

## **IMPACT OF FACE-TO-FACE ADMISSION COUNSELLING ON PROSPECTIVE LEARNERS IN ODL: A CASE STUDY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) has a significant place in providing higher education in the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode. Although ODL system is not a new concept in education, IGNOU in the past three decades has set an exemplary model of successfully providing higher education to the unreached and underprivileged. IGNOU learners have successfully seen their dreams of higher education fulfilled in the midst of social, occupational and family commitments. At IGNOU, counselling is provided to learners through Gyan Vani, Gyan Darshan, other online modes and face to face. The University conducts regular weekend classes at learner support centres which is popularly known as academic counselling. In addition, IGNOU also provides information, grievance redressal and career guidance through counselling activities which is the kind of counselling discussed in this paper.

The importance of counselling has and will continue to remain in every educational system and more so in the ODL mode where interaction of learners with peers and facilitators is limited. Keeping this fact in mind, the Student Service Centre (SSC) situated at IGNOU headquarters regularly conducted admission counselling. The counselling programme was facilitated by resource persons from Operational Divisions and Schools of Studies of the University. Such interaction enhanced the self-esteem, satisfaction and confidence of students and helped them to take decisions on the academic programmes to pursue and realize their educational dreams. The present study examines and analyses, the feedback received from participants of the admission counselling sessions organized by SSC. It tries to infer whether and to what extent such sessions were useful for students enrolled in the ODL mode. It also studies whether the profile of the learners had an impact on their feedback about the counselling programme. The paper also gives recommendations based on feedback and experience regarding ways of organizing such counselling sessions more effectively.

**Keywords:** Counselling, ODL, student satisfaction.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Counselling is a process that is designed to help an individual solve some of his/her problems or assist the individual in planning the future (Zindi & Makotore, 2000). According to Lefever, Turrell and Weitzel, 1950, "Guidance is an educational service designed to help students make more effective use of the schools training programme."

**The importance of counselling has and will continue to remain in every educational system and more so in the ODL mode where interaction of learners with peers and facilitators is limited.**

**Counselling is a unique procedure and an integral part of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode of higher education. It brings together learners and facilitators onto one platform so that they can interact with each other and get solutions to their problems and enhance their learning experience. As mentioned earlier, this process is all the more important in the ODL system as; the main challenge of ODL amongst other challenges is the absence of regular interaction with teachers and peers (Toms *et al.*, 2018). Counselling helps in boosting the morale of students and also helps them to move steadily towards their goals (Crockett, 2016; Lavender, 2015). In other words, the facilitators while guiding the students in the learning process also gives wings to their hopes and ambitions to move forward.**

**The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) has a significant place in providing higher education in the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode. Although ODL system is not a new concept in education, IGNOU in the past three decades has set an exemplary model of successfully providing higher education to the unreached and underprivileged. IGNOU learners have successfully seen their dreams of higher education fulfilled in the midst of social, occupational and family commitments. The ODL mode of higher education has made life-long learning possible in the society which in turn has led to progress and development of families, societies and economies. As rightly said by Cropley, 1980, the concept of lifelong learning is not, merely a philosophical concept about human rights, but a national necessity for economic survival.**

**This Open University having its headquarters at New Delhi, India is a People's University catering to the educational needs of students from varied backgrounds and from far-flung areas for whom, counselling is extremely important. The range of student type vary from freshly passed out youngsters from school, economically backward school drop outs who wish to learn or enhance their skills to earn a livelihood, housewives who wish to upgrade themselves and to professionals who wish to take up a certificate or diploma programme along with a degree programme they are already pursuing. The purpose for which the prospective learners of various categories decide to enroll into a programme of study is different and therefore they require appropriate counselling and guidance. As rightly said by Traxler, 1957, "Guidance enables each individual to understand abilities and interests, to develop them as well as possible and to relate them to life-goals, and finally to reach a state of complete and mature self-guidance as a desirable member of the social order".**

