



## Tutor Orientation Courses for improving Student Retention in India

Sutapa BOSE

Indira Gandhi National Open University, India

[sbose@ignou.ac.in](mailto:sbose@ignou.ac.in)

### ABSTRACT :

High enrolment in distance education may be counterbalanced by a high rate of attrition. To enhance retention of distant learners there is a need for an extended support system provided by academic counselors, and the support system gets strengthened when academic counselors are trained intensively for their role. In this paper the focus is on the orientation programmes that have been organized from 2003-2009 for the academic counselors working for the academic programmes of the School of Education at Indira Gandhi National Open University. These programmes were meant for preparing the academic counselors for the twin roles which they are expected to perform – tutoring, and counseling. The study aimed to critically assess the effectiveness of these programmes along three dimensions - academic inputs provided ; methods of imparting instructions ; and duration of the programmes. A longitudinal descriptive case study approach was adopted, and individual programmes were the units of the study. Interpretation of the data collected was done by grounding the observations into a rubric developed with the help of propositions extrapolated from published literature on the dimensions chosen for assessment. It was found that the orientation programmes were inadequate along all the three dimensions and needed to be strengthened, especially for the counseling role. Suggestions have been made for revamping the programmes.

### 1. INTRODUCTION :

Bob Talbert, the popular columnist of USA had once famously said that ‘good teachers are costly, but bad teachers cost more’. This is true for not only the conventional system but also for distance education as in many distance education institutions tutors and/ academic counselors who happen to be spatially closer to distant learners may substitute teachers. Hence, a corollary to this quote could be- not having good academic counselors may prove to be costly to distance education institutions.

It is well known that distance education attracts phenomenally huge number of students but the benefits are counter-balanced by the high rates of attrition (Berge & Huang, 2004 ; Moody, 2004 ;

Biswas & Mythili, 2006). A sound system of academic counseling is required to overcome it. This is because Wedemeyer’s (1971) idea of distance education with independence and autonomy of the learner and self directed learning in no way precludes the role of supportive interventions for learners. The quasi permanent separation of teachers and learners in distance education (Keegan, 1990) is in fact bridged by two way guided didactic communication and dialogues (Bath, 1980 ; Holmberg, 1981). This requires human elements (teacher / tutor / tutor-counselor) as intermediaries between the learning material and the individual student. So the success of the Open University is largely a result of the support and counselling systems (Sewart, 1978).

Interventions in the form of dialogues and human elements who can support learners and their learning is especially required to bridge the transactional distance, which as described by Moore (1993) is the psychological and the communication space between the learner and the teacher. Therefore, distance education institutions employ a variety of learning support systems including the academic services that include tutorial services and study group activities for their learners (Zuhair, 2007). Apart from academic aspects there are other aspects too like administrative and personal, for which sustained support from the institution is required as the needs of distance students may be even more than that of other students' (Lake, 1999).

Distance students have various needs and as suggested by Peter (1992), besides tutorial support, they may have a host of other requirements like orientation to university study that supports goal commitment, provides real and symbolic interaction between academic staff and students, provides informal as well as formal contact for promoting social integration and the like. These diverse needs if ignored may escalate attrition. Therefore, many distance learning institutions including Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) envisages academic counselors as links between students and themselves for addressing these needs. At IGNOU academic counselors are part time workers and carry out both general counseling and tutoring at study centers as these roles are felt to be intertwined. The tutoring role of academic counselors of IGNOU requires tutoring and evaluation of assignments, while the basic responsibilities of the counselor are to guide, inform, help and enable learners to make satisfactory progress in the system (Srivastava, 2000). This stand is further supported by Rekkedal's (1991) finding that the system where the roles of the tutor and counselor are integrated in one person increases the possibilities of meeting the student's needs and this is true whether they concern the subject matter, study organisation, personal or social difficulties, and administrative procedures or the student financial matters.

