

## COUNSELING AND SUPPORT SERVICES FOR DISTANCE LEARNERS AT ALLAMA IQBAL OPEN UNIVERSITY PAKISTAN

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**ABSTRACT.** *In the system of distance education counselling and support services has great significance. Without proper support services and counseling to the students in their study difficulty distance education system cannot flourish. This paper indicates the growth and concept of counseling and support services provision at Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad. This article would certainly highlight the prose and coins of such services in the environmental situation of Pakistan. The process, procedure and elements of counseling are discussed in this paper.*

**Keywords:** Counseling, Support Services, Distance Learner

**1. Introduction:** Counselling 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. Counselling 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.

**2. The Nature of Distance Education system.** 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. [10] 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.

With a view to impart education and training to the masses at large, Allama Iqbal Open University was established at Islamabad in 1974. According to Vice Chancellor Report, [1] the important aspect of the functioning of this university has been the fact that its system of distance education has proved itself a viable cost effective and highly successful in fighting illiteracy, thus bringing deprived and neglected sections of the society into the main stream of educational activity. In 1984, the Student's Advisory Cell was established at main campus. Later on, it was upgraded as Directorate of Student Affairs. The main job of Directorate of Student Affairs is to support solutions to the educational problems and provide the students advice on how to conduct successful performance in their educational activities. Such responsibilities are exercised by the counsellors because counseling is to show the students that they are being cared for.

“Counselling 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” [6].

The Directorate of Students’ Affairs, which has the duties of counseling, has been functioning in the following sub-division since 1984: (1) Administration (2) Advisory and Counselling Division (3), Overseas Cell and (4) Inquiry/Information Section.

The main activities of counselors as pointed out in Vice-chancellor Annual Report [1] are:

- Providing clear, accurate and unbiased information.
- Helping individuals to evaluate their needs and the available options by offering suggestions based on knowledge and experience.
- Working with individuals in a non-directive way to help them explore and assess their needs and the available options.
- Structuring learning experiences for individuals to gain new skills and knowledge.
- Taking action on behalf of and with the agreement of individuals.
- Trying to find out solutions to the problems of the students.
- Coordination of overseas students from admission to examination.
- Altering organization to functions or problems experienced by students, which require changes in the system.
- To provide financial support to deserving students.

These counselors have been very helpful in solving the problems of the students through coordination with the campus. Hundreds of pending cases of Examinations and Admission have been solved through the assistance of these counselors. The university has semester system; admission is advertised on 1<sup>st</sup> February (spring semester) and on 1<sup>st</sup> August (Autumn semester) every year in the leading newspapers as well as by radio and TV introductory programs. The admission to general nature courses is granted on the basis of pre-requisite qualification in the admission is granted on merit basis. The teaching methodology of Allama Iqbal Open University includes printed materials (books, study guides and allied material), radio and TV broadcasts, course assignments, face to face tutorials at approved study centres and course workshops.

**3. Students Characteristics.** The AIOU’s students are the adults from all over Pakistan including all rural and urban areas who are not able to continue their graduation or high level education due to numerous reasons. Some reasons include family responsibilities and occupation. In this respect, they can be benefited from such learning system.

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.

In the academic year 2012 as mentioned in AIOU Report [1], there were a total of 1312858 students pursuing either of the degree programs offered by distance education approach. About three quarters of the students were either teachers, civil servants or other government officers. There were more females than males. Only about 57 percent (745461) students were female. The male students were 43 percent (567397). The majority of the distance education students (37%) live in the urban areas whereas the rest (63%) were scattered in the rural areas.

**4. Meaning and Concept of Counseling.** Counseling is a personal and dynamic relationship between two individuals (one of whom is older 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." [5]

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. Counselling comes in when emotions are at stake. Counselling 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.

**5. Characteristics of Counseling.** 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.

**6. Elements of Counseling.** The counseling has three elements [2] but Gladding, S.T. increases the elements of counseling to five which include:

- i. Rapport should be established with the counselee.
- ii. Counseling is communication between the counselor and the counselee.
  - a. Tone of voice, facial expression, gestures and postures of both the counselor and counselee play an important role.
- iii. Counselor should have a thorough background of the counseling process.
- iv. Counselee expresses changes in feelings as counseling proceeds and progresses through various stages.
- v. The counseling interview must be structured i.e. properly planned, [3].

**7. Media of Communication for Counseling and Support Services.** 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.

Following types of media may be used in counseling and support services:

- a. Counseling and support services through correspondence.
- b. Counseling and support services through audio-cassette
- c. Counseling and support services through telephone
- d. Face-to-face counseling

**a. 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.

**b. 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.

**c. Counseling and support Services through Telephone.** 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.

**d. Face-to-Face Counseling.** There are primarily three ways of providing face-to-face counseling:

- i. Counseling services located at the headquarters of the distance education institution itself.
- ii. Counseling services provided at resource centers.
- iii. Counseling services provided by itinerant counselors who travel from place to place to assist learners sort out their learning problems and assist them overcome their anxieties, [8].

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].

Counseling of distance learners at the Allama Iqbal Open University has not been adequate. The system has less course coordinators in each department. The academicians can effectively provide counseling facilities that the tutors.



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 possibly never meet." [13] Even the academicians of Allama Iqbal 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 Allama Iqbal 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.

**8. Conclusion.** Open University must respond to a student as soon as possible. A friendly, responsive letter can claim ruffled nerves and soothe 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.

It is pleasant to note that the Allama Iqbal Open University has received its policy for tutor briefing. What still lacks is the inter library loan provision to coordinators and students. Moreover, two days of briefing sessions is too short. It should be increased up to one week. During such sessions tutors should be encouraged to organize tutorial groups for students in their areas.

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