UNIT 3  FACE-TO-FACE SESSIONS

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

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

- state and describe the need for face-to-face sessions;
- study the aims of face-to-face sessions and the purposes they serve;
- be familiar with a case study of personal contact programmes;
- describe the organisation of face-to-face sessions;
- be familiar with the role of support services staff with the help of a case study of the UKOU.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Units 1 and 2 of this block introduced the concept of counselling, considered different categories of counselling and looked at counselling theories in relation to opportunities in different media. This unit is devoted to face-to-face sessions in distance education, which is an important medium of counselling.

As we all know that in distance learning, learning takes place through both individual interaction with the self learning materials and social interaction with peers/tutors. Face-to-face meeting, therefore, is an occasion for this social interaction. Although communication between the learner and the counsellor/institute takes place through various media as discussed in the previous unit (section 2.5), the loneliness of the distance learners cannot be effectively compensated for unless there are some opportunities for them to meet their counsellors in person and discuss their problems and exchange their views with them. Face-to-face sessions also give the learners opportunities to discuss their problems — academic and personal — with their counsellor and also their peer groups.
Most of the institutes of distance education and open universities all over the world organise face-to-face contact sessions for their distance learners. Of course, these are limited as compared with the face-to-face lecture sessions organised by conventional universities.

### 3.2 NEED FOR FACE-TO-FACE SESSIONS

Many distance learners may find it difficult to handle the self-learning materials with their various access devices, activities and assignments. These would require knowledge of study skills which can be provided through human support. You may also bear in mind the characteristics of distance learners which have been discussed in course ES-313, Block 1, Unit 1, which will further make you understand the need for face-to-face contact counselling sessions.

As we discussed in Unit 1 of Block 1 and also in Unit 4 of Block 1 that distance learners are independent, and also lonely. They are independent to the extent that they need not attend the classes at regular timings and do not depend on the oral instruction of a teacher. They can study at their own homes and choose their peer groups as well. They cannot get immediate clarification for the doubts that come up during their studies. They may not be in a position to discuss their academic problems with their fellow learners. Similarly, they may not possess the study skills necessary to cope with the requirements of courses offered by a distance teaching institution. If the distance learners happen to live in economically and technologically backward societies, they may not be able to make use of the audio-video programmes, nor the educational broadcast, since the majority of them will not have access to the media in their homes. Apart from these, the learners may like to know many things regarding the scope of their courses, their performance in assignment responses, examination pattern, the modes of assessment and evaluation, the attitude of their peer group, etc. Precisely to meet such needs of the distance learners, study centres are established and face-to-face contact sessions are arranged at these study centres. Thus, contact-cum-counselling sessions give the distance learners the opportunities to discuss their problems (academic and personal) with their teachers and also their peer groups.

Thus, whatever the merits of the self-learning materials to the extent they try to build the teacher in the text, try to simulate a classroom situation, they remain finite in their character. They cannot go beyond a point. On the other hand, the needs of the learner are infinite in their variety, as all human beings are. So, distance education has to cater to these infinite variations, which the self-learning materials however good, may not completely succeed in doing. To satisfy these variations, it thus becomes necessary to offer some face-to-face support.

We have said so far that face-to-face sessions are very useful. However, there could always be some distance learners who could probably do equally well even without attending these programmes. If open learning materials are perfect, and if learners’ learning skills are highly developed, there might be no need for the learner to attend face-to-face sessions. On the other hand, even with imperfect learning materials, many learners shoulder responsibility and succeed without the help of a counsellor.
There are two schools of thought whether face-to-face sessions are necessary or are unnecessary. One school of thinking finds face-to-face sessions essential, but another finds them unnecessary and even, in some cases harmful as they are felt to represent interference, disturbing the individual study. No conclusive proof has been established either to prove the necessity of face-to-face elements or to reject them as conventional embellishments. However, philosophically the organisation of face-to-face sessions is a dilution of the very concept of distance education. But this should not be taken to mean that face-to-face sessions have no place in distance education. Holmberg (1986) and Keegan (1989) suggest a variety of aims and purposes that face-to-face sessions serve in distance education. According to Keegan, “Occasional face-to-face sessions are organised for both didactic and socialisation purposes unlike the conventional system, where it is a major teaching medium" (Keegan, 1989).

