UNIT 1 DEFINITIONS, IMPORTANCE AND CATEGORIES

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

After working through this unit, you should be able to:

- list the ways in which learners might be supported in distance education;
- define counselling and explain how it differs from tutoring;
- say why there is interest in counselling in distance education, what the attitudes to it are and why it is widely held to be important;
- suggest when counselling is likely to take place and for whom; and
- categorise counselling in distance education along two different lines—developmental/problem-solving and academic/non-academic.

1.1 INTRODUCTION—SUPPORTING LEARNERS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

In Unit 1 of Block 1 you have read about the need for learner support and also about the different types of support services that distance learners need at different stages of their endeavour. Let us list some of them.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kinds of learner support</th>
<th>Possible examples</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tutoring</td>
<td>Giving a lecture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>Marking an essay.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grading</td>
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<tr>
<td>Taking action</td>
<td>Arranging transport for a disabled learner.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>Giving a reference.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>Testing if someone has the right qualifications for a course.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Informing</td>
<td>Telling someone about a university regulation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Advising</td>
<td>Advising someone on the best way to study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselling</td>
<td>Helping someone choose the right course for the future.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

You may have thought of other activities as well. So it might help to fit the above activities (and the ones you have thought of) into three broad classes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tutoring</th>
<th>Teaching</th>
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<tr>
<td>Feedback</td>
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<td>Informing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Advising</td>
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<tr>
<td>Counselling</td>
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This is a rather arbitrary classification and you have probably thought of some activities that either do not fit into any of our classes, or fit into all three.

Nevertheless, we think you will find it helpful to keep these broad distinctions in mind during your study of this block and whilst you are at work, stop and ask yourself occasionally, ‘At this moment am I a teacher, an administrator or a counsellor? And how should I be working in accordance?’ This Block is to help you answer the second question — when counselling seems the most appropriate answer to the first.

You may also remember that it is the type of institution which greatly affects the organisation of support services. Distance education departments/directorates within conventional universities may have a different learner support structure as compared to a single mode open university. There are other factors affecting the provision of learner support services, namely: the learner needs; locational factors; media constraints; and cost factors.
**1.2 WHAT IS COUNSELLING?**

You will already have spotted one semantic problem. The term ‘counselling’ appears twice in the list; once to describe the group of activities and again as one of those activities.

This is historical misfortune arising from the way the subject has grown and developed. It would have been better if the description of the group had been a word like ‘guidance’ or ‘consultancy’, with ‘counselling’ as one of its elements. Things have now gone too far to change (it would mean altering the title of this Block for instance!).

In practice, such confusion does not often arise as the intended sense is usually clear from the context, in the same way as, till recently, the word ‘Russia’ was used to describe a Union of States, one of which was individually called ‘Russia.’ This will become clearer in the next section.

### 1.2.1 Defining counselling

Let us start by defining more closely the three activities that constitute counselling:

**Informing**—giving appropriate and correct information to learners—e.g. ‘I’m sorry, the University’s regulations don’t allow you to submit that assignment late’.

**Advising**—suggesting appropriate course of action to learners, perhaps offering several options but recommending one especially for that particular learner—e.g. ‘Well, we have two maths courses. You could take anyone but as you want to be an engineer, I suggest the Applied Maths course.’

**Counselling**—helping learners clarify their needs, feelings or motivations so that they can make an appropriate decision for themselves—e.g. ‘So you’re not sure what you want to do with your life but you’d like to do something interesting. Describe to me what you mean by interesting’.

**Informing** is about knowledge which is largely independent of the learner—course requirements, regulations, statistics and so on. So you do not have to take the learner very much into account when offering such information. You do, however, have to have a high level of appropriate knowledge and the ability to communicate it clearly.

**Counselling** is about helping learners decide for themselves what is best for them as regards choice of course and career, overcoming of obstacles and so on. So, it is entirely learner-dependent rather than knowledge-dependent. As a counsellor you need clarifying skills rather than knowledge skills.

