction meetings by teleconference mode, there should be face-to-face induction meetings too.
- j) The conduct of counselling sessions should not be related to the number of learners present and attending
- k) It may be related to the number of learners enrolled.
- l) Teleconference is very useful means of counseling
- m) Interactive Radio Counselling is a very useful means of Counselling.
- n) Learners are enthusiastic about attending Teleconference
- o) Learners listen to Interactive Radio Counselling Programmes and participate actively.

| | Learners (76) | | | Counsellors (39) | | | Coordinators (12) | | |
|---|---------------|-------|--------------|------------------|-------|--------------|-------------------|-------|--------------|
| | Fully agree | agree | do not agree | Fully agree | agree | do not agree | Fully agree | agree | do not agree |
| a | 67.11 | 31.58 | 1.32 | 69.23 | 28.21 | 2.56 | 83.33 | 16.67 | 0.00 |
| b | 64.00 | 32.00 | 4.00 | 69.23 | 30.77 | 0.00 | 58.33 | 41.67 | 0.00 |
| c | 75.00 | 22.37 | 2.63 | 76.92 | 23.08 | 0.00 | 58.33 | 33.33 | 8.33 |
| d | 44.74 | 22.37 | 32.89 | 41.03 | 33.33 | 25.64 | 33.33 | 58.33 | 8.33 |
| e | 17.57 | 52.70 | 29.73 | 15.38 | 30.77 | 53.85 | 0.00 | 16.67 | 83.33 |
| f | 44.59 | 52.70 | 2.70 | 56.41 | 43.59 | 0.00 | 83.33 | 16.67 | 0.00 |
| g | 61.33 | 36.00 | 2.67 | 58.97 | 30.77 | 10.26 | 83.33 | 8.33 | 8.33 |
| h | 10.96 | 35.62 | 53.42 | 2.56 | 35.90 | 61.54 | 0.00 | 25.00 | 75.00 |
| i | 42.25 | 43.66 | 14.08 | 35.90 | 43.59 | 20.51 | 58.33 | 33.33 | 8.33 |
| j | 53.42 | 42.47 | 4.11 | 66.67 | 23.08 | 10.26 | 75.00 | 16.67 | 8.33 |
| k | 26.76 | 43.66 | 29.58 | 17.95 | 35.90 | 46.15 | 8.33 | 41.67 | 41.67 |
| l | 12.68 | 61.97 | 25.35 | 7.69 | | 25.64 | 8.33 | 66.67 | 25.00 |
| m | 11.43 | 61.43 | 27.14 | 2.56 | 71.79 | 25.64 | 0.00 | 66.67 | 25.00 |
| n | 5.80 | 59.42 | 34.78 | 10.26 | 25.64 | 64.10 | 0.00 | 16.67 | 75.00 |
| o | 7.25 | 53.62 | 39.13 | 2.56 | 23.08 | 74.36 | 8.33 | 25.00 | 58.33 |

Table: 3.

| | Learners | Counsellors | Coordinators |
|---|----------|-------------|--------------|
| A | 98.68 | 97.44 | 100 |
| B | 96 | 100 | 100 |
| C | 97.37 | 100 | 91.67 |
| D | 67.11 | 74.36 | 91.67 |
| E | 70.27 | 46.15 | 16.67 |
| F | 97.3 | 100 | 100 |
| G | 97.33 | 89.74 | 91.67 |
| H | 46.58 | 38.46 | 25 |
| I | 85.92 | 79.49 | 91.67 |
| J | 95.89 | 89.74 | 91.67 |
| K | 70.42 | 53.85 | 50 |
| L | 74.65 | 74.36 | 75 |
| M | 72.86 | 74.36 | 66.67 |
| N | 65.22 | 35.9 | 16.67 |
| O | 60.87 | 25.64 | 33.33 |

Figures in Italics (blue) indicate statistically significant results

f learners vs counsellors

0.119532595 ns significant

f learners vs coordinators

0.01989963 atp<0.05

f counsellors vs coordinators

0.410961031

There is no point of dissension on the importance of assignments, feedback on their evaluation and counselling sessions among all the three categories. Coordinators tend to agree that counselling should be made compulsory whereas the learners do not agree. In addition, learners express frustration as counselling is not held whenever a counsellor does not turn up or regular counselling is suspended when the number of learners is less than required.