Holmberg (1986) also endorses the same view. He feels they are useful as opportunities to consult subject specialists and to exchange views with tutors and fellow learners as well as to benefit from tutors’ expositions and criticism of work done. Face-to-face interaction seems mainly suitable for:

- practising psychomotor skills in laboratories and under similar conditions, also verbal skills through personal communication;
- facilitating the understanding of the communication process and human behaviour;
- encouraging attitudes and habits of relevance for the study;
- mutual inspiration and stimulation of fellow learners;
- training in co-operation.

Discussions in groups appear the most valuable supporting functions of face-to-face sessions apart from those that require special equipment (labs, machinery, computers etc.)

Another form of integrating distance study with face-to-face sessions that has been found profitable is running intensive residential courses. As they take place during concentrated periods (pre-scheduled) they do not interfere or disturb the learner’s routine/regular study.

Another form of face-to-face instruction according to Holmberg is supervised correspondence study. The learners work in libraries or classrooms and have a teacher available there as a resource (individual helper and adviser) rather than as an instructor; this teacher answers questions, explains when asked to, motivates, organises group activities and administers.

Inspite of this there remains a basic controversy between those who are in favour of as much face-to-face contact as possible and those who mainly rely on non-contiguous communication. To the former distance education is merely a substitute for interaction when this is not available and learning is seen as something of a social activity. To the latter learning is basically individual and distance education has considerable potentials of its own, different from but not inferior to traditional types of education. Both approaches, as we can see, represent individualisation. Even the former viewholders stress that self-learning materials are provided for hundreds or
thousands of learners in general, but the counsellors (tutors) counsel or tutor the distance learners as individuals.

There is a continuum between the two. At one end there are programmes that employ primarily face-to-face learning supplemented with texts and audio-visual aids. At the other end lie the programmes being offered online without any face-to-face component. In between the two there are many programmes that strive to combine (limited) face-to-face communication, either between teachers and learners or among learners themselves and also interactive media based dialogue with carefully structured printed, audio-video materials which make central inputs to the teaching-learning processes.

Check Your Progress 1

Why do you think face-to-face sessions are an essential component of the distance education system?

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

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The human factor

In the foregoing section we have highlighted the controversy regarding the need for face to face contact in the distance education system. It has also been pointed out that whatever the merits of the self-learning materials, they remain finite in character, therefore the human factor is very important to take the distance out of distance education and resolve the infinite problems of the learners.

As we all know distance education revolves around a learner centered system with teaching activity focussed on facilitating learning. The institutional function, and the task of its instructional personnel, is to facilitate and enhance that process — despite the distance to achieve optimum learning outcomes. The faculty engaged in distance education must be adept at facilitating learners’ learning through particular attention to process, unlike, classroom based teachers whose traditional role is largely confined to selecting and sharing content. Also the faculty must recognize the role of instructional technology as a learning resource. Thus, the human factor in distance education has a very crucial role to play in the teaching learning process. The task of the distance instructor is more than merely grading learners submitted material (assignments, projects, examination papers etc.) Ideally the instructor’s role involves:

- diagnosing the learner’s readiness to learn;
- monitoring learner progress towards objectives sought;
- recognizing and discovering a learner's learning difficulties;
- stimulating and challenging learners to further efforts;
- evaluating the quality a learner's learning and assigning a grade to estimate learning outcome; and
- maintaining an effective two-way communication between the institution, the teacher and the taught and also among the peer groups.

Hence, distance education is a highly specialized branch of education requiring a special set of skills and attitude on the part of teachers (instructors) who take to distance teaching and function at any of the different levels in the system, such as: course designing, course developing, course production, tutoring, counselling, evaluation, etc.

### 3.3 **Organisation of Face-to-Face Sessions**

Local support centres or study centres are the best places to provide face-to-face sessions, which you had read about in Block 1, Unit 4. The distance learners are informed well in advance about the specific period and place where the face-to-face sessions are to be held. The distance education institutes/open universities differ widely with respect to the number of face-to-face sessions organised by them for each course during the academic session.

Also as regards the frequency of face-to-face sessions in the time and interval with which they are organised, the institutions again adopt different policies.

Open universities mostly organise limited face-to-face sessions throughout the academic session on weekends or holidays in the evening hours whereas personal contact programmes are mostly organised by correspondence course institutes during the end of the academic session, in order to prepare the learners with the end of the course examination.