**Advising** is a mixture of knowledge and learner-dependence — something between informing and counselling.

You can think of these three activities as a ‘continuous spectrum’ of areas which merge into each other.
Informing  Advising  Counselling

Higher levels of
information skills needed  Increasingly knowledge
dependent  Higher levels of
'interpersonal' skills

Increasingly learner
dependent

Check Your Progress 1

Imagine you are a counsellor answering the following queries from the learners. What kind of response would you make in each case—informing, advising or counselling?

1 'Can I take these two courses at the same time?'
2 'What is the best way to study at IGNOU?'
3 'I'm interested in management—which course would be best for me?'
4 'I'm finding the course very hard—I shall have to withdraw'.
5 'Must I do all the assignments for the course?'
6 'I cannot sit for the exam—I am terrified of exams'.

Notes: i) Write your answer in the space given below.
   ii) Compare your answer with the ones given at the end of the
   unit.

1.2.2 Transferring queries

Working through the above 'Check Your Progress' will have introduced you to the 'transferring query' syndrome. This occurs when:

i) a query apparently aimed at one part of the 'spectrum' and really needs a response from another part. Usually this is in the form of an apparent information request that actually needs a counselling response to clarify what is needed e.g. 'Can you tell me of a good way to increase my powers of concentration?' It looks like a straight request for information. Yet it needs a little closer examination. Why is the
learner finding it hard to concentrate? Could it be (for instance) that he/she is in the wrong course? Some further clarification is needed—so you need to do a little counselling first.

ii) a query moves naturally through several areas of the spectrum before it is resolved. You may start by giving a piece of information; the learners then need some counselling to clarify their response to this information and you finish by advising them on a particular course of action. e.g. ‘Can I submit this assignment late?’ initially needs an informing response, but then perhaps the learner needs some counselling—why is the assignment late, what problem has the learner been facing—before finishing with some advice to the learner on how best to catch up.

1.2.3 Counselling and tutoring

We hope by now you are beginning to have a clearer idea about what counselling is. The problem, however, that occurs to many people at this stage is, ‘I can see the difference between administration and teaching. But I am not sure about the difference between teaching and counselling.

And it is a very fair question because the two activities are so closely related as to be often indistinguishable. A good teacher is always a good counsellor because counselling is part of all successful teaching methods. But it is still helpful to compare the two activities:

Teaching—ultimately course-centred; communications are directed substantially from the teacher towards the learner; the teacher needs to be a good talker.

Counselling—ultimately learner-centred; communications take place the other way around, from the learner to the counsellor; the counsellor needs to be a good listener.

So the activities are essentially complementary—especially in distance education, for reasons that I hope will become clearer as we work through this unit and the next.

Check Your Progress 2

Which of the following activities could be classified under teaching, and which under ‘counselling’? If they come under ‘counselling’, are they informing, advising, counselling or transferring queries?

1 A learner asks why \((a + b)^2 = a^2 + b^2 + 2ab\).
2 A learner fails to submit an assignment without contacting you.
3 A learner asks if you can explain why she got such a low grade on her assignment.
4 A learner tells you he has fallen off his bike and broken both arms.
5 A learner writes to say she has withdrawn from the course because it is too difficult for her.
6 A learner submits an assignment that you have to mark ‘fail’ because it does not answer the question.
1.3 COUNSELLING IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

So far everything we have said could apply to counselling in any educational setting. This section and section 1.4 ask why we should be interested in counselling in distance education and why it is considered so important.

1.3.1 Interest in counselling in distance education

That there is a deep and growing interest in this area now. It is undeniable. In 1984 the International Council for Distance Education and the British Open University held a joint conference on Counselling in Distance Education; a second conference was held in 1987. The British Open University has developed a range of correspondence, video and face-to-face staff development materials, including a section on counselling. The Association of European Correspondence Schools has instituted a Diploma in Correspondence Education which also contains a counselling module.

