

Appraisal of Counsellor Learner Support Services in Open Distance Learning System

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Abstract

Learning at a distance is similar to classroom learning in many ways, but there are some notable differences. Counsellors of distant learners must achieve the same general aims as those working in traditional settings, because the counsellor is separated from the learners, some of the obstacles take on new forms. For example, in the absence of counsellors, the learner is frequently insecure and concerned about his or her progress in the absence of close feedback and, possibly, fellow learners. The learner becomes more insecure if the course's direction is not effectively structured and it is unclear where he or she stands in terms of completion of his or her programme. The concept of "drop-out" is significantly more widespread in distant education than in traditional education, implying that it is simpler for a learner to withdraw from the somewhat impersonal interaction of a distance course than from a traditional curriculum. In response to such concerns, Open Distance Learning (ODL) counsellors must take a variety of steps to ensure that the course is well-structured, with clear objectives and an efficient use of learners' time. This article investigated the role of counsellors in the delivery of learner support services in the ODL system. This paper also discussed responsibilities of the counsellors in an Open University system in follow-up, monitoring of learners' progress, and feedback mechanisms.

Keywords: Learner support services, Open Distance Learning System, Follow-up, Monitoring, Learners' progress.

Introduction

It is critical to comprehend the concept of learner support services (LSS), including its classification, scope, and characteristics within Open Distance Learning System (ODLS). It is commonly held that distributing print-based lessons to distance learners will guarantee their academic success (Donkor, 2015). A learner in a distance education environment may necessitate supplementary support for them to successfully complete their academic pursuits, due to the physical separation from both their instructor and peers. ODLS consequently gives learner support services top priority. Student support services encompass a vast array of responsibilities, including the provision of learning materials and their distribution to students, coordination of contact programmes, and administration of examinations (Johnson, Gitay, Abdel-Salam, BenSaid, Ismail, Al-Tameemi, Romanowski, Al Fakh, Al Hazaa, 2022). In this particular context, the broader

notions of learner support and distance education intersect. ODLS operates as a facilitator of learning through a variety of communication channels and by providing the student with feedback regarding his or her academic progress. Thus, learner support services are broadly defined as facilitating remote learning and development through the use of diverse media, technologies, materials, techniques, and resources, while considering the requirements and obstacles of students at various stages of study (Sarkhel, 2022). Many in the distance education industry regard print-based course materials, audio-visual lectures, assignments, contact programmes, and examination systems as subcomponents of LSS.

Put differently, the LSS function is considered a concealed operation of every ODLS element of this nature. This methodology fails to distinguish LSS as an independent function of ODLS (Krishnan, 2012). In order to foster the development and progress of distance learners, LSS must be regarded as an independent element of ODLS that is interconnected with other components. In this context, learner support is referred to as "a special type of service organised by an ODLS institution to enable distance learners to make the best use of various learning and evaluation inputs provided through course materials, media and technology, expert guidance, and a continuous and comprehensive evaluation system (Moore, and Greg, 2015). This means that LSS is considered a learner-centric facilitative function of ODLS within this particular framework, which tackles challenges that distance learners encounter during the pre-entry, course, and course completion phases (Harichandan, 2010). The terms 'advising,' 'informing,' 'governing,' 'tutoring,' and 'counselling' may be encountered in the pertinent literature regarding LSS. Distance education "bridges the gap of isolation and injects the touch of teacherhood to the distance learner, it helps in counselling, continuous assessment, and facilitates the learning process" the student employs (Harichandan, 2010). Overall, this definition might assist in elucidating the notion of LSS. The structure established in ODLS for the learning processes of remote learners is imbued with the spirit of LSS: a) LSS enables the student to perceive the instructor's presence in the teaching-learning inputs provided by ODLS. b) By employing an array of methods, LSS promotes human participation in the teaching and learning process. c) LSS promotes feedback mechanisms through the ongoing evaluation of the academic progress of remote learners.

In essence, the appraisal of counsellor's learner support services in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) systems involves evaluating the effectiveness of counselling programmes in

assisting learners. Key aspects, includes assessing accessibility, responsiveness, impact on learners’ academic and personal development.

Components of LSS

Different authors have categorised LSS into numerous forms. Additionally, distinct ODL institutions implement unique iterations of LSS in accordance with their own particular viewpoints. Krishnan (2012) classified LSS as academic, technical, and emotional support. Negi (2003) classified LSS into the following four categories: administrative, counselling, library support, and assignment evaluation. Sathyanaryan (2001) classifies them as information support, guidance support, counselling support, library support, and tutorial support. Harichandan (2010) divides the overarching concept of LSS into six categories: The primary source of assistance is printed study materials: Audio-video Programme, Support through face-to-face interaction with teacher’s during contact programmes, Counselling support, Library support Assignment and feedback to learners. In this paper, the author is limited to learners’ support that has to do with Counselling and Personal Support.