To give you some insights with regard to the organisation of face-to-face sessions in distance education, we think it appropriate to take you through a case study of personal contact programmes being organised at correspondence course institutes (CCIs) attached to conventional Indian Universities. It is a well known fact that these CCIs rely heavily on face-to-face sessions for tutoring distance learners. We have also included a study on the learners' opinion on counselling sessions. These learners are enrolled at one of the Regional Centres of Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), India.
3.3.1 Personal contact programmes: A case study of correspondence course institutes (CCIs) of India

The study conducted by H.C.S. Rathore has made an attempt to look at the adequacy and the relevance of the face-to-face sessions popularly known as personal contact programmes (PCPs) organised at 14 CCIs. He also surveyed the perceptions of the learners and staff of these institutes. Two hundred learners were selected from 14 CCIs.

Now let us look into the findings of the study under various headings.

 Organisation of PCPs

In principle as per the UGC guidelines a PCP is required to be held at places wherever there is a concentration of more than 200 learners. It may be noted that most of the institutions were not able to abide by it for reasons like unavailability of an institution willing to host the programme; lack of funds; lack of expertise in the city in question; lack of accommodation for learners etc. The CCIs also differed widely with respect to the number of PCPs organised by them for each course during the academic session; the frequency of PCPs, the venue of PCPs and nature of participation at PCPs. Mostly the CCIs did not have sufficient staff to conduct PCPs. Thus they had to hire experts from local colleges or universities. 71.42% of the institutions hired experts to conduct PCPs.

 Aims of PCPs

All the correspondence institutes organised the PCPs mainly for formally teaching the course contents to their learners — this is the main aim behind organizing the PCPs. The second priority was given to the aim of preparing learners for the coming final examination by 10 out of 14 institutions. Similar number of institutions used PCPs as platforms for removing learners' isolation and this was the third priority aim. It may be quite disheartening to a number of learners that the PCP sessions to remove their learning difficulties were held only by 9 institutions and they too gave only a fourth priority to the issue. Again, a very important aim behind organizing PCPs was to provide individualized tutoring and counselling to the learners; but surprisingly it came as a fifth priority aim and that too only in the case of 5 (i.e. 35.71%) institutions. The other aims too such as, to use PCPs as a platform for seminars and group discussions, to orient learners with distance teaching and learning methods etc., which are important to be achieved through PCPs. But this study reveals that they were almost neglected in the system of correspondence education in India.

 Suitability of the PCPs

The study revealed that the venue of the PCPs suited 65.51% of the learners. Similarly in the case of 59.21%, the PCPs were organized during the time when they really needed them, but this was not the case for 40.78% of the learners. As regards the suitability of the activities during the PCPs, 65.68% of the learners were satisfied with the quality of the organized activities and only 34.31% were not satisfied with them.

 Academic value of PCPs

82.74% of the learners reported that they benefitted in their studies from the teaching given during the PCPs, and barely 17.25% reported that they did not benefit from the formal teaching during the PCPs. 33.9% of the learners wanted participation in the PCPs to be made voluntary. Although the PCPs were considered worth the time and money spent to attend them by 61.77% of the learners, almost an equal number of learners felt that sufficient time during PCPs was not given to enable them to individually consult the teachers to discuss their academic problems. Perhaps this is the reason why every second learner felt that PCPs did not serve the purpose of removing their academic problems. However, on the basis of these findings it was clear that on the whole PCPs are beneficial to the learners.

(Extract from an article by H.C.S. Rathore (1995), Personal Contact Programmes of Correspondence Course Institutes in India, An Evaluation, published in IJOL, Vol. 4, No. 1, p. 15-21. Reproduced with the permission of the editor of IJOL and the author.)
Check Your Progress 2

How have you benefitted from the face-to-face sessions organised by your institution?

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

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Some Observations

• From Rathore’s study (1995) of PCPs organized at CCIs attached to conventional Indian universities, it is clear that: PCPs are a compulsory component of the teaching learning process. The learning materials supplied to learners are supplemented by teaching through PCPs. The stress is more on spoon feeding i.e., teaching the course content (through lectures) rather than using PCPs for interaction and solving problems of distance learners.