Learners feel that they are well aware of distance learning methods, whereas the coordinators interestingly do not agree. Is it that the learners are blissful in ignorance and like the fools are full of confidence and the coordinators like the wise one are too full of doubt?

However all categories agree that new learners must be initiated into distance learning methods and that this is better done by a face-to-face induction meet rather than a teleconference.

All the categories agree that the number of learners present and attending should not be the determining factor for the conduct of counselling sessions. 70%

of the learners feel that the conduct of counselling sessions may be related to the number of learners enrolled rather than those present and attending.

Regarding Teleconference and Interactive Radio Counselling, about 75% agree that it is a very useful means of counselling but significantly, learners feel they are enthusiastic about these modes, whereas the coordinators feel otherwise. There is a greater need to disseminate information pertaining to the schedules widely and much in advance. It is necessary to give adequate thought to the mode of communication so that it effectively reaches the learners. Only then will the learners be able to take advantage and derive proper benefit from these programmes.

2.1. Feedback - Learner:

Presented graphically below are the findings obtained from the respondents, which are self-explanatory.

Some open-ended questions were asked to enquire more deeply into the problems faced by the target groups. The learners have stated that they did not attend counselling because “they were not informed sufficiently in advance about the schedules due to which they found it difficult match their service timings and duties; due to family responsibilities or other important commitments.”

The reasons given for not taking back assignments were, “it is a tedious task to search through piles of assignments; not aware that it can be taken back; study centre staff are not cordial and cooperative; not useful for further preparation as they are mostly available after the exams”. Other difficulties mentioned pertained to institutional problems like “late receipt or non-receipt of material; change of exam centre to another town by the University; non-reflection of assignment awards; and it takes very long to set things right.” Suggestions made included “we should know

contact details of counsellors and other fellow learners; give good remuneration to attract good counsellors; regularity in counselling; feedback to be given before exams; model answers may be provided after the exams; CDs regarding lectures be provided; we may be contacted on e-mail; telephone.”

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2.2. Feedback – Counsellors:

Counsellors have suggested that “assignments are given in a single lot; change rules to hand over assignments directly to counselors; ensure that learners get material on time; review block literature every 5 years; design assignments creatively to make the learner think rather than merely copy from the study material.” They feel that “number of counselling sessions be increased; need for orientation programmes and interaction between the academics and the counsellors; orientation programmes were appreciated; confidential unbiased appraisal from learners may be used to renew counsellors; informal monitoring; compulsory initial counselling. Those who attend counselling, although few in

number, are enthused and submit qualitatively better assignments. Counselling need not be restricted to stipulated time and place. Off session meetings are good. Introduction of flexi-timing/location.”

2.3. Feedback- Coordinators:

Coordinators expressed “difficulties in organizing counselling stating that learners are not punctual; limited infrastructure; eleventh hour changes by counsellor; range of IGNOU programmes is wide and varied making it difficult to identify and appoint suitable counsellors; qualified persons are not attracted or not willing to spare time on Sundays. Regarding assignments, they state that learners submit assignments just on or before last dates; Counsellors return the evaluated assignments late; there is pressure on counsellors wherever there are less number of counselors; assignment handling work is time consuming; learners do not come to take back the assignments and hence they are often returned at the time of exams; increase in postal expenditure.” They suggest that “a couple of full time staff may be hired if study centre is to provide Teleconference facilities; library facilities etc. Study centre may be provided with computer, printer, and an Internet connection. There should be more flexibility in overall functioning.”

3. SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS:

Based upon the opinions have been gathered from the learners and counsellors, some suggestions have been drawn up

3.1. Counselling:

- Allot a group of learners to each academic counsellor, limited to a maximum number of sixty

learners. The learner will be sure of receiving assistance whenever he faces any academic or other difficulty.