Learners and Learner Support Services

The primary goal of LSS is to facilitate learning by analysing learners' social-psychological backgrounds. Learners from remote regions, learners with special needs, working women, on-the-job learners, and others, for example, require specific support for learning and growth. Their needs, motivation, expectations, and talents determine specific LSS approaches. Students form their own groups to assist one another.

Table1: The Interrelationship between LSS and other Components of ODLS

SI. No.	Components of ODLS	Components influencing LSS	Components influenced by LSS
1	Distance Learner needs and motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Socio-psychological background ▪ Group dynamics ▪ Forming self-help learner groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Guiding learners for selection of courses ▪ Development of learning skills ▪ Developing and sustaining motivation ▪ Shaping study habits
2	Course materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Nature of course materials and learning strategies involved in course work ▪ Learning activities involved in study materials ▪ Further reading 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Guiding how to use course materials ▪ Clarification of concepts by counsellors ▪ Guiding learning experiences integrated with materials

SI. No.	Components of ODLS	Components influencing LSS	Components influenced by LSS
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Post reading activities ▪ Integration of activities like projects, field work, practical etc 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provision of library support
3	Media and Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Facilitate learning as an integral component of instructional system ▪ Additional support for special groups of learners. ▪ ICT based LSS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Experienced Counsellors acting as tutors ▪ Give feedback for development of need based media inputs ▪ Media-based library and laboratory support provided in study centres.
4	Delivery of courses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Information support ▪ Telephone counselling ▪ Broadcast and telecast-based LSS ▪ Interactive LSS through teleconferencing ▪ www networking synchronized and a-synchronized LSS ▪ Mobile learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Distribution of Course materials ▪ Study Centre's role in organization of Audio-Video lesson classes ▪ Provision of CAI and networked based LSS
5	Evaluation Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Nature of Assignments, Projects, Practical, Examination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Assessment of assignments and feedback to learners ▪ Conduct of examinations through study centres ▪ Feedback to learners by experienced teachers involved in assessment of examination answer books.

Source: Sweet, R. (1993). *Students Support Services: Towards More Respective Systems, Perspectives on D.E.* Vancouver: Common wealth of Learning.

Need for Student Support Service

AlnTait (2010) provided a comprehensive account of learner support services. Constructing and overseeing administrative procedures that facilitate the provision of services to learners in ODL, an environment characterised by significant invisibility, is a formidable task. Particularly significant are the distinctions between single-mode and dual-mode institutions, and it is challenging to precisely forecast the technological revolution that will ensue. Non-academic support encompasses the subsequent endeavours: advising (which entails furnishing information, investigating issues, and proposing resolutions); assessment (which entails offering feedback to individuals regarding non-academic aptitudes and skills); action (which involves delivering

practical aid to encourage study); advocacy (which entails advocating for financial resources and composing references); agitation (which advocates for institutional reforms that benefit students); administration (which coordinates student support services) (AlnTait, 2010).

Every academic establishment that provides distance education has a unique system in place to assist students. Sewart (National Knowledge Commission. 2017) identified three distinct types of support systems.). Students are furnished with printed materials as a substantial element in the initial two models. The students to the study centres for assessment resubmit the completed assignments. The second paradigm further incorporates mandatory seminars, workshops, and dissertations. The third category is based on the framework established by the UK Open University, which offers students a variety of communication and support alternatives tailored to their specific needs. These include mediated or face-to-face interactions, as well as a hybrid approach that incorporates regional centres, study centres, or communication networks. The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) has made efforts to provide access to higher education for a substantial proportion of the population and to design innovative programmes to accommodate adult learners who have faced obstacles or been unable to pursue formal education.

E-Counselling Platforms in Open Education

Simpson (2002) defines ODL counselling as a collaborative exchange involving the learner, the supporting institution, and the instructor. Its primary objective is to aid students in resolving personal and academic issues that may be causing disruptions to their academic progress. Further, Simpson (2002) asserts that counselling assistance is crucial in ODL due to the fact that the majority of the time, distance learners study independently. Anxiety, lack of confidence, and ineffective study practices may impede their progress and prevent them from completing the programme. Before enrolling, learners should be provided with information regarding course prerequisites, how to interact with learning materials, managing work pressure, and reviewing their own learning progress, in addition to career guidance and opportunities for further qualifications, according to Morrison, Brand and Cilliers (2006).