As academic counselors function as the vital link between students and the institution and provide the much needed support to learners, it is essential that they are equipped with the competencies needed. Going back to Bob Talbert's quote, it can be safely assumed that not having academic counselors capable of performing their functions effectively would cost the institution more in the long run. Hence, the institution has to invest in training academic counselors for preparing academic counselors for their roles. At IGNOU this is done through 'orientation programmes' that are organized by its Staff Training and Research in Distance Education (STRIDE) as well as by the Schools.

In this paper, the strategy adopted for preparing academic counselors for the programmes of the School of Education (SOE) has been critically assessed along three dimensions- academic inputs, methods of imparting instructions and duration. The aim was to evaluate its effectiveness for preparing the participants for the dual role – tutoring and counseling, they are expected to perform.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW :

Gupte (2009) reviewed the existing pattern of academic counseling and assignment evaluation in IGNOU and found inadequacies in these operational aspects. Srivastava (1999) too had pointed out that the present system of orienting academic counselors of IGNOU is fraught with shortcomings which is taking a toll on the competencies of academic counselors and had suggested a prolonged training programme. Similar suggestions for training academic counselors, who happen to be from conventional systems and are part time workers in distance universities and hence may not be having the requisite skills have also been made by Manjulika, et al. (1996), Wikramaratne (2001), and Mishra, (2005).

The need for training being apparent, the subsequent concerns are the academic inputs, the methods of imparting instructions in training, and the duration of the actual training programmes. Inputs are

determined by the competencies to be developed, which in turn is decided by the functions performed by the trainees. The major functions of academic counsellors and the corresponding competencies have been specified by many authors. As stated by Sewart (1978) functions of academic counsellors include maintaining a continuous contact with learners so as to motivate them, help them with their study, personal and social problems and in making educational and vocational choices, facilitating peer to peer interactions and lowering attrition. Similar functions were also identified by other authors. O'Rourke (1993) was of the view that for teaching, tutoring and supporting distant learners, there is a need to understand adult learners, possess knowledge in the subject area and the abilities to teach it, have systemic knowledge with an understanding of distance learning and the administrative systems of one's organizations, acting as a link between students and the organization, dealing with more open ended learning situations, openness to work as a team and to new ideas and approaches, ability to motivate learners and the like. O' Rourke (2003) also listed four core ODL tutoring skills and identified the specific skills that comprised them. The core skills listed were -ability to be supportive, needed for sustaining learners; ability to guide learners to understand the content and its relationship to their learning goals; enabling learners to develop and apply appropriate learning processes effectively; and for administrative purposes, serving as a link between learners and institution. Tait, (2004) was of the view that distance learning tutors need to create an environment for learning as it is a key factor in student retention. Creating a learning environment for distance learners would require abilities that encompass the skills required by Sewart and O' Rourke. Shelley (2009) opined that tutors for distance education differ markedly from their classroom counterparts in terms of the roles they assume, the ways in which they interact with students, and the attributes and expertise required of them. The wide variety of competencies required supports

this opinion. This entails expertise overarching tutoring abilities to include those required for supporting learners administratively and above all morally. It is natural that for developing this kind of expertise intensive training is required.

These abilities required by counselors or tutors of distance education are naturally required by the academic counselors of IGNOU as they perform the dual role of counselors as well as a tutors and carry out activities like initiating learners into distance education system, guiding self learning, encouraging learners to keep contact, guiding learners for using the library at the IGNOU study centers, tutoring by monitoring learner's progress, confirming and reinforcing learning, providing non print interventions, building study skills, helping in solving study related problems, evaluating assignments, preparing them for examination and helping in solving personal problems, motivating learners (Manjulika, et al., 1996; Srivastava, 1999 ; Srivastava, 2000 ; IGNOU, 2001 ; Mishra, 2005). Academic inputs of the training programmes need to be tuned to these requirements.

Regarding the method of imparting instructions in the training programmes and their duration, Srivastava (1999 ; 2000) had suggested that a multi media training toolkit with printed-self-instructional materials, video programmes supplementing the print materials, teleconferencing and group based learning activities be developed. She had also stated that duration of the existing system of training at IGNOU through orientation programmes is of only two or even one day, which fails to provide adequate time for distance education concepts, practical activities and use of audio and video programmes. She suggested duration of one month during which the trainees would learn with the help of the printed materials and videos and then attend a five day extended contact training programme held through teleconferencing.

