Quality Issues for Counselling
in Open and Distance Learning in India

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ABSTRACT :

This article is mainly intended to identify various aspects concerned with improving the Quality of Counselling in Open and Distance Learning. The characteristics of distance education, the distance learner, the various mechanisms of learner support, the important role of the academic counselor in maintaining quality in distance learning are discussed and some measures are suggested based on TQM for maintaining the quality of counselling in distance learning with particular reference to IGNOU. The authors have a wide experience in dealing with practical issues involved in distance education at the grassroots level by virtue of their work related experiences in the Regional Centres of IGNOU for over a decade.

1. INTRODUCTION :

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. Each of these characteristics is discussed next.

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(1) Built-in flexibility. 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 counselling 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.

(2) Learner autonomy. 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 counselling session, the discussions can be directed by the learners according to their needs.

(3) Democratization of education. 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.

(4) Use of modern technology in course delivery mechanism. 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.

(5) Absence of peer learning group. Learners rarely congregate together in a classroom situation except for the counselling sessions. Since counselling 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.

(6) 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 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 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.

(7) Heterogeneity of the learners. 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.

2. METHODS :

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 Counsellors 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.

2.1 Learner Support Mechanisms

Learner support mechanisms are built into the system to help the learner cope with learning and to help them sustain their initial motivation. These include (1) self-instructional learning materials, (2) counselling sessions, (3) assignments, (4) interactive radio counselling, (5) various multimedia, (6) radio, (7) television, (8) teleconferencing, (9) satellite, (10) guidebooks, (11) practical sessions, and (12) skill development centres. Each of these is discussed next.

(1) Self-instructional Learning Materials (SIMS). 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. 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.

(2) Counselling sessions. These are organized at the study centres with the intent of providing the human face to the learner. These are coordinated by academic counsellors 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 counselling sessions is predetermined.

(3) Assignments. 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.

(4) Interactive Radio Counselling. 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 Counselling 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.

(5) Various Multimedia such as Audio or

Video Cassettes and Compact Discs. 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.

(6) Radio Broadcasts. Fixed time radio broadcasts are available on the National All India Radio Channels. These are aired and available to the public.

(7) Television Broadcasts. 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.

(8) 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.

(9) Satellite. The two-way video Edusat Channel is made use of in several places like Jabalpur etc. under certain special schemes.

(10) 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.

(11) Practical Sessions. 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. 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.

(12) Skill Development Centres. 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.

3. RESULTS :

Student counselling has prime importance in distance education. Counselling adds the much needed human element to distance learning. The characteristics of the distance

learner have been explained above and 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, multi-media facilities, staff and academic counsellors. Doubts and queries are answered boosting confidence. Tips are offered on how to study as an independent learner in the distance learning mode.

Counselling 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 counselling sessions is made compulsory.

Attendance at counselling 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 counselling 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. Moreover

counselling need not only take place in a face-to-face setting in a group in a classroom. There can be various types of counselling including individual counselling according to specific needs for instance by telephone/mobile, via e-mail, through teleconference, interactive radio counselling, 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.

Despite all the efforts to assist the learner and offer learner support in several ways, there are many drawbacks and limitations which have been noticed. These include the following ;

- 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
- Counsellors expect a lot from the learners and do not take into consideration their heterogeneous backgrounds
- They easily revert to conventional teaching and complain of insufficient time

- 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
- This acts as a dampener on the motivation level of both the learner and the counsellor who feel disappointed and as if their time has been wasted. 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.
- Academic Counsellors have little interaction with other fellow counsellors and the Faculty of the School.

4. CONCLUSION :

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 counsellors fits in here.

This brings us to an important question about quality. What is Quality? How is it defined ? Quality is difficult to define. It is an abstract term. The dictionary meaning of the term is capacity, ability or skill in some respect when we speak of persons and in the case of things; it is attribute, property or special feature. So, quality is a determinant of the grade or degree of excellence and can mean many things for many people. Quality can mean ;
- a continuous improvement process.
- conformance to requirements'
- developing capabilities
- better performance
- the ability to think and rationalize
- the ability to face new challenges
- continuous skill enhancement.
- doing things on time

Bearing in mind the above, we try to give some suggestions to overcome limitations and improve quality of counselling ;
- Issue local advertisements to attract the best talent in the town. Provide attractive and timely remuneration.
- Maintain a database of counsellors, course-wise for every course at each study centre.
- Hold regular orientation programmes to ensure role clarity and facilitate meaningful interaction and feedback between faculty at the Schools in the Headquarters and the academic staff at the Regional Centres and the counsellors at various study centres in a given region. This could be done effectively through teleconference and face-to-face media.
- Provide adequate advance information about counselling schedules to the learners and adherence to the schedules. Provide for alternative arrangement in case of unforeseen departure from schedule.
- Encourage multi-lateral communication and contact between counsellor and learners by telephone, e-mail, letters etc. for easy access, when needed. Introduce

off session meetings, flexi-time, flexi-location counselling.

- Devise informal systems of monitoring. Make use of confidential unbiased appraisal from learners to renew counsellors. Review and renew all appointments of counsellors, systematically and regularly to weed out unsuitable persons and allow for accommodating new prospective counsellors.

Quality Management can be of two types as a good quality management system and as a Total Quality Management approach.