Principal journals of distance education such as ‘Open Learning’, ‘Distance Education’ and ‘Indian Journal of Open Learning’ now frequently carry articles on counselling.

1.3.2 Attitudes to counselling

This is not to say that counselling meets with unqualified approval from everyone in distance education. Counselling will always face competition from other areas for resources and there will always be opposition from
those who would prefer to see such resources going into extra tuition, three-colour print, TV programmes, or something else.

There is also a more complex opposition to counselling, that is particularly characteristic of university level education. University academics are accustomed to working on a purely intellectual and cognitive level. Counsellors sometimes find themselves dealing with learners' feelings and generally working on an affective level. Thus a cognitive/affective dichotomy can underlie many of the controversies between course writers and learner services or between central and regional academics.

The value of counselling is indeed hard to assess, in any rigorous way. You cannot for instance assume that a lower rate of dropout or withdrawal from a course indicates that counselling has had a positive effect. In some cases, a counsellor might actually advise learners to withdraw.

Nevertheless, the best corrective for anyone who is unconvinced of the value of counselling is to work with learners directly for a while, as we shall see in the next section.

1.4 **WHY IS COUNSELLING IMPORTANT IN DISTANCE EDUCATION?**

Any one who does work directly with learners in distance education is likely to realise that it possesses three characteristics that make counselling important: the characteristics of the learners, of the institution and of the learning process.

1.4.1 **The characteristics of distance learners**

It has already been mentioned for instance in Unit 1 of Block 1 of this course, that distance learners

- may be isolated, both from other learners and the institution;
- will certainly have had previous educational experience which may have been positive or negative;
- are very likely to have other substantial time commitments in terms of their home and work;
- will come from a wide variety of backgrounds, both educational and occupational;
- will be thoroughly committed, provided the courses they are taking are at a suitable level and are meeting their real needs.

Counselling is important because it is the only way of clarifying real needs, reconciling the conflicting demands of home and work, and coming to terms with isolation and with problems resulting from previous experience.

1.4.2 **The characteristics of the institution**

It is clear that distance teaching institutions tend to develop certain common characteristics, particularly during the process of settling down. They are, or can become:
- **Remote:** Even an institution which develops a regional network of services is still likely to have its offices hundreds of miles away from its learners. But in countries where communications are difficult, that remoteness is compounded by delays and problems in the delivery of course materials.

- **Complex:** An institution that is trying to produce course materials of several different kinds, and deliver them to learners as well as provide support services is likely to develop a complex bureaucratic system of administration. Such systems can be very effective in dealing with large numbers of learners but may be inflexible and damaging when dealing with individuals.

Counselling is important in helping to individualise services to learners and in overcoming the problems of system malfunctions.

### 1.4.3 Learning characteristics

Both learner and institutional characteristics suggest that the nature of the learning process is different in distance education. In particular, a learner must develop an effective set of appropriate learning strategies or study skills. Some learners may already possess these; some may need help. The process of acquiring such skills may be a cognitive one. However, for some learners, for example, those who have a previous history of educational failure, it may be an affective process, consisting in part of coming to terms with that previous failure.

Counselling is important in helping people to develop their own individual strategy for studying under a distance education system.

### Check Your Progress 3

Here are some comments about counselling made by people working in distance education. How do you respond to what they are saying? How far do their comments reflect your own view at this stage? If you are working through the course with some colleagues or fellow learners, then also discuss your reactions with them, and compare them to the reactions of other people presented in the possible answers at the end of the unit.

**Teacher 1:** “When I started in distance education I really didn’t know what counselling meant. But my supervisor thought I was already becoming an excellent counsellor!”

**Learner 1:** “I found the counsellor very helpful—I think it was just having someone to talk to, who seemed to care.”

**Teacher 2:** “I’m always surprised how much learners appreciate someone just listening to them. Often I’ve been surprised how grateful they are for that and some simple advice.”