• Majority of the learners have viewed them positively. Hence the general notion that distance learners being adults and generally employed, are independent and do not prefer any kind of compulsion to participate in PCPs. But from this study it is obvious that the same cannot be said of the Indian learners. Rathore (1995) has also pointed out in his study that the probable reason for this is that most of the learners studying at these CCIs were dropouts from conventional system who failed to get admission in the conventional system. Their traditional habits of being taught by a teacher in a classroom situation dominated their thinking and hence their preference for more compulsory face-to-face sessions. Also the unemployed learners would view their study as full time work. Barely 33% of the learners expressed that PCPs should be made optional as they were probably the employed or adult learners. They could also include those persons who are residing in rural and remote areas, who found it cumbersome and expensive to attend PCPs organized continuously over a period of 7-14 days at a few places. Above all, it should not be forgotten that PCPs are utilized for imparting instruction (course content). Hence the learners have no other alternative but to view them positively.

• Every second learner felt that PCPs did not serve the purpose of removing their doubts and clarifying their problems. Therefore, in their suggestions the learners have expressed their need for individualized tutoring. Since PCPs are utilized mainly for imparting instruction, there is no provision of tutoring and counselling as in the case of counselling...
sessions organised by open universities. In fact, counselling sessions are utilised mainly for providing problem solving and developmental counselling to distance learners and not for imparting instruction.

- The learners had also suggested that PCPs should have been conducted at least 3 to 4 times in a year and should be completed at least 2 months before the examinations were held. This reflects on the need and importance of spreading out the support provided through PCPs throughout the academic year instead of providing it only at one time of the year and at a few places as is being done in the case of counselling sessions organised by open universities.

- The learners' suggestion that necessary accommodation for outstation learners need to be arranged by the institution at subsidized rates, indicated that the venue of the PCPs was not suitable for many learners. The places where PCPs are conducted are limited, there is a need to increase the access points for the learners by the institution when PCPs are conducted.

Check Your Progress 3

In your opinion should participation in face-to-face sessions be made compulsory?

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

3.3.2 Learner opinion of counselling sessions: a case study of IGNOU

A study was undertaken by Srivastava, Reddy and Fulzele (1996), on counselling organised by IGNOU. The major objectives of the study were to examine the:

- pattern of attendance at counselling sessions;
- usefulness of counselling sessions;
- reasons for not attending counselling sessions;
- activities undertaken at counselling sessions;
- preparations made by students before attending counselling sessions.

Although the study was conducted in 1995, the universe of the study included the 2036 learners enrolled at IGNOU Regional Centre for the post-graduate and undergraduate level programmes in the year 1992. Deliberately 1992 batch learners had been selected
Face-to-Face Sessions

as they had been in the system for over 2 years and therefore their opinion would be more valuable than the freshly enrolled learners. Using the random sampling method 25% of the learners were selected for the study giving due representation to women, rural residents. Let us now look at the findings of this study.

Pattern of attendance at counselling sessions

62.5% of the respondents had attended counselling sessions. Age-wise analysis showed that the participation in counselling sessions was cent percent in the case of learners who were in the age group of above 60 years, 80% in the 46-60 years, 66.7% in the below 25 years age group and 54.5% in the 26-45 years age group. The percentage of women and men who had attended counselling sessions was identical i.e., 62.5%. However, only 50% of the rural residents attended counselling sessions.

Usefulness of counselling sessions

39.7% of the respondents found the sessions useful, 39.0% to some extent useful and 21.3% not at all. The respondents had given highest rating to the point relating to meeting with fellow learners at sessions which created more enthusiasm to complete the course on time viz., 45.3%. The next point i.e., counselling sessions encouraged further readings and increased the interest in the course (32.8%) as an important reason, for attending sessions. 29.7% found the sessions useful because of the fruitful discussions at counselling sessions on assignments, 28% of the respondents found it useful because of the audio-visual aids used by the Counsellors, 23.4% said that their doubts were clarified; 29.1% found the discussions comprehensive; 20.3% felt the sessions covered more content than was given in the lesson, scripts/units and 26.6% were happy at the convenient time chosen for the sessions.

Interestingly, all the respondents of the above 45 years age groups have found the sessions useful whereas 75% of the below 25 years and 57.6% of the 26-45 years age groups have found them useful. The responses of the rural and urban group was almost identical viz., 67.2% urban and 66.7% rural respondents had found counselling sessions useful. More men (70%) as compared to women (62.5%) had found the sessions useful.