Counselling is frequently defined as peer (student) or staff (tutor, mentor or facilitator) assistance concerning personal matters or, more commonly, academic matters (Shukla, 2005). Counselling is the provision of assistance to individuals whose learning is being impeded by personal or academic challenges in order to assist them in overcoming these obstacles. It is

predominantly necessary when individuals require support in surmounting challenges in life with the aim of optimising their capabilities. By addressing personal concerns in a one-on-one setting, counselling can be tailored to the individual. It can also be a social activity in which individuals or groups with similar concerns and interests collaborate to find solutions. Offline or online counselling may be utilised in open education (Ojo, 2013); its purpose is to assist students who are encountering challenges in resolving matters pertaining to time management, family obligations, course registration, and examinations.

E-counselling is a digital method of receiving supportive counselling through various means, including digital games, live webcam sessions over the Internet, telephone, and e-mail (Kolog, 2014). E-counselling is also referred to as computer-based counselling, online counselling, Internet counselling, virtual counselling, and automated therapy. Regardless, e-counselling employs ICT capabilities to assist individuals who are separated in time and space, especially in the context of open education. Its principal instruments consist of web pages on the Internet, including email, video conferencing, and web-based messaging, Twitter, and telephone services.

E-mail: Electronic mail is a fast, convenient, and free platform for e-counselling, reaching remote students within seconds. It allows students to provide information without undue pressure and offers introspective responses. Other email-related means of disseminating information during e-counselling include Gmail, GoogleTalk, Instagram, Skype, and WhatsApp. These platforms provide a flexible and convenient way to communicate and collaborate.

Facebook: E-counselling in open education uses web-based messaging platforms like Facebook and web-based messaging to connect learners and counsellors, regardless of their location. These platforms allow for interactive chats, instant communication, and timely answers to students' questions. Web technologies, such as web-based messaging, encourage peer counselling and can serve as an alternative to face-to-face counselling in open education (Zamani, 2009). This encourages peer counselling where students assist themselves by exploring and resolving personal concerns especially academic work (Kolog, 2014). Web technologies are available on the internet and could be used in open education as an alternative to face-to-face counselling.

Video conferencing: Video conferencing is an e-counselling method that involves people in multiple locations communicating through sound and vision. It provides multiple sensory cues, such as visual appearance and body language, for effective communication. However, it can be compromised by loss of body language, jerky conditions, and reduced pictures, causing interruptions (Suler, 2000; Kolog, 2014).

Instant messaging and chat: Mobile phones have revolutionized text-based communication over the internet, with short message systems (SMS) and instant messaging being key tools. Chats allow virtual group sessions, information sharing, and counselling services. Chats can be private or public, with users invited to join sessions on invitation (Kolog, 2014). Jennings et al (2006) posit that chat or instant messaging can either be private, where a user is invited to join a session or public, where users also join counselling sessions on invitation.

Twitter: Twitter is a free social media platform that enables users to send and receive messages called tweets. It allows non-registered users to read posts, while registered users can post and read others' posts. This tool is useful in e-counselling (Okoroegbe, 2013).

Blogs: Blogs are computer-mediated communication platforms used in open education to facilitate educational counselling, connecting students, fostering support, and sharing information. They simplify information dissemination in group e-counselling sessions, encouraging collaborative work in a dynamic learning environment. Blogs provide links to interesting websites.

The Counselling Functions

The field of counselling has progressed beyond traditional face-to-face interactive sessions, which are time-constrained and multifaceted, due to the exponential or intermittent increase in the number of people seeking information and the integration of technology into education. Counselling entails providing guidance and support to students concerning personal matters that are pertinent to their academic pursuits. The objectives of the counselling support are as follows:

- i. to furnish the learner with concepts that are crucial to his success; to employ information at hand regarding a student in order to resolve his challenges.
- ii. to facilitate an environment of mutual comprehension between counsellors and clients; to aid the client in formulating a strategy to address his difficulties;
- iii. to facilitate the learner's assessment of educational and vocational fields in order to enhance the learner's self-awareness, interests, capabilities, and aptitudes;
- iv. to foster an environment that promotes the cultivation of positive attitudes and exceptional abilities among students, thereby motivating them to strive for success in their pursuits.

Monitoring and Management of Learner Support to Reduce Attrition and Enhance Learning

It is imperative that institutions of higher education offer pre-admission counselling to prospective students during the admissions process in order to aid them in selecting the most suitable academic programme. During the enrolment process, students ought to possess the ability

to articulate their requirements and establish attainable objectives. In order to prevent student attrition, pre-entry assessment is the initial step. The subsequent phase entails coordinating an induction programme to acquaint newcomers with the responsibilities and obligations they will face as distance learners. Additionally, the institutional commitment should be articulated during such programmes. This would aid students in navigating the intellectual and social challenges that may accompany the transition to the new era of remote learning, which they have elected to enter. In addition to promoting the development of learning communities by encouraging shared and collaborative learning, it is imperative to consistently evaluate the progress of students. To this end, the institution should implement specific metrics commonly referred to as "learner monitoring" in contemporary parlance.