In between 2003 and 2009, SOE of IGNOU organized orientation programmes for the academic counselors of several newly launched as well as existing programmes of SOE. The adequacy of this

practice had to be studied in the perspective of the functions and the corresponding competencies required of them. This study was therefore undertaken to critically examine the existing practice of orientating academic counselors by SOE. The rationale of the study is that reflection on action, i.e. on activities and practices that have taken place (Schon, 1983) and especially structured reflection on an existing practice that involves exploration of experiences, leading to new understanding (Boud, et al., 1985), is required to strengthen the practice concerned.

### 3. OBJECTIVES :

This study aimed to critically assess the strategy that was adopted for orientating academic counselors of SOE from 2003-2009 along the following dimensions:

1. Academic inputs provided vis a vis the competencies required by academic counselors
2. Methods of imparting instructions
3. Duration of the programmes

### 4. METHODS :

Descriptive case study method was adopted for carrying out this study. A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. Further, a case study is a longitudinal case examination when there is a systematic way of observing the events, collecting data, analyzing information, and reporting the results obtained over a long period of time (Yin, 1984; 2003). As said by Zainal (2007), a descriptive case study may be in a narrative form that describes the data obtained through an in-depth examination of an event. The study becomes evaluative as the researcher adds judgment to the findings. The present study is thus a longitudinal study with description of the cases and their evaluation along the dimensions studied.

Analysis of the data collected has been carried out by categorical aggregation and direct interpretation (Stake, 1995) under the

dimensions along which the study has been undertaken. As per the process outlined by Baxter & Jack (2008), the individual orientation programmes have been considered as units embedded in the larger case, which is the strategy adopted for orientation of academic counselors of SOE programmes and data analysis has been carried out across the units with the intent to study the global issue. Content analysis of the reports of the orientation programmes along the dimensions studied was done. The analysis thus carried out led to inductive derivation of trends (Trace, 2001) for the dimensions studied. Discussions in a case study may be carried out on the basis of a descriptive theory (Zainal, 2007). Therefore, assessment and evaluation of the practices were carried out against a rubric built up for anchoring the interpretations. The rubric was developed with propositions regarding the roles and competencies of academic counselors, which clarified the inputs required, the method of imparting instructions and duration of training that had been extrapolated from the literature reviewed.

#### 4.1 Rubric for Data Interpretation

Academic inputs comprising the first dimension were based on the functions performed by academic counsellors. The functions were classified under two categories-tutoring and counseling but many functions being intertwined, they were placed under a third category, titled as tutoring and counseling. The list of functions and the corresponding implied academic inputs have been tabulated and given in Table 2 below. Against this normative list were assessed the trends emerging for academic inputs, given later in Table 4, that were actually provided.

Trends regarding methods of imparting training and duration have been studied vis a vis the suggestions by Srivastava (1999 ; 2000). Essentially the methods used were multiple methods and multimedia, and the duration was either one month for studying the self-learning material provided to the tutors / counselors, and also a 5-day extended contact programme through teleconferencing.

| Function                | Competencies  | Training Inputs  |
|-------------------------|---|--|
| Tutoring                | Guiding on academic matters-<br>Guiding and monitoring self learning by adult learners;   | Needs of distance learners; IGNOU; the academic programme concerned (general and unique requirements); Andragogy; Study and reading skills |
|                         | Assessing assignments   | Evaluation of assignments & grading system of IGNOU  |
| Counseling              | Counselling   | Counseling skills ; Skills of using technology for counseling  |
|                         | Initiating learners into distance education system  | Open and Distance Learning (ODL); Distance education in India and abroad;  |
|                         | Guiding for administrative purposes and institutional practices   | Guidelines & practices followed in IGNOU   |
|                         | Guiding educational & vocational choices  | Educational & vocational choices for a programme; skills, techniques & media for counseling  |
| Tutoring and counseling | Being supportive through abilities to motivate, promote team work, help in coping with personal, social problems; Effective communication | Motivation, social constructivism and collaboration, problem solving; Communication skills   |

Table 1: Competencies and Implied Academic Inputs

#### 4.2 Tools

Data were collected through documentary analysis, participatory observations, and informal discussions with the participants.