**The Student Service Centre (SSC) situated at IGNOU headquarters where the authors were posted when this paper was being written, not only provides information and grievance redressal but also provides career guidance. Realizing the need of guidance and counselling to prospective learners as explained earlier, SSC had made admission counselling sessions a regular feature for IGNOU learners. Such interaction was found to enhance the self-esteem, satisfaction and confidence of students and helped them to take decisions on the academic programmes to pursue and realize their educational dreams. Admission counselling is important for IGNOU learners also because the vast majority coming from the conventional system of education who need to be familiarized with the various processes comprising the student life cycle of the open and distance learning system.**

**The present study examines and analyses, the feedback received from participants of the admission counselling sessions organized by SSC. It tries to infer whether and to what extent such sessions are useful for students enrolled in the ODL mode. It also studies whether the profile of the learners had an impact on their feedback about the counselling programme. The paper also gives recommendations based on feedback and experience regarding ways of organizing such counselling sessions more effectively.**

## **ADMISSION COUNSELLING AT IGNOU**

Admission Counselling programme was organized by the Student Service Centre (SSC) at IGNOU headquarters regularly in every admission cycle; IGNOU enrolls students twice a year in January and July. Such activities are also carried out from time to time by the Regional Centres of the University spread across India. At IGNOU, counselling is provided to learners at a distance through *Gyan Vani* (interactive radio counselling), *Gyan Darshan* (television) and other online modes besides face to face counselling.

The face to face admission counselling activity was generally divided into various sections. The Counselling programme included presentations by faculty of the various Schools of Studies regarding their programmes, eligibility criteria and scope. Information regarding student support services was provided by the Student Service Centre (SSC) and the Regional Services Division (RSD). Details about the admission process were provided to the students by the Student Registration Division (SRD) and that about distribution of self instructional materials (SIMs) by the Material Production and Distribution Division (MPDD). Computer Division (CD) interacted with the learners, apprising them about Digital Support Services of the University while the Student Evaluation Division (SED) briefed the students about the three tier system of evaluation followed by the University. Handouts of the steps of online admission and the details of 'Whom to Contact for What' after admission were prepared by SSC and given out to the students. The students were guided to select a programme of study and were provided career guidance.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The major research design adopted for this study was the descriptive survey methodology which needs collecting data at a single point in time and using just one questionnaire for data collection purpose (Fogelman in Coleman and Briggs, 2002). Twenty five students each from two counselling sessions were sampled through the non-probability sampling technique, more specifically the convenience sampling method, in which samples are chosen on the basis of proximity and judgment of the researcher (Cohen and Manion, 2000).

Although it would not yield data about the perception of the general population who share those experiences, the feedback of 25 people per session who were used as sample in this study, was expected to provide valuable insights about the effectiveness of such counselling sessions.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The feedback in the form of questionnaire from 25 attendees (prospective students) each from two counselling sessions was analyzed and response to each question was calculated in percentage. Of the total students who attended the programme, 44% were prospective post-graduate students, 40% prospective under-graduate and 16% were aspiring certificate learners. From this data, it can be inferred that generally, post-graduate students were keener to attend such opportunities for counselling created by the University, suggesting that they might be more serious towards their careers. However, it was noted that the proportion of undergraduates who attended the programme was also not far behind. Whether it was prospective undergraduates or post graduates, it is noteworthy that these students had taken out time and some of them had travelled far to attend the programme, suggesting their interest towards studies and career.

Amongst the participants, the percentage of girls who attended the programme was more (56%) as compared to boys (44%). This is in accordance with the general tendency where girls enroll with open universities for higher education to make it more manageable along with personal and social commitments. Most of the girls (64%) who participated in the programme were prospective post-graduate students while most of the boys who participated in the programme (73%) were prospective under-graduate students

suggesting that the ODL system is being widely used by girls for attaining higher education. Shokeen 2017, describes the role of open and distance learning in empowering women and as the beginning of a new era towards gender equality. Raj *et al.*, 2013 also elaborates the role of ODL for lifelong learning and gender equality.

As the programme was conducted in Delhi, most of the participants (86%) were from Delhi; others were from adjoining rural areas and few from other states. Those from other states informed that they had noticed the scrolling alert regarding counselling on the IGNOU website and had planned their travel in such a way that they could attend the same along with some other event they had to attend in Delhi. The efforts taken by the attendees were commendable and suggested that prospective students were actually looking forward to such opportunities.