**Learner 2:** “No I’ve never used the counselling service. But it’s nice to know it’s there.”
1.5 WHEN DOES COUNSELLING TAKE PLACE AND FOR WHOM?

So who needs counselling and when do they need it? To take up the second question first, there appear to be two points in a learner's progress at which counselling may be appropriate—at a decision point or when some kind of barrier appears.

1.5.1 Decision points

Decision points (as depicted above) can occur at several stages of a learner's progress, such as:

- whether to apply for a course or not;
- which course(s) to take;
- what career possibilities to aim for;
- whether to withdraw or to keep going;
- how much time to devote to family/job/course.

These are substantial decisions. But there can be less weighty decisions as well:

- whether or not to miss an assignment;
- which method of taking notes to follow;
- whether or not to ask questions in tutorials;
- the best way to approach the topic in an essay.

The amount of energy expended on a decision does not necessarily reflect its importance, as you probably know from your own life. Some people need no help in making such decisions. But some appreciate the chance that
counselling gives to reflect on the criteria involved in making the decision and clarify the possible consequences.

1.5.2 Barriers

Barriers (as depicted above) can occur at many stages of a learner’s progress. They can be:

**Study-related**: to do with finding ways of studying effectively, and completing assignments and exams.

**Time-related**: finding or rationing time adequately.

**Personal**: domestic/career/financial/health barriers.

**Institutional**: barriers erected, probably unintentionally, by the institution—regulations, mailing delays and so on.

Again these can be substantial barriers. But small barriers at the wrong time can be equally difficult. Such barriers could be:

- a tutor returns work late;
- a badly timed holiday;
- extra pressure at work;

and so on. Again some people negotiate these barriers, both big and small, with ease; some need help which can range from intensive counselling to analysing the barrier and ways of surmounting it, to a sympathetic acknowledgement that the barrier exists and that lots of people share it with them.

1.5.3 Who seeks counselling?

There is no easy way of predicting who is likely to seek counselling. A self-sufficient learner can study for years, ignoring the counsellor, until suddenly one day he/she runs into an intractable problem and needs help.

Here are some very general patterns from the British Open University:

i) (Very) approximately 60% of learners ask for some counselling support at some point in their careers.

ii) Requests need responses ranging from the mainly informative (30%) to the mainly advisory (50%) to those which are mainly counselling (20%). Again, the percentages are very approximate.

iii) The most common times for seeking help are at the pre-entry stage and during the first year of study—up to 60-70% of requests received are during this time.

iv) The most common areas of request appear to be divided equally between decision points and barriers.
v) The most common topics raised (more or less equally and on the whole about 50% of all topics) are:
   a) institution-related problems;
   b) course/career choice issues;
   c) study issues—assessment, exams and so on;
   d) withdrawal issues.

(We shall be dealing with the appropriate categories of response in the next section.)

vi) There do not appear to be any consistent links between the probability of learners seeking help and their educational background. Well-qualified learners seem as likely to seek help—even with study problems—as those who are less qualified.

vii) More women seek help than men and more arts/social science learners seek help than maths/science/technology learners. But since more women study arts/social science than maths/science technology, this may be two ways of saying the same thing.

Let us emphasise that all these statements and statistics are very approximate indeed and that they might well be quite different in a different socio-economic and cultural climate.

1.5.4 Who does not seek counselling?

There is a reason for asking the complementary question to the previous one, as the answer affects the way in which counsellors go about their work.

Clearly there are many learners who do not need counselling and who do not seek it. But equally any experienced counsellor will have come across significant categories of learners who (and it is usually in retrospect) might well have benefited from help but who did not ask.

For instance, we have already noted that in the UKOU more women than men ask for help. And indeed women may be more likely to experience barriers to learning arising from, say, their domestic circumstances. At the same time it is noticeable that more men than women permanently withdraw from their courses. So it may be that women are simply better than men at identifying when they need help and better at asking for it.