Reasons for not attending counselling sessions

The respondents who had not attended counselling sessions had also given their reasons for not attending the sessions. 45.3% had expressed that they could not attend sessions as the study centre was too far away for them to attend sessions; 29.7% could not attend due to demands of full employment; 21.9% found that the sessions were not upto the mark, 21.9% had no difficulty with the SIMs, 17.2% could not attend due to family duties; 14.1% felt that the counsellors were not well-versed with the SIMs; 10.9% due to inconvenience of tutorial time and 7.8% due to financial difficulties could not attend the sessions.

The major reasons given by the urban respondents (44.8%) for not attending sessions was that the study centre was located too far away though the centre was located within the city itself. The rural respondents (50%) had also given the same reason. In addition, to that 50% of them also felt that they had no difficulty with regard to the SIMs. 37.5% women felt that the study center was too far away, 32.5% said that they could not attend sessions due to demands of full employment and 25% of the women respondents could not attend due to family duties.

Activities during contact/counselling sessions

It is interesting to note that 50% of the respondents had mentioned in the questionnaire that they listened to lecture/discussion and even took notes whereas 15.6% only listened to the lecture/discussion, 46.9% participated in the sessions by asking questions, 45.3% by participating in the group discussions, 40.6% by talking to their peer group, 35.9% by watching video cassettes and 15.6% by listening to audio cassettes. 50% of rural and urban respondents had taken notes during the discussions but in all other aspects the urban respondents had been more participative than their rural counterparts. Sexwise analysis shows that men had been more participative than women, except for one activity of taking notes in the sessions where the ratio is fifty-fifty.
Preparations of distance learners for attending counselling sessions

The active participation of the distance learners at counselling sessions is directly linked to the preparations they made before coming to the sessions. 54.7% of the respondents read the relevant course materials before coming to a session; 48.4% attempted the self-check exercises before coming to the session; and 39.1% brought the list of questions they wanted to ask.

All the learners in the age group 46-60 years had gone through the relevant course materials, attempted all the self-check exercises but only 40% had listed the questions to be clarified. The oldest age group i.e., above 60 years, only 50% had read the SIMs, had done the self-check exercises and listed out their doubts before coming to the session. The response of the below 25 years age group is also quite similar. There is no noticeable difference in the response of the rural and urban respondents. Sexwise analysis shows more than men (60%) had read the SIMs than the women (45.8%) before attending the session. But interestingly more women had attempted the self-check exercises than the men in terms of percentage. But it is the reverse in relation to listing of questions before coming to the sessions.


Some Observations

- The study conducted on counselling sessions at IGNOU (1996) (an open university), has brought out the fact that all learners had not attended counselling sessions. In the previous case study of CCIs this point of attendance was not raised as PCPs are a compulsory component. Whereas at IGNOU or, for that matter, at any other open university, it is not compulsory for learners to attend counselling sessions. Hence 37.5% of the learners did not attend counselling sessions.

- Since counselling sessions are conducted at study centers, which are located in urban areas, barely 50% of the rural residents attend counselling sessions. 45% of the learners who did not attend counselling sessions said that they could not do so because of the distance of the study center. The university therefore needs to set up more centers in rural areas to facilitate the learners living in rural areas. It could also provide/make alternative arrangements for providing counselling support by making use of the new telecommunication technologies available for reaching out to all parts of the country.

- Nearly 80% of the respondents found the counselling sessions useful. The major reason mentioned by them is the opportunity it gave them to meet and discuss with their peer group which not only motivated them but also increased their interest in their course. Also through individualized tutoring and counselling many of their doubts were clarified.

- The active participation of over 50% learners in the counselling sessions reveals the preparations that they must have made before attending the counselling sessions. Since counselling sessions are not lecture sessions like PCPs, the learners are expected to have read the self-learning materials provided to them before coming to the counselling session. The counselling session is to be utilized for clarifying doubts, reinforcing learning, improving study skills and finding solutions to the problems/hindrances coming in the way of successfully completing the course.
On the other hand more than 40% of the learners had not read the relevant study materials before attending counselling sessions. It is therefore necessary to make induction programs compulsory for new entrants. Distance learners need to be familiarized with the *modus operandi* of the distance education system, particularly the integrated role of counselling sessions in the teaching-learning process.