The documentary analysis consisted of ;

(i) Reports of the orientation programme prepared by the author (individually/jointly with other faculty members). The reports were explicit about the number of participants, date, timings, venue, schedule of the programme (with information on sessions and resource persons involved), gist of the proceedings during the sessions and the feedback collected from the participants at the end of the programme on its strengths and weaknesses and the suggestions for improving it through orally administered open ended questions.

(ii) Documented guidelines on qualification for appointment of academic counselors.

Then the participatory observations of the orientation programmes by the author involved the programme schedule and the

pre-planned format for the report of the orientation programme for structuring the observation and recording it accordingly.

The informal discussions consisted of unstructured conversations with participants for understanding their perception to the orientation programmes.

#### 4.3 Delimitation and Limitations

The delimitation was that orientation programmes per se were studied without any attempt to determine empirically their impact on the functioning of academic counselors. The first limitation could be the subjectivity that creeps into data emerging from participatory observation; the second was the technique of collecting feedback from participants on the effectiveness of the orientation programme. It was done only at the reaction level (Kirkpatrick, 1994) through informal discussions to get a general idea of their perception about the programme.



5. DATA AND DISCUSSION :

5.1 Academic Programmes for which Orientation Programmes were organized

Between 2003 and 2009, orientation programmes for the academic counselors of several newly launched as well as existing programmes of SOE were organized. They were Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.), Diploma in Primary Education (DPE) (organized by Regional Center Patna for DPE offered in Bihar), Certificate in Elementary Education (CETE), Master of Arts in Education (MA Education) and Post Graduate Diploma in Educational Technology (PGDET) Although the orientation programme for MA Education was held at various places of India using a common schedule but only those orientation programmes in which the author had been present as a resource person have been considered in the study. Except B.Ed. the rest of these programmes had been either freshly launched or were about to be launched.

5.2 Counselors' Academic Background

The participants had been approved as academic counselors by SOE following scrutiny of the bio data of all the candidates

recommended by the concerned Regional Center (RC) of IGNOU. The approvals were in accordance with the guidelines pertaining to academic qualification and experience prescribed by SOE. Academic counselors for MA Education, PGDET and B.Ed. were teacher educators working in teacher education colleges and University departments of Education while those for the rest of the programmes were teachers from government/government recognized schools. Thus it was made sure that the counselors possessed the stipulated qualifications and were competent to teach the subjects concerned. Hence, it is natural that subject knowledge is not a part of the academic inputs (given in Table 1) required for the training programmes. Although academic counselors of IGNOU are expected to perform dual role of tutoring and counseling, the guidelines for selecting counselors detail out only the requirements for tutoring. Tutoring abilities are accordingly ensured by screening at two levels-RC and SOE. The guidelines being oblivious to the requirements of counseling and the systemic requirements, training becomes imperative for these components.

The data pertaining to the orientation programmes organized by SOE from 2003-2009 are given in Table 2.

| Programme              | Year & venue of orientation | Number of participants (Academic counselors) & Region | Duration of orientation      |
|------------------------|-----------------------------|---|------------------------------|
| B.Ed.                  | 2003; EMPC*, IGNOU          | Number not known; from 22 RCs of India                | 2 days                       |
| CETE                   | 2006; RC Agartala           | 106; from Tripura                                     | 2 days                       |
| DPE (offered at Bihar) | 2007;RC Patna               | On an average 100 per batch; Bihar                    | 1 day for 3 consecutive days |
| MA (Education) & PGDET | 2009; RC Lucknow            | 14; western Uttar Pradesh                             | 1 day                        |
|                        | 2009;RC Kolkata             | 16; West Bengal                                       | 1 day                        |

\*Through teleconferencing at Electronic Media Production Center (EMPC) of IGNOU

Table 2 : Data pertaining to the Orientation Programmes

### 5.3 Academic Inputs

Following content analysis, the trends found to be emerging for the inputs provided in the orientation programmes involving tutoring were inputs about the programme and the courses and their components, and about the evaluation system and assignments, and involving counseling were inputs about ODL, IGNOU and SOE, the meaning of counseling, its difference from teaching, and about media useful for counseling.