- Encourage to have multiple channel communication between learners and counsellor through telephone, mobile, e-mail and letters. Encourage the formation of informal study groups bearing in mind geographic location and convenience of the learners.
- Hold compulsory induction besides the teleconference induction to familiarize learners with distance learning methods, and introduce them to study centre staff and counsellors. Effective induction meetings help the learners to understand their role and responsibility as a distance learner better.
- Arrange sessions for submission of assignments directly to the Counsellor. Another session may be organized to return assignments and discuss learner performance. Flexi-time and flexi-location sessions should be encouraged to suit the mutual convenience of learners and the counsellor.
- Pay the counsellor a lump sum amount on a per learner basis at the end of the year, instead of payment on the basis of number of counseling sessions held. This will reduce the work of maintaining student attendance for payment purposes and also eliminate the possibility of fraudulent financial claims.

3.2. Appointment of Counsellors:

- Maintain a database of Counsellors for each course at the Study Centre. The availability of alternative counsellor in case of any difficulty will be ensured.
- Issue local advertisements city wise to attract qualified persons interested in undertaking counselling and assignment evaluation, and willing to share their expertise and time with the learners. There may be many qualified persons with expertise who are interested in quality teaching. Enlisting their support would be a boon to the

- learners. The base will be broadened and will not be restricted only to the host institution college.

Identify a suitable panel and forward bio-data for scrutiny and approval to the appropriate authority.

3.3. Assignment Handling, Evaluation - Feedback:

- Reduce paper work and assignment handling at study centre level by following a system of permitting submission of assignments directly to the Counsellors. The evaluated assignments may be returned to the learners within a time frame of 3 weeks. The Counsellor would maintain record of all assignments submitted to him/her personally by the learners. Assignments sent by post should be handed over to the Counsellor by the study centre staff.
- Those assignments that are not collected by the learners may be given to the study centre for dispatch by post or to be collected personally by learners later.
- The Counsellor must retain the award lists and submit them to the study centre at the end of the semester for further processing.

These are some practical suggestions that may help to serve the learners better. With increased interaction between Learners and Counsellor and maybe staff at the study centre, they will be encouraged and persuaded to avail of alternate modes of counselling like Teleconference and Interactive Radio Counselling.

Quoting Eileen Thompson in a study on Distance education drop-out: What can we do? "The results of this study confirm the views of the experienced staff in External Studies that the feeling of isolation for many distance education students is compounded when they are not informed who the tutor is for the unit that semester. The inclusion of an

introductory letter from the tutor with the package of learning materials can be a reassurance for students.

Communication with the tutor is often made more difficult for external students due to their geographical location. Communication between the students in this study and the tutors may also have been hindered as many of them were classroom teachers and therefore not readily able to be contacted by telephone during school hours. Both these factors again support the use of voicemail facilities and probably, in the future, enhance the possible use of e-mail."

Similar conditions seem to prevail in the Indian situation. Maybe we need to rethink how to bring about a sense of belonging in our learners so that they are encouraged to perform better. The use of e-mail and telephone can be used extensively to deal with individual learner queries and administrative problems and it must be encouraged in every possible way. Sir John S Daniel (1996) had set six priorities that Mega Universities must address for future development, one of which is "to introduce or enhance tutorial support to students and foster student-to-student interaction". Our satisfied learners would be our brand ambassadors.

4. IMPLICATIONS:

Deeper research studies can be commissioned to probe and verify the defects in Academic Counselling and Assignment Evaluation in the present system. Suggestions could be tried out on a smaller scale to ascertain whether they are workable and to what extent. Problems and difficulties could be ironed out before attempting to implement any change on a nation wide basis.

Close monitoring of the suggested system would be useful to understand the feasibility as well as the difficulties. If it runs well, replication in other areas could be considered. Inbuilt checks and feedback mechanism must be considered, the purpose of which should be for better understanding and interaction and not in

the form of any faultfinding inspection.