Identification and appointment of the right academic counsellors is equally important as it has a long term impact on the system. In order to make the counselling sessions more interactive and beneficial to the learners, counsellors/tutors should be trained. Since most of the counsellors/tutors are teachers in the conventional system, they are not familiar with their tasks and responsibilities about which you have read in Unit 1 of this Block.

In the next section you will be reading more about the role of counsellors/tutors who are responsible for handling face-to-face counselling sessions. Before you go to section 3.4, you may do the check your progress exercise that is given below.

### Check Your Progress 4

Do you attend counselling sessions regularly? If yes, what are the reasons that make you to attend counselling sessions. If no, what are the reasons. Explain.

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### 3.4 THE ROLE OF SUPPORT SERVICES STAFF

Conscientious counsellors/tutors plan things to do at a face-to-face session. Ideally, in a face-to-face session all the learners should be involved. There are all sorts of ways of doing this, all of which depends on breaking down the initial formality of the atmosphere and allowing even the shyest in the group not to feel threatened or pressurized. It helps a lot to seat the learners in a circle rather than in rows. That stops people at the back being excluded.
or cut off. If everyone in the group can see each other's facial expression, the group soon becomes more relaxed.

It is important to always regard the processes as much more important than the context. Processes such as questioning, sharing ideas, discussing, and solving problems contribute to the learning process. If the counsellor/tutor were merely to provide a long lecture, there is no guarantee that effective learning would occur.

Some learners may be quite shy in face-to-face sessions. If the whole group is asked a question, the same one or two voices would reply. It would be uncomfortable for the shyest learners if they were forced to give their views. An easy way out is the use of brainstorming sessions in the group.

Everyone may be given a question to answer on a slip of paper or a post-it. Learners after writing their answers may stick or post it on the wall and all of them can then look at each others responses. This method of 'joining in' is much kinder to shy learners and allows them to participate equally. In fact their contributions are often better than those from the one or two learners who would have answered all the questions orally (Race, 1994).

There are several other group learning techniques that can be used such as buzz sessions, debates, seminars, brainstorming, panel discussion, etc.

It is more helpful to highlight the responsibilities of staff who will normally be locally-based Academic Counsellors as:

- to respond on the assignments to the dialogue initiated by the learner in their written work and to assess that work;
- to foster further discussion in face-to-face sessions at the Study Centres;
- to respond to learners' queries and/or confusions about the course material;
- to assist learners to become independent learners by helping them to develop sound study skills appropriate to distance education;
- to encourage and support learners' when they reach barriers to learning or points of decision, e.g. at the start of the course, the first assignment and the examination;
- to maintain adequate records, interpret the institution's regulations and to liaise with supervisory staff.

This is a different role from that of conventional face-to-face educators and it can be highlighted further by stressing the differences. Some of these are:

- teaching a course designed and written by other people;
- making greater use of a multi-media system;
- much greater concern with study skills in a novel way of studying;
- possibly dealing with older learners who have a wider range of experience and higher motivation;
- possible tensions between the roles of counsellor and assessor.
This is a novel role offering new challenges and making different demands on academic staff and to take it on with a positive approach can be exciting. The institution itself needs to be clear in its expectations of its staff. It needs to:

- provide a clear description of duties and procedures;
- establish a clear contractual position;
- provide well thought out and comprehensive briefing and training.

Very often staff providing academic and counselling support in areas remote from the centre will be recruited from the staff of other institutions on a part-time basis. This can be beneficial to the distance education institution as it can involve experienced educationists who will, hopefully, find that their fresh experience with distance education provides new insights in their full-time jobs. It is also our experience that graduates not currently working in education have a lot to offer, particularly if the work becomes their major professional outlet. We shall not look at a few examples of the role and functions of tutor counsellors at UKOU and IGNOU.

3.4.1 Role of Tutors and Tutor Counsellors at the UKOU.

A brief check list of the tasks performed by the learner support staff at the UKOU includes (Kaye & Rumble, 1981):

a) commenting on written work sent in
   - grading written work submitted;
   - assisting learners to understand course materials through discussion;
   - conducting discussions face-to-face or occasionally by telephone;
   - organising self help groups of learners;
   - providing feedback on course materials and learner problems to full-time staff;

b) answering learner queries about the system
   - helping learners plan their work;
   - negotiating with the institution on behalf of learners when problems occur;
   - advising applicants if required;
   - inducting new learners into the course;
   - advising learners on course choice;
   - giving guidance on problems of an administrative nature such as fee payment, late submission of work;
   - helping learners develop study skills.