There are a variety of reasons why people do not seek help. For example:

i) The ‘I didn’t want to bother you’ syndrome—learners who find it difficult to ask for another person’s time and energy or who are afraid of what that person might think of them. This of course is a classical medical syndrome—the person who does not seek a doctor’s aid, sometimes until it is too late.

ii) The ‘superman’ or ‘perfectionist’ syndrome. The perfectionist believes that he/she ought to be able to manage without help.

iii) The ‘ashamed to admit to failure or inadequacy’ syndrome. We doubt if there is anyone who does not feel this at times. It is hard to admit to someone that we cannot manage or have failed at something, especially
if we see that person as a kind of figure of authority, as learners often do perceive the staff of their institutions.

iv) The ‘there’s no way anyone can help me’ syndrome. This is the person who has come to believe that his/her problem is so deep-seated or intractable that no help is adequate. Such learners can be very frustrating to help because of their marked lack of self-confidence and esteem.

1.5.5 Counsellor-initiated counselling

Clearly counselling can be initiated either by the learner (very largely the assumption we have made so far) or by the counsellor. Counsellor-initiated counselling must obviously be appropriate when trying to work with the kind of learner described in the previous section.

Some of those learners (especially perhaps the ‘didn’t want to bother you’ and ‘no way you can help me’ groups) will actually welcome contact positively and with relief. Some however (the ‘superman’ and ‘ashamed to admit failure’ groups) may find such contact threatening; they may associate it, however gently it is made, with the ‘call to the headmaster’s office’ they may have experienced during their school days. Perhaps you can remember that feeling yourself.

We mention this problem at the moment only to note it for later attention. Some of the counselling media we will be studying in Unit 2 are more suitable for this kind of contact than others, so it is a topic we shall return to.

1.5.6 Counselling colleagues

Finally, it is worth mentioning in this section that you may sometimes be called upon to counsel your institutional colleagues. We have sometimes found ourselves counselling colleagues (who have been dealing with a particularly difficult or frustrating appeal case) or simply talking over their career prospects. If you develop counselling skills, you will inevitably find people drawn to use them.

1.6 CATEGORIES OF COUNSELLING

In the last section we made an attempt to classify the points at which learners might seek counselling of some kind. In this section we shall try to classify the counselling responses appropriate to particular issues raised by learners.

We shall do this not because classification is useful in itself, but because counselling can be such an amorphous, diffuse, open-ended activity that it is often helpful for counsellors to stop and ask themselves ‘What am I doing at the moment? Does this fit into any general pattern and, if so, are there helpful guidelines I might follow?’

There is certainly more than one way of classifying counselling and indeed we have already covered the informing-advising-counselling (IAC) spectrum which is not only a definition but an activity-based classification as well.
The IAC spectrum classification relates to two other possible classifications: developmental/problem-solving and academic/non-academic.

1.6.1 Developmental counselling and problem-solving counselling

This is both an activity and topic-based classification and relates closely to the two main points at which learners raise issues, the decision and barrier points respectively.

- **Developmental counselling** is often the most appropriate response to decision points. It is concerned with the development of learners so it covers issues such as:

  - **pre-entry**: for example, course information, alternative courses and institutions, preparatory advice, motive clarification, time allocations, institutional information, and entry requirements;
  - **entry**: for example, study skills, institutional requirements, orientation to study at a distance, and preparing assignments;
  - **course choice**: for example, course information, recognition of courses, levels of difficulty, possible prerequisite courses and knowledge, relationship to other courses, and possible career directions;
  - **career choice**: for example, dealing with overall career directions, specific career wishes, qualifications, experience, possibilities of employment, and job-hunting skills;
  - **withdrawal**: for example, clarifying reasons for, and helping to deal with the sense of frustration and disappointment, suggesting alternative courses, and encouraging return to study;
  - **motivational**: clarification of motives for study, remotivating, relating motives to appropriate courses, organising and structuring time and social demands.