Any improvement in quality of Academic Support would have long reaching implications in not only bringing out Graduates of high standard, but also reducing dropout rate, thereby leading to greater credibility. Action Research Projects could be launched by closely monitoring the learners in a defined area in order to understand the cause and effect mechanism and provide Better Learner Support Service for Development in Education.

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Dr. Kalpana S Gupte, holds a Ph. D in Political Science from Pune University. She has taught Political Science to Undergraduate students as well as Postgraduate students in Urban and Rural colleges in Maharashtra. She worked as an Associate Coordinator in the State Resource Centre for Non-Formal and Adult Education for Maharashtra, Indian Institute of Education, Pune. During this stint, she has designed and implemented a programme in Life Skills for Adolescent out of school girls and neo-literates. She has also completed two online courses from WIPO in IPR. She is presently working as Deputy Director in the IGNOU Regional Centre, Pune. She can be contacted through e.mail:kalpanagupte@ignou.ac.in

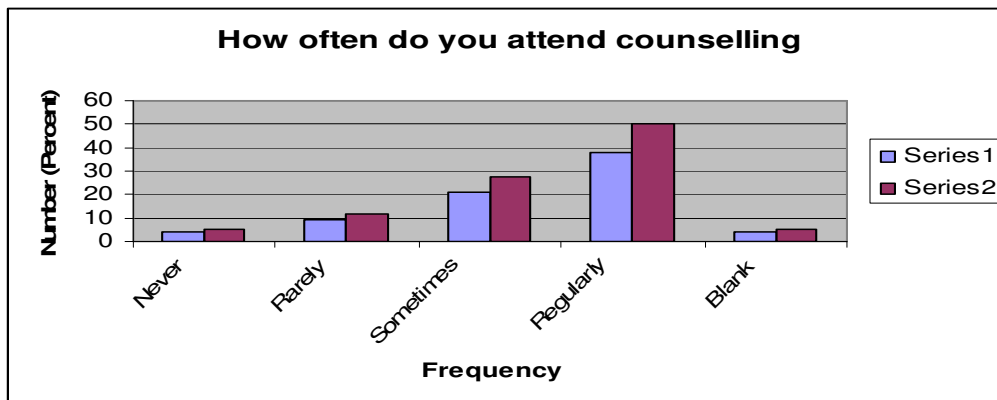


Figure. 2

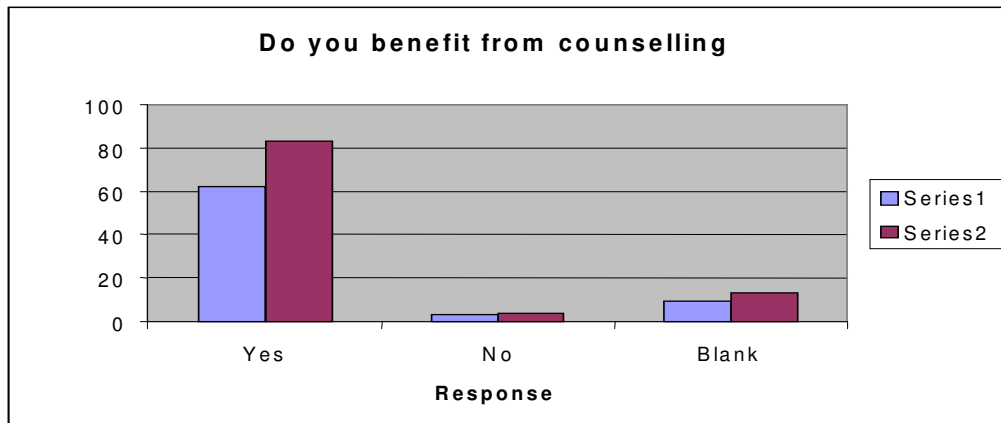


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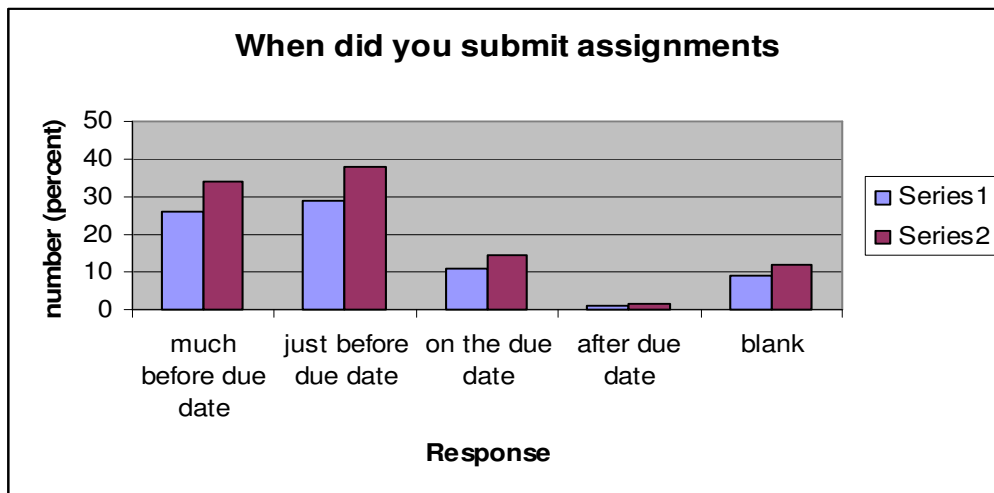


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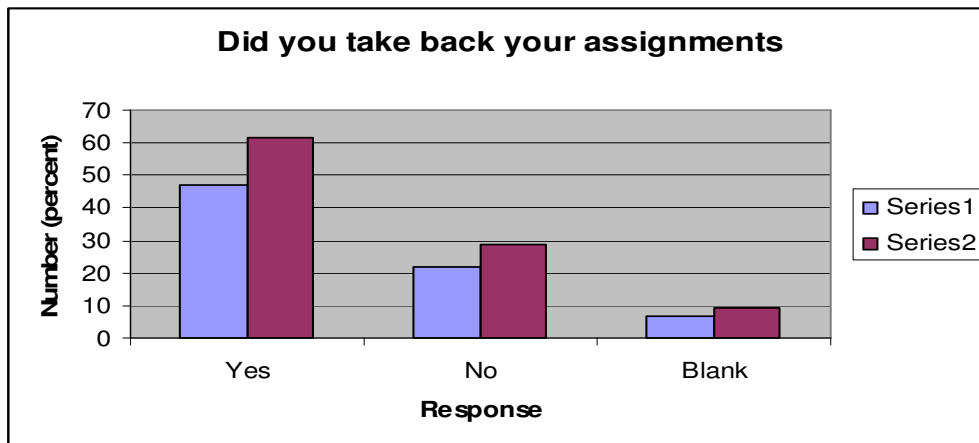


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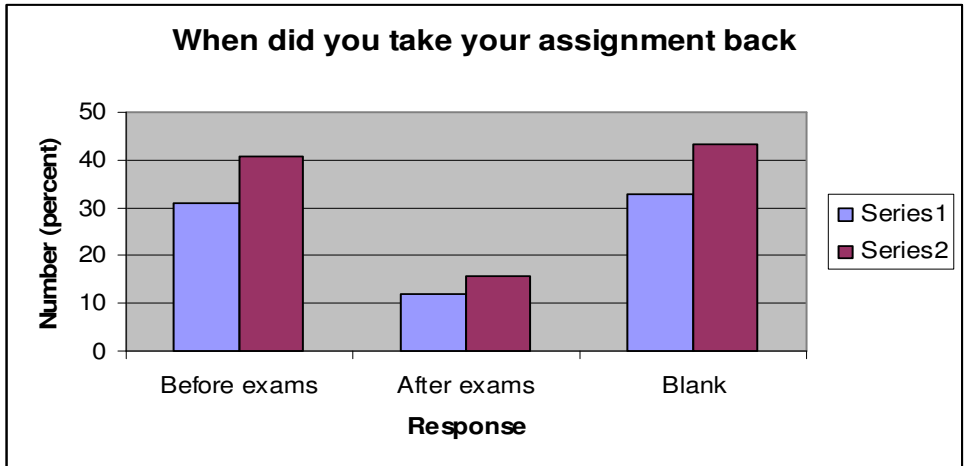