This is a fairly comprehensive list of requirements for any distance education support service. In the UKOU, two categories of staff are recruited to carry out these functions and in UK terminology they are
entitled Tutor and Tutor Counsellor. Their relationship with the learner is shown in the diagram below:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study Year</th>
<th>Credit rating</th>
<th>1st credit</th>
<th>2nd</th>
<th>3rd</th>
<th>4th</th>
<th>5th</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 or 1/2</td>
<td>Tutor</td>
<td>Tutor A</td>
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Level of course | Foundation | Post foundation courses

![Fig. 3.1: Responsibilities of Tutor Counsellors and Tutors](image)

The tutors carry out all the tasks listed above the gap in the checklist [see part (a) of the checklist above] and are specialists in the subject taught by the course. The tutor counsellors teach one of the five foundation courses all learners start with and they also concern themselves with the educational support matters listed below the gap [see part (b) of the checklist above].

The university allocates greater resources to foundation course support as it recognises that learners need most help in the first year of distance education. As the diagram shows, the tutor counsellor continues to act as educational advisor [the duties listed under (b) above] throughout a learners study life, providing continuity of contact.

There has been some debate in recent years about the continuing role of the Tutor Counsellor, and some staff advocate moving to a model similar to that of IGNOU, whereby all duties are carried out by one member of staff namely the academic counsellor.

A diagram showing the complexity of the Learner Support System is given below (Fig. 3.2).
This concludes the description of a large relatively well resourced system in a densely populated country. In the next section we will study the role and functions of an Academic Counsellor at the IGNOU.

Check Your Progress 5

a) Which of the following functions are likely to be performed at the Institution's Headquarters and which at the Study Centre:

1. run a computer terminal induction session for learners.
2. organise a staff briefing and training session.
3. arrange an end of term learner party.
4. publish and distribute the Study Centre handbook.
5. appoint a new part-time Academic-counsellor.
6. revise the Study Centre financial payments.

b) Which of the following do you think are not the Academic Counsellor's responsibility:

1. replacing a missing page from a course book.
2. agreeing a timetable for assignments to be submitted late by a sick learner.
3. guaranteeing a loan for a learner.
4. devoting some time to questions and answers about examination problems.
5. helping a learner who wants you to witness his signature on a paper.

Notes: i) Write your answer in the space provided.
ii) Check your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

a) 1. ........................................................................................................
2. ........................................................................................................
3. ........................................................................................................
4. ........................................................................................................
5. ........................................................................................................

b) 1. Yes/No
2. Yes/No
3. Yes/No
4. Yes/No
5. Yes/No
3.4.2 Role and functions of academic counsellors at the IGNOU

As you already know, most of the learners who freshly enter the open system require general counselling to a large extent along with a small component of tutoring. This combination of general counselling and tutoring is known as academic counselling at the IGNOU and the person who offers academic counselling is called an academic counsellor.

As a general counsellor he/she is supposed to orient learners to learn at a distance, familiarise them with the system, and try to help them overcome their non-academic problems that are hindering their process of learning. As a tutor he/she assumes a role of a subject specialist where the emphasis is on dealing with problems related to the subject.

An academic counsellor is supposed to understand his/her partnership role allied with technology and has to make use of appropriate interventions of non-print media in order to facilitate the teaching learning process. Such as use of audio cassette recorders, video cassette recorders (both are available at the IGNOU study centres) during face-to-face counselling sessions; telephones; teleconferencing (available at limited study centres but at all Regional Centres); and more recently computers.

The role of an academic counsellor depends on the programme for which he/she is allotted. For instance, in the Bachelor’s Preparatory Programme counsellor’s responsibilities involve dealing with learners who have to be acquainted with study and mathematical skills likewise, the main role of a counsellor dealing with the Bachelor’s Degree Programme (Foundation Course) is to foster confidence in the learner and to advise him/her to improvise on the aspects he/she is already familiar with. The change in approach of the counsellor between these two categories is primarily because of the difference in the nature of the learner needs; the former category consists of those who had no formal education, whereas those entering the Foundation Course stream are those who have had either a formal higher secondary school exposure or should have presumably prior acquaintance with the IGNOU’s learning scheme in their BPP. On the other hand, a counsellor of the Management programme would be facing student participants who have had a good deal of work experience. However the basic responsibilities of the counsellor are the same to guide, to inform, to help and in short, to help the students to help themselves to make satisfactory progress in the system. Both the academic and personal needs of the learners have to be taken care of by the counsellor. The functions of an academic counsellor are as follows:

— Encourage the learner to keep contact through phone or correspondence and also have willingness to take the initiative to contact a learner.