In orientation programmes of only one day duration, these topics were squeezed into a schedule with 3-4 sessions of about one and a half hour each. On comparing the input data above with the data of Table 1 it is found that the sessions covered the aspects mentioned in Table 1 with the exception of andragogy, motivation, communication skills, techniques and skills of counseling, reading and studying skills, problem solving, collaboration and using technology for counseling.

Non-inclusion of andragogy could affect the development of competencies required or engaging adult learners. The strategies of motivating adult learners could be better appreciated by counselors if they are exposed to the basic concept of andragogy through the views of authors like Malcolm Knowles, Eduard C. Lindeman, Cyril O. Houle and others on adult learning and especially on motivation of adult learners.

Tutoring and counseling both require communication skills. Hence, inputs on theoretical and practicalities of communications are needed. Although counseling was included but discussion on it was limited to definition of counseling. The techniques and skills of counseling are vital for counselors and leaving them out could affect the development of the various skills for counseling like attentive listening, paraphrasing, modulating tone, using appropriate body language, being non judgmental, summarizing and the like listed in IGNOU (2001). Besides counselors may be provided with grounding in Rogerian or person centered counseling advanced by Carl Rogers to help distant learners in coping with their problems and achieving self actualization.

Stemming attrition would require academic counselors to help learners in solving their academic and other problems by the application of scientific method, SWOT analysis (analyzing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats), ability to make decisions for problem solving (Ritchie & Thompson, 1988), helping in managing their stress and time. Hence, inputs in these areas are required. Collaboration helps students learn more thoroughly, deeply and more efficiently than learning alone and helps in the preparation for the real world requiring team work (Bruffee, 1998). But the counselors were not initiated into the theory and practice of collaboration thus leaving them unprepared to foster collaboration among learners.

### 5.3 Method of imparting Instructions

Except for the B.Ed. programme which was carried out through two ways audio and one-way video teleconferencing, the rest were held in face to face manner. Teleconferencing in isolation of all other media, as said by Srivastava (1999) may not be suitable for developing the necessary competencies but it could be adopted at a later stage following some grounding in academic counseling though distance or face to face programmes.

The trend emerging for the method adopted for orienting the participants was of lectures supported by power point. The inherent benefits of lectures supported by PowerPoint slides/transparencies in situations with huge number of participants, and limited time, justify the choice of this method. The ratio of resource person and participants in most of the programmes was about 1: 100, a ratio unsuitable for technology based, trainee centered training method. However, even for those programmes with smaller number of participants the method involving one of the earliest models of communication, i.e. Aristotle's rhetoric prevailed. ICT was used only to support and strengthen this traditional method. Hence, the potential of technology for interactive and collaborative learning remained untapped (Laurillard, 1993 ; 2002 ; Kittl, et al., 2009 ). However,

the resource persons encouraged interactivity and in most of the sessions there was active participation of participants. Still the approach remained didactic though interspersed with dialogues.

Emotional support (e.g. attentive listening, sympathy, and expressions of affection) can help relieve distress, whereas informational support as for e.g., counseling and advice can assist with problem-solving efforts (MacGeorge et al., 2005). Teachers' ego supportive skill, which is the ability to make students feel good, was associated with student motivation and learning (Frymier & Houser, 2000). Printed material with case studies and videos may be used to entrench this attitude in academic counselors providing such support. Developments in affective (being supportive and motivating, appreciating team work) and psychomotor domains (skills for communication and using technology for counseling) expected are harder to bring and may be better achieved through the methods suggested by Srivastava (1999 ; 2000) and role plays.