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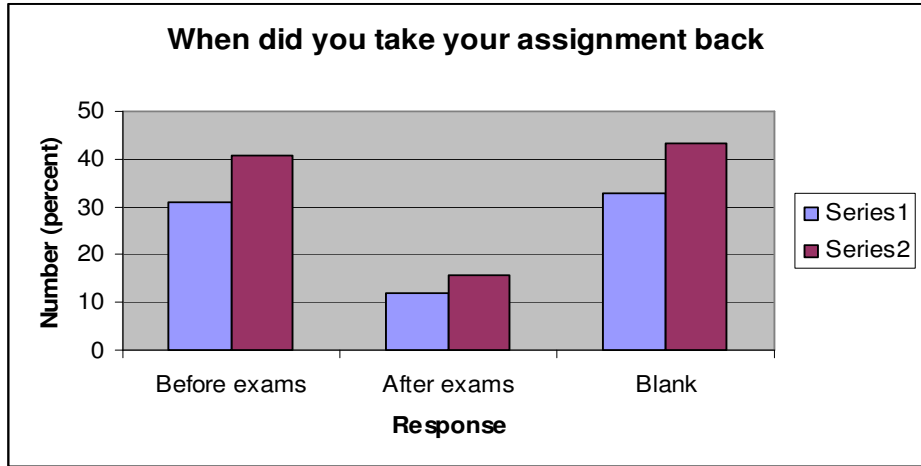


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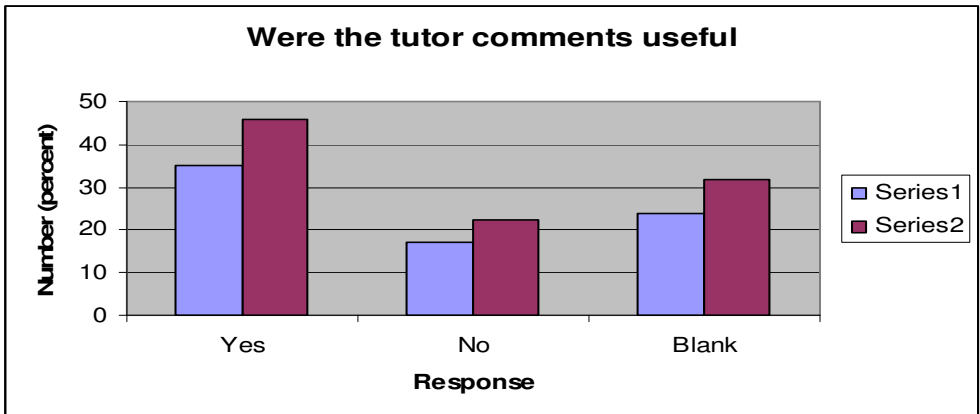


Figure. 8

Counsellor Responses:

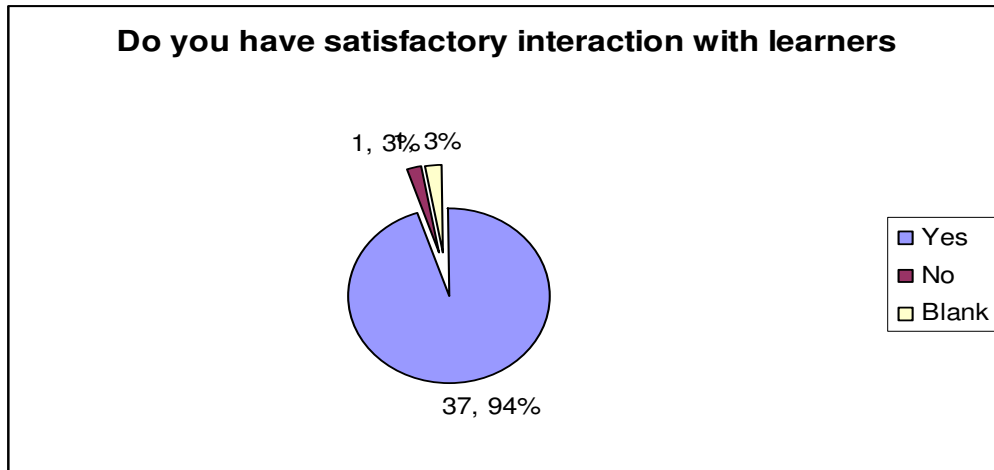


Figure. 9

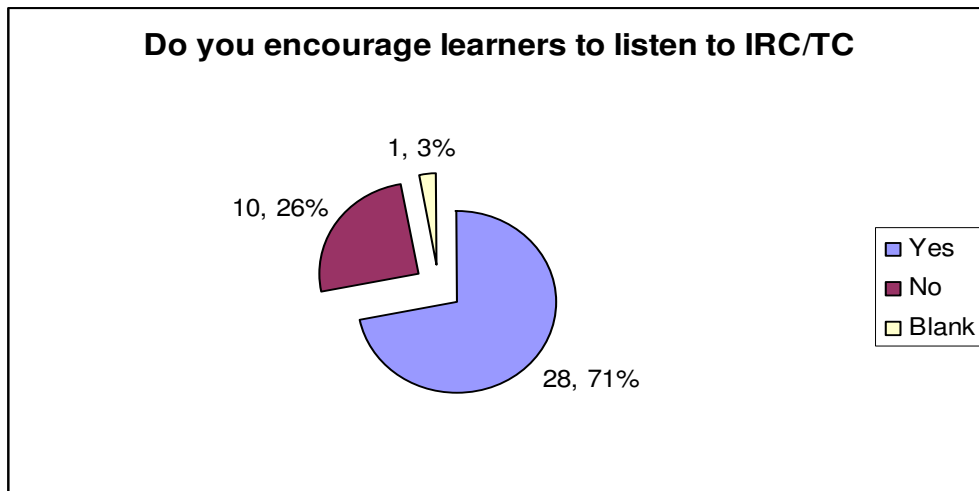


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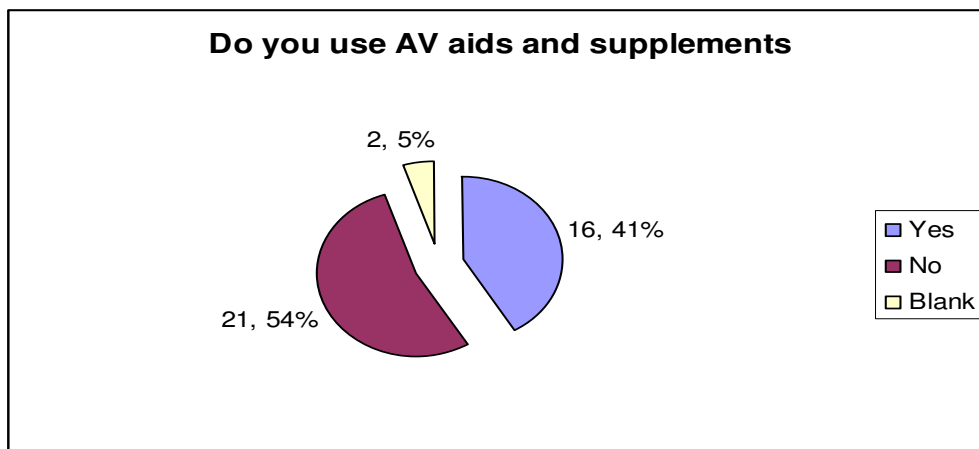