Another very encouraging finding was that 85% of the participants were able to decide upon their course after attending the programme, 36% of whom went on to get enrolled in the ongoing session itself. As a result of attending the admission counselling, 23% of the learners decided to enroll into a certificate or diploma programme of the University along with a degree programme. It was observed that these students got involved in very engaging discussions with the resource persons on the prospects of the add-on certificate/diploma programmes and also enquired about the frequency of such sessions.

82% of the learners were visiting the University campus at headquarters for the first time and it became possible for the organizers to give them a satisfying experience. Most of the learners (82%) came to know about IGNOU from the website and therefore, as suggested by 2% of the participants, the University website needed to be constantly updated as incorrect or incomplete information could be many a time misleading. 73% of the participants found the present face to face admission counselling programme to be very useful and suggested that such activities should be carried out more frequently and widely publicized in advance so that aspiring students do not lose out on the opportunity.

As mentioned earlier, the University provides counselling to learners at a distance through *Gyan Vani* (interactive radio counselling), *Gyan Darshan* (television) and other online modes, besides face to face counselling. SSC conducted dedicated monthly programmes on *Gyan Vani* with the name '*Vidyarthi Vishesh: Aapki Khatir*' (meaning Student Special: For You) and on *Gyan Darshan* with the name '*Vidyarthi Vishesh: Aao Baat Karein*' (meaning Student Special: Come Let's Talk). When enquired, only 22% attendees were aware of these programmes suggesting that such initiatives needed to be widely publicized to benefit larger audience.

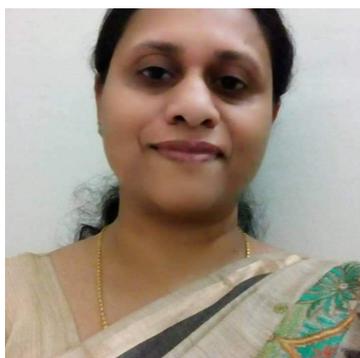
## CONCLUSION

The present study about the impact of admission counselling on prospective learners of IGNOU indicated that the programme was helpful for students and should be continued at regular intervals preferably once in every admission cycle. If possible, there could be two such counselling programmes in each admission cycle. As post-graduate students were more anxious about the courses and the processes, it is felt that such sessions should be organized for all post-graduate programmes with operational divisions and respective School faculty as resource persons. As most of the participants were from Delhi, such sessions can be planned in rural and remote areas by organizing camps. Keeping the University website regularly updated is imperative in the interest of prospective learners. As learners with different needs approach IGNOU to enroll into its 241 odd programmes, it is necessary that the prospective learners be appropriately guided and counselled, helping him/her to decide upon their programme of study and understand career prospects as well. As rightly said by Das *et al.*, 2009, counselling may help the learners in understanding their needs, feelings or motivations so that they can make appropriate decisions for themselves.

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**Dr. Bini Toms** has a rich and varied experience at national and international levels in the fields of Bioethics, Genetics and Plant Breeding. Having received the Vishwa Vidyalyaya Gold Medal, Silver Jubilee commemoration Rotary Silver Medal and Govind Prasad Silver Medal, she has had a brilliant academic career and has been the university topper throughout the course of her B.Sc. (Ag) and M.Sc. (Ag). She completed her Ph.D. in Genetics and Plant Breeding and was later awarded Fogarty fellowship by the NIH, USA, towards MHS in Bioethics at the Joint Centre for Bioethics, U of T, Canada. She has published and presented widely and has guided post graduate and doctoral research over the years. Before joining IGNOU as the Regional Director, EDNERU headquarters, she has worked at AAIDU, Allahabad as Asst Professor and Principal Investigator of Wheat Breeding Programme and later at TJC, Bangalore as the Vice Principal after serving as Head of the Departments of Biotechnology & Genetics. She was Director Student Service Centre IGNOU, New Delhi during the course of this work and is presently posted at the Regional Evaluation Centre of IGNOU in Bhopal. The ongoing popular 'IGNOU Webinar Series" aired every Friday on the theme of providing student support services in a virtual university framework is organized and moderated by her along with the Regional Director of Regional Centre Bhopal.

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