To some extent developmental counselling is easier than problem-solving counselling. It is usually unstressed, the learners are not in a particular hurry to make a decision and so there is time to explore appropriate directions. Withdrawal counselling is of course the exception; this can be more difficult.

- **Problem-solving counselling** is often the most appropriate response to barriers in the learner’s progress. Sub-categories of this might be:

  - **institutional**: for example, dealing with system breakdowns, discussing cases for exception and appeal against regulations, dealing with unsuccessful appeals, changing tutors and so on;
  - **personal**: for example, illness, disability, marital breakdown, childcare, bereavement, ageing, unemployment,
re-employment, work pressures—all in so far as they affect a learner’s progress;

study : for example, developing appropriate study methods, helping to improve concentration and reading speeds, adapting to distance learning, overcoming negative study habits such as late assignments, and developing group study methods;

assessment : for example, essay writing skills, providing assessment and dealing with exam anxiety;

time : organising and structuring time, prioritising activities, clarifying motivation and so on.

One of the reasons why we find this classification helpful is that it suggests general approaches to specific issues, particularly in the last four areas. For instance, when dealing with these areas, we carry mental algorithms as follows:

personal barriers : how far can we help;

study and assessment barriers : check anxiety levels;

time barriers : check motivation.

a) **Personal barriers:** how far can we help? If we are trying to help someone deal with a personal problem affecting his/her studies, then we have to remember our limitations especially those of a lack of skill or time.

We cannot for instance help someone solve a difficult and long-standing marital problem. What we may be able to do is to help them:

i) contain that problem so that they can continue studying if that is important to them;

ii) refer that problem to someone better equipped to help such as a doctor, priest or psychotherapist;

iii) to be enabled to temporarily withdraw (and help them feel alright about it) while the problem is being dealt with.

These processes are together known as ‘holding’—helping someone at least to maintain their position in the face of unresolvable difficulties.

You may find it helpful to think of an extended IAC spectrum, as shown in Figure 1.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informing</th>
<th>Advising</th>
<th>Counselling</th>
<th>Psychotherapy</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Increasing level of interpersonal skills</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Your personal limit?

Fig. 1.1: IAC—Extended Continuum
Only you can decide how far you feel able (in the sense of being skilled and qualified) to go. Fortunately learners will always respect that limit and will very seldom ask you to offer skills that you feel are beyond you.

b) **Study and assessment barriers**: check anxiety levels. Say someone approaches us with a study or assessment problem, typically, in this form (and you will note some of these are transferring queries):

- 'It just doesn’t go in when I read something’.
- ‘I’m finding it hard to concentrate—can you give me a few tips?’
- ‘How do you get started on an essay?’.
- ‘I’m sorry, this assignment is late again’.
- ‘I must learn to read faster’.

First we check that they are actually working in a sensible way. For instance, in the first query, we would get them to describe how they read. Do they survey and question the material to get an idea of what it is about or do they just read straight through? If they have an apparently reasonable approach to reading then we would begin to wonder if some basic anxiety about study is getting in the way.

c) **Time barriers**: check motivation. Again someone raises a time problem such as:

- ‘I just don’t seem to be able to find the time to study’.
- ‘Give me a few tips on organising my time’.
- ‘I’m just getting further and further behind’.
- ‘My tutor says I’m taking too much on’.

Again, we would first check the realities of the situation—what are the demands on their time? How do they organise and prioritise their time? If it begins to emerge that time is available to them, then we would begin to wonder if their motivation was beginning to fail them in some way. In Unit 2, we will come back to show as to how classification can be an aid to clarification.

**Check Your Progress 4**

Which category—developmental or problem-solving—might be appropriate to the following queries or issues? And what is the first thing you would say in response and why?