The monitoring checklist for learners should comprise the subsequent items:

- Coordinating faculty and student communications with the institution. In addition, guaranteeing that the established schedules are rational and providing students with the option to reschedule if required.
- Formative assessment should be implemented via various means such as assignments, seminars, workshops, logbooks, and workbooks, among others.
- Assessment should occur at regular intervals during the learning process, and written comments should be provided as feedback on assessment within a specified time frame.
- Ideally, assistance centre services ought to be accessible round the clock, every day of the week. The responses ought to be succinct and unambiguous, with a problem-solving methodology.
- Proactive measures may include apprising learners of forthcoming activities and events, the due dates for internal assessment submissions, counselling session attendance requirements, and other relevant information.
- LMSs provide remote learners with a variety of these services and solutions. For instance, by implementing a Learning Management System (LMS) platform, educational services and resources could be made accessible to all students. In addition, the LMS will possess the capability to monitor the progress of the students. By retaining learner activities in memory, the learning manager of the learning management system (LMS) is able to furnish learners with an abundance of educational data (e.g., time spent on each learning unit,

number of attempts, last attempt data, progress level, learner responses, and more) that facilitates effective progress monitoring.

Furthermore, it is imperative for the tertiary institution to establish a mechanism for identifying students who are in critical condition. The attainment of this goal is exclusively possible via ongoing surveillance of the students' advancement (Ukwueze, 2016). In order to address the decline in academic achievement of students, as evidenced by declining grades or scores on formative assessments, the educational institution should provide individualised academic assistance in the form of counsellors. Furthermore, it is imperative that academic establishments establish direct lines of communication with students who are encountering academic setbacks, as evidenced by their lack of engagement in various courses, absences from examinations, and similar behaviours. In order to foster the continued enrolment of economically disadvantaged students, it is recommended that the university sanction financial aid as a form of motivation. Furthermore, it is imperative that academic institutions acknowledge and provide the necessary support to students with disabilities as soon as they are admitted.

Once or twice a year, examinations provide information about students' performance and generally focus on their reading and writing skills. Counsellors can, however, monitor, measure, and provide comments on their students' development in every lesson. In this sense, 'feedback' refers to constructively informing learners of their performance in relation to a certain learning target and guiding them on how to improve or build on this. Counsellors can alter their services to better meet the requirements of everyone in the class by continuously gathering information on their learners and identifying those who are having trouble or are ready for more challenges.

Monitoring and responding to students on a regular basis is necessary to improve their performance, ensuring they comprehend what is expected of them and receive feedback following task completion. By receiving constructive criticism, they are able to improve their performance. Effective facilitators regularly monitor the progress of their students. The majority of facilitators monitor and assess their students' progress in class through listening to and observing their activities. Monitoring the progress of students is of the utmost importance because it empowers them to: attain higher grades; develop greater self-awareness regarding their performance and assume more accountability for their education; improve their learning; and predict their future accomplishments. Students gain the most when they are provided with timely and precise feedback

regarding their advancement. By means of consistent feedback, counsellors will have the capacity to apprise their students of their progress and identify any additional actions that may be required to improve their learning (Ushadevi, 2014). A counsellor may encounter the challenge of supporting students in establishing their own learning objectives, a process commonly referred to as self-monitoring. Particularly those who are experiencing difficulty, students are not acclimated to assuming responsibility for their own education. Conversely, counsellors possess the ability to aid learners in establishing their own objectives or targets for a given task, devising a schedule for their work, establishing due dates, and monitoring their own progress. They will benefit in school and in their future endeavours from cultivating the skill of self-monitoring and exercising the process.

Feedback is information given to a student about how they performed in relation to a stated goal or expected outcome. Direct and honest feedback tells the learner what is functioning well and what needs to be addressed. Feedback that adheres to the principles, whether offered orally or in the learners' workbooks, is more effective. Effective feedback informs the learner on what occurred, provides an assessment of how well the activity or task was completed, and offers suggestions for how to improve their performance. Counsellors should provide feedback to each learner to help them understand what they can and cannot achieve how their work compares to that of others, and how they can grow. It is critical to remember that learners benefit from adequate feedback. Counsellors do not want to hinder learning by giving inaccurate or unclear criticism.

Conclusion

Without effective learning support services particularly in respect of counselling services, the learning process will be a failure; ODL will largely become inoperable, and students will remain unmotivated. Open education is a method of ensuring easy access to education. Its effectiveness is determined by the availability of learner support services. Students benefit the most from excellent learning outcomes in the system if proper counselling services are available during their studies. Counsellors should be able to readily answer these learners' problems by utilizing ICT facilities in counselling such as social media networks.

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