In the first, it will be necessary to identify the process and then set out how this will be done. The number of Counselling sessions per 4 or 8 credit course is determined, or the number of counselling sessions for each block of study material. Then a monitoring system is established to collect details of how many sessions are held, the number of learners present, percentage of learners present calculated by a given mathematical formula etc. This will throw up numerical data, but will not really tell us about the quality of the counselling, whether it was effective or not, whether it helped and facilitated the learner to perform better. The numbers can also be easily fudged to indicate good performance while hiding the flaws and inadequacies. In such a situation, one may ask whether it is necessary to monitor at all? In a system as widespread and large as IGNOU, monitoring becomes a very difficult task and if it is not done well, it becomes meaningless.

In the second, the Total Quality Management approach may suit distance-learning institutions better. In Total Quality Management, the emphasis is not only on codifying good practices, but also on continuous quality improvement, which means a systematic and continuous activity to improve all processes and systems in the organization to achieve an optimal level of performance. Lesser number of dropouts and greater retention rates must be strived towards. We need to better our own performance and keep pace with the changing circumstances and situations. For this, it is necessary first to define our quality

goals clearly and communicate these to all the personnel involved in learner support services, the regional centre staff, as well as the remotely situated study centre staff and the academic counsellors who are involved only part-time. This is no doubt a difficult proposition. It is important that all need to show total commitment to quality. It becomes imperative that the management style becomes more participative and also the learner feedback must be taken into consideration. Each satisfied learner is important. Quality circles can be formed. Benchmarking becomes necessary to codify the existing standards in Academic Counselling, and in Student Support Services.

There are the four pillars of TQM can be applied to Counselling, which are (1) building synergistic relations, (2) continuous improvement and self evaluation, (3) the system of ongoing process, and (4) leadership. Each of these is discussed next.

(1) Building Synergistic Relations. Teamwork and collaboration between the learner and the academic counsellor is essential. Pooling the talent and expertise of the learners and the counsellors enhances the performance and learning of the students. The percentage of attendance is immaterial here and meaningful interaction can take place even on a one to one basis or in a small group. For effective communication, large groups of learners can be split into informal voluntary study circles. The product of their successful work together is the development of the learners' capabilities, interests, and character.

(2) Continuous Improvement and Self Evaluation. Total dedication to continuous improvement, personally and collectively, is the hallmark of Quality Counselling. The University must work collaboratively with the learners and the counsellors. Compliance, command, control and monitoring reports are outdated and should be things of the past. Today it is in our best interest to encourage everyone's potential by

dedicating ourselves to the continual improvement of our own abilities and those of the people with whom we work. There should be a free exchange of ideas and experiences drawn from different regions. Total Quality is, essentially, a win-win approach that works to everyone's ultimate advantage. TQM emphasizes self-evaluation as part of a continuous improvement process. This principle focuses on learners' strengths, individual learning styles, and different types of intelligences.

(3) System of Ongoing Process. The third principle is the recognition of the organization as a system and the work done within the organization is an ongoing process. The primary implication of this principle is that individual learners, counselors, study centre functionaries, and officers and staff at the Regional Centres and various divisions at the Headquarters are less to blame for flaws and failures than the system in which they work. Quality means working on the system, which must be examined to identify and eliminate the flawed processes that allow its participants to fail. Regular orientation and training programmes and follow up feedback mechanism are necessary if it is expected that the academic counsellors understand and perform the roles expected of them to full satisfaction. Likewise, induction of learners into the distance learning process can prove to be very useful and serious attention must be paid to this aspect. Since systems are made up of processes, the improvements made in the quality of these processes largely determine the quality of the resulting product. In the new paradigm of learning, continual improvement of learning processes based on learning outcomes replaces the outdated "teach and test" examination mode. Despite the final evaluation system, check lists and monitoring proforma can be developed and designed by the Schools, the Regional Centres and the Regional Services Division with a view to seeking proper feedback from the students, the analysis of which would prove to be useful for improvement in the system.

(4) Leadership. The success of TQM is the responsibility of top management. The University must establish the context in which learners can achieve their full potential through the continuous improvement that results from counsellors and learners working together. Availability of all academic resources at the study centres and access to electronic media of communication is imperative. Learners are in need of academic and administrative support. The system must be sensitive and responsive to learners' needs and queries. The learners are more likely to drop out when they have problems and the system is not as responsive as they would like it to be. Can there be a shift in the mode of counselling? For courses with less enrolment, can academic support be provided through other means rather than counselling sessions, like telephone, letters, e-mail, mobiles, formation of study circles, Quality circles etc. Can payment be made on a per learner basis, so that the learner is able to receive support whenever he/she needs it and the counsellor is easily approachable?

In order to achieve the above, participatory management among well-trained and educated partners is crucial to improve the quality of counselling, in particular and the distance learning system as a whole. Everyone involved must understand and believe in the principles of Total Quality Management and must be trained appropriately in TQM methods. They need support in finding the time and resources to pursue the goals that are set. Some personnel who are committed to the principles of TQM may be called in as trainers and can facilitate the process of continuous quality improvement. Their vision and skills in leadership, management, interpersonal communication, problem solving and creative cooperation will prove to be important qualities for successful implementation of TQM in the distance-learning scenario.

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