1. ‘I’m finding the course rather boring’.
2. ‘My tutor just seems to ignore my comments totally. Can I change tutors?’
3. ‘Is this qualification really recognised by employers?’
4. ‘I appealed against my exam failure but they wouldn’t change it. I’m wondering whether to give up’.
5. ‘Do you have a course in journalism?’
6. ‘I’ve lost my job and don’t really know what to do next. Can I get any financial help with the fees?’
1.6.2 Academic and non-academic counselling

This is a topic-based classification and is an alternative perspective that you may find useful. It is particularly helpful when considering the way in which counselling services are organised in an institution and the time of year at which they occur, that is, who does what and when. The informing-advising-counselling spectrum still applies.

- **Academic counselling**: covers all course and course-based topics. Examples of this might be preparation, specific course study difficulties and exam techniques. Academic counselling tends to relate to specific and cognitive issues.

- **Non-academic counselling**: covers all other areas of counselling. Examples here might be course choice, general study difficulties, and exam anxiety. Non-academic counselling tends to relate to general and affective issues.

- **Academic and non-academic counselling during the year**: as this classification is topic-based, examples can be illustrated in calendar form, as shown in Table 1.1 (you will see that we have also retained the IAC classification).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Academic Counselling</th>
<th>Non-academic Counselling</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-entry</td>
<td>Information on courses, entry requirements, registration procedures etc. Preparatory course advice. Course choice counselling.</td>
<td>Information on alternative instructions. Advice to special cases e.g. disabled candidates. Return-to-study counselling.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entry</td>
<td>Information on course use—tutorial times, assignment dates etc. Advice on studying the course. Course change counselling.</td>
<td>Information on regulations and procedures. Advice on general orientation to studying at a distance. Withdrawal.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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During the course

- Information about delivery problems. Advice on dealing with late delivery or incorrect material. Counselling on assignment difficulties.

- Information about other (i.e., outside the course) aspects—e.g. summer schools. Advice about payment difficulties, counselling on personal difficulties, problems between tutors and learners.

Exam

- Information about time/place conduct of exam. Advice on exam techniques and revision.

- Information about special support available—extra time for disabled learners etc., exam anxiety, counselling.

Post-study

- Information about further related courses. Advice on further course choice. Counselling for results.

- Information on possible career options. Career advice and counselling. Counselling failed learners.

- Academic and non-academic counselling—who does what: depending on the way in which counselling is organised in an institution (see unit 3) the academic/non-academic split can be useful in deciding who does what.

For instance, academic counselling could be deemed to be the business of the tutors, and non-academic counselling the business of the central institution. Of course, the learners would not draw this finer distinction, so both sides would need the necessary training.

Check Your Progress 5

Look back at ‘Check Your Progress 4’ and decide into which category of counselling, academic or non-academic, each query might fall.

Notes: i) Write your answer in the space given below.

ii) Check your answer with the one at the end of the unit.

1.6.3 The dangers of classifying

We have talked at some length about classifying counselling because it is helpful in making some pattern of the thousands of different queries/problems/issues that can arise for learners in distance education. Yet after
over ten years of working in distance education we still daily come across questions we have not met before.

So remember—people do not fit into neat classifications. Use these distinctions if you find them helpful but do not let them impose a pattern on your perceptions.

“For the pattern is new in every moment
And every moment is a new and shocking
Valuation of all we have been”

—T.S. Eliot

1.7 LET US SUM UP

There are at least nine ways of supporting learners in distance education

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Counselling covers a spectrum of activities — those of informing, advising, counselling. A query can be answered from the most obvious place on the spectrum or from elsewhere — it could be a transferred query.

Counselling is important in distance education because of the particular characteristics of the learner, of the institution and of distance learning itself.

Counselling takes place at decision points and barriers and can be initiated by the counsellor as well as the learner.

Counselling can be categorised in two ways:
• developmental and problem-solving, or
• academic and non-academic.