Astin (1977 ; 1993) determined that the persistence or retention rate of students is greatly affected by the level and quality of their interactions with peers as well as faculty and staff. Students also learn to depend on one another instead of depending solely on the authority of experts and teachers (Duffy & Jonassen, 1992; Bruffee, 1998). Hence, social constructivist approach to learning had to be put into practice by organising collaborative work among counselors during training. The advantages of technology for counseling and fostering collaborative learning also remained out of the purview of the orientation programmes although it had been mentioned by Srivastava (1999) that many counselors are unable to use the audio-visual aids and are also unaware of the teleconferencing or telecounseling.

The participants were not given materials on counseling for reading. Resources in the print medium, especially case studies and success stories could be helpful to supplement the training programme. CDs with videos and print materials may also be sent in advance. Use of techniques like role

play, mock counseling sessions, hands on experience in evaluation, use of ICT like audio and videos and encouraging team work could help in introducing academic counselors to the very methods they may be required to adopt with learners later.

The components ignored being closely related to counseling skills, their non inclusion could take a toll on the counseling functions carried out by the academic counselors.

### 5.5 Duration of the Programme

The duration of the orientation programmes as mentioned in Table 2 was of one /two days. There were on an average four sessions of about one and a half hour each on a particular day. When feedback was collected about the orientation programmes towards the end of such programmes (except for B.Ed.) from the participants, many of them desired a longer duration so that they could get acquainted with their new roles and responsibilities in a better way. Way back in 1999 it had been urged by Srivastava (1999) that as practiced at IGNOU the duration of one/two days is insufficient to provide an exposure to a new system. It is inadequate for preparing counselors for the complexities of academic counseling and the crucial role they are expected to play in open distance education. It is apparent that suggestion for an extended training period has not yet been put into practice. It is also apparent that the present practice imposes a time constraint which takes a toll on the range of academic inputs included as well as the method of imparting instructions.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS :

Although academic counselors of IGNOU are expected to perform dual role of tutor and counselor, the criteria for selecting them is heavily biased towards the tutoring role. Hence, training is all the more important for the counseling part. There have been regular efforts to provide orientation to academic counselors of the new as well as a few existing programmes of SOE. The participants on almost all the



occasions were full of praise for the resource persons, their presentations and IGNOU's efforts for organizing such programmes. The only shortcoming mentioned was about the duration. The formal setting under which feedback had been collected coupled with the novelty of the system and consequent lack of awareness about the roles and responsibilities required in the field might have led to such exaltation as several inadequacies have come to light following the study. While rigorous training for developing competencies related to tutoring and counseling have been recommended time and again, the objective of the programmes organized was not to train rather to orient. However, the academic inputs, methods of instructions, duration and often the ratio of resource person and participants were inadequate for either of these.

The method of imparting instructions was predominantly lecture based. Lectures bring about content orientation, which as per Malcolm Knowle's theory on adult learning, is unsuitable as adult learning is problem centered rather than being content oriented. It is also a truism that the way in which teachers have learnt will reflect itself in the way they teach (Bigge & Hunt, 1980 ; Hargreaves, 2003). Hence the reason for the oft repeated allegation that academic counselors resort to lecturing with linear transmission of instructions instead of counseling could be traced to these orientation programmes with bias towards preparation for tutoring.

Counseling is a specialized service and when it is required for the complex problems of adult learners, training for the counseling duties could be entrusted to professionals who could provide the theoretical background and organize activities needed to develop competencies for counseling, while the faculty concentrated on the systemic and tutoring aspects.

The duration of the programme needs to be extended in view of the quantum and diversity of the inputs needed. An extended duration can be achieved indirectly through reading materials in the form of similar self

learning materials like the handbook prepared for counselors by IGNOU, case studies and videos sent before the programme. Daniel (1992) suggested the need for a well organized and outcome oriented training programme for making effective academic counselors as this is crucial for student retention. This approach could be applied to the orientation programmes organized by SOE.

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Dr. Sutapa BOSE is in the School of Education, at Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), Maidan Garhi, New Delhi 110068, India. email [sbose@ignou.ac.in](mailto:sbose@ignou.ac.in)

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