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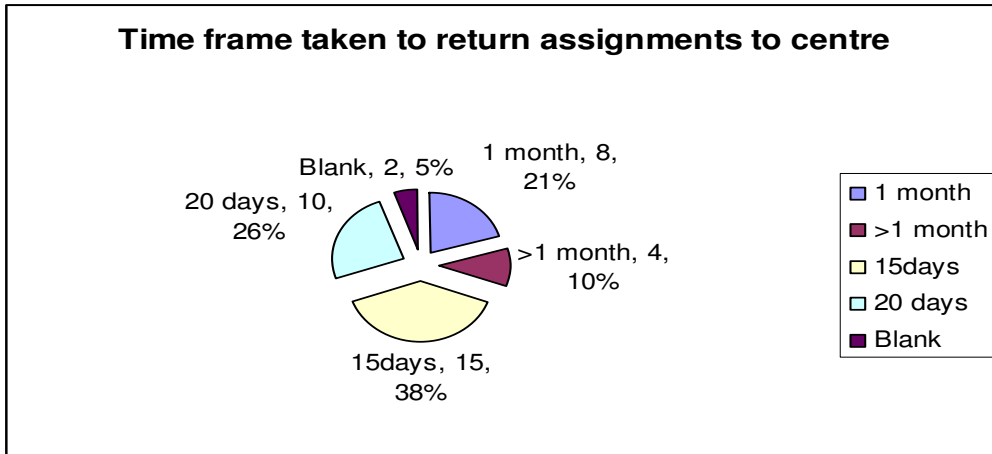


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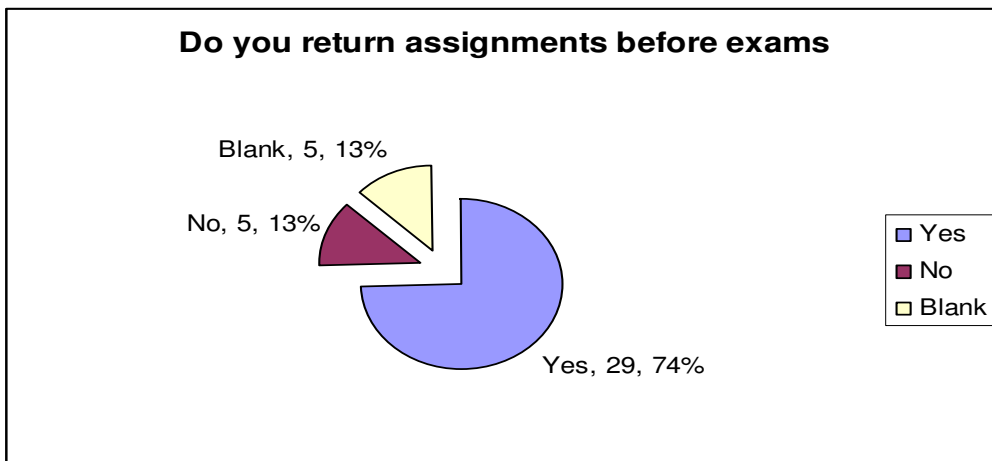


Figure. 13

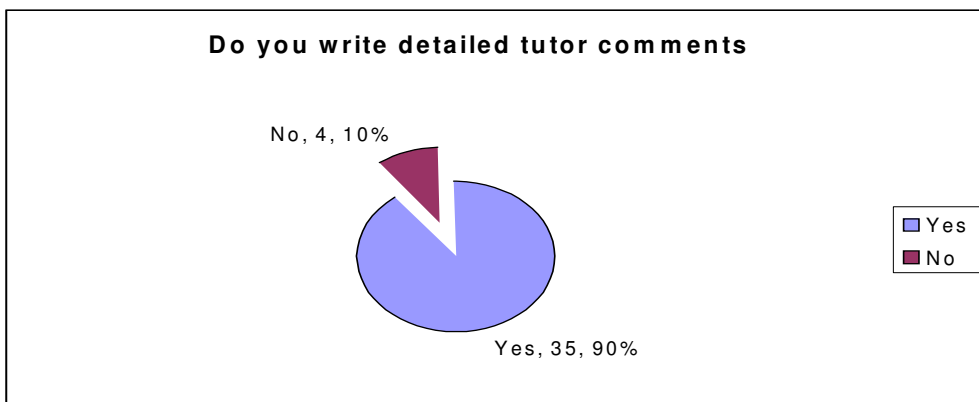


Figure. 14