Check Your Progress: Possible Answers

1

1 This probably starts as a straight informing response depending on your institution’s regulations. But perhaps some advice is needed too—is it desirable for the learner to take two courses?—can they manage the work load?
2 An advisory response that perhaps takes into account the learner's previous study experience.

3 An informing response. But you also need to know more about what your enquirer really wants, so perhaps some counselling is needed along the way.

4 A counselling response is needed to find out what the learner means by 'hard work'. Have they for instance, found it too hard because it is the wrong course? Getting the answer right could mean the difference between just dropping out of a course and withdrawing from the institution altogether.

5 An informing response initially, but some counselling also needed for the same reasons as in 4.

6 A counselling response initially, perhaps followed by advice when the problem has been clarified.

2

1 A fairly straightforward teaching activity, unless the answer uncovers other problems.

2 A counsellor-initiated contact which may result in a tutorial or counselling response from the learner (if any response at all).

3 If the learner has received apparently adequate feedback from her/his tutor, then this might well be a counselling request rather than a tutorial one—a transferring query in fact.

4 A counselling activity—probably an advising query.

5 This sounds like a counselling activity that might lead to a teaching activity once the learner's problem is clear.

6 This might well depend on the learners' previous record. If they have received adequate teaching and feedback previously but are still failing to answer the question, then perhaps there is some other problem affecting them, such as assessment anxiety.

3

Here are some reactions to the comments from distance education staff.

Teacher 1: 'I think this feeling is very common. It's sometimes hard to know whether one is counselling well because the end-product is often unclear. In the end, it's learner feedback that tells you'.

'So many people think counselling is a difficult and highly technical job when often all it means is warm friendly listening. In some ways I think it would be best to use the word 'befriender' instead'.

Learner 1: 'I'll bet the counsellor was using a lot more skill than the learner noticed! But if the learner found her helpful it doesn't matter'.

'So many learners have said this kind of thing to me that it must be true. It's because distance education is potentially so isolating'

Teacher 2: 'It's interesting how difficult some teachers find it to just listen—as teachers they're used to talking I guess! But if you can
stop talking and listen sometimes it makes a world of difference to your success

'The point of course is that it's no use giving advice before you've listened'!

Learner 2: "Yes of course there are many learners who never need counselling of any kind. But it's essential to be seen to be easily approachable, friendly and informal so that they know you're there if needed'.

4

1 This sounds like a barrier with some development to come. My first response might be "I'm sorry to hear that—what is it about the course that you're finding tedious?" I would want to find out if it was the whole course or just a part that was a problem.

2 Another barrier. My response would be 'Well, yes you can. But can you tell me first what exactly it is that you're finding frustrating about the tutor?' My intention would be to find out if this was a case of individual antipathy or whether there was more to it than that.

3 Possibly a barrier, possibly developmental. Sometimes a query about course recognition is a way of saying 'Is it worth it? I've run out of motivation'. So my first response might be 'Yes it is recognised. Were you beginning to wonder if it wasn't?'

4 This sounds like a developmental problem disguised as a barrier. Assuming the failure is final, some developmental counselling is needed. I would say, 'I'm sorry about the exam result. But why are you wondering about going on?'

5 At last, a straightforward developmental counselling query! I would say 'Yes we do. What was it about journalism that interested you, though?' My intention would be to ensure that a journalism course was what was wanted.

6 A confused query mixing developmental and barrier queries. Deal with them separately and say 'Yes we can get you help with the fees. What is it you're wanting to do now?'

You might like to look back at these answers and ask yourself whether they are informing, advising and counselling or transferring responses.

5

1 This could be either academic or non-academic, depending on whether it is the course content or general demoralisation of the learner that is the problem.

2 Relationships with tutors are often non-academic and could be based on all kinds of previous experience.

3 An academic counselling query.

4 A non-academic query.

5 An academic query since it is about a specific course.

6 A mixed query but mainly non-academic.