— To guide learners how to make the best use of the library provided by the University at the Study Centre.

— To find during the contact programmes whether the learner has completed the self assessment tests given to him/her in the print media and provide feedback to enable the learner to know in which aspects of learning he/she is weak.

— To familiarise the learners with general study skills & even listening to their personal problems.
— Initiate discussion with a view to helping the learner consider all the relevant factors and reach a decision.
— The counsellor should be a friend rather than a teacher. Inherent in this new role is an element of advising which the counsellor would perform.

**Major Functions of Academic Counsellors of the IGNOU**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Counselling</th>
<th>Tutoring</th>
<th>Use of Multimedia</th>
<th>Assessment &amp; Evaluation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(helping overcome learning difficulties)</td>
<td>(helping to achieve)</td>
<td>(making satisfactory)</td>
<td>(giving feedback)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>academic standards)</td>
<td></td>
<td>appropriate</td>
<td>and establishing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>interventions</td>
<td>of non-print media)</td>
<td>interpersonal links)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another very important responsibility entrusted to an academic counsellors is that of grading a learner’s assignment response and writing tutor comments on the assignment response. These tutor comments should be positive and constructive. The comments should keep up the morale of the learner. At the same time these comments should also provide distance tuition (teaching) to the distance learner.

**Check Your Progress 6**

Can you list out the specific tasks of an academic counsellor of the IGNOU?

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

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Thus the basic requirements of an effective academic counsellor are:
— Good knowledge of the course he/she is taking up for counselling.
— He/she should have a genuine and sustained interest in the learner as a learner and also as a person.
— An ability to observe accurately and empathize: i.e. looking and listening carefully to what a learner says, and putting himself/herself in the learner’s place so as to understand his/her problems sincerely.
— A thorough knowledge about the University which enables him/her to help the learners achieve their goals without much disruption.

At IGNOU the concerned school, that designs the programme of study, decides on the academic qualifications and experience required of a suitable academic counsellor for its programme. Thus for each programme there is an eligibility criterion with regard to the selection of academic counsellors.

A two day orientation programme is normally arranged for the newly appointed academic counsellors at the regional centre utilising the services of resource persons from concerned schools at headquarters, academic staff from the regional centre and distance education experts drawn locally or from other regional centres/headquarters. These trained academic counsellors have these basic responsibilities to perform at the study centre as (a) informer (b) counsellor, and (c) evaluator.

In order to maintain standards, the university monitors the performance of academic counsellors through various mechanisms: namely monthly reports of study centres, visits of IGNOU centre staff to study centres, and monitoring 2% of the evaluated assignments by the faculty members of the concerned school.

3.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have sought to draw your attention to the factors responsible for the provision of face-to-face sessions in distance education and the aims and purposes they serve. We have also given you a glimpse of the organisation of face-to-face sessions and the role of support services staff involved in providing this type of support.

Check Your Progress: Possible Answers

1

In your answer to this question you will have considered the factors responsible for the provision of face-to-face sessions in distance education. We are sure you would have considered all the key factors listed below:

- human factor in distance education
- need to break the isolation of the distance learner
- need to cater to the learners' needs which are infinite
- need to impart instruction and provide individualised tutoring and counselling.

2

Your own experiences are to be stated in order to answer this question. We list here some key points, but we hope you have thought of some more:

- your isolation was removed
-
• your academic and non-academic problems were removed/partially resolved
• you were encouraged to discuss your problems
• you benefitted from interaction with the counsellor and your peers (fellow learners)
• you were encouraged to make better and effective use of the facilities provided at your study centre
• you felt motivated to complete the course on time.

3

Your own ideas are required to answer this question. You would have felt that face-to-face sessions should either be made compulsory or they should be voluntary. Depending upon your choice you would have also given reasons for the same.

4

Your own opinion and experiences are required to answer this question. If you are attending counselling sessions, you would have spelt out the benefits that you have derived from counselling sessions. In case you are not attending counselling sessions, you would have given your reasons for the same.

5

a) At the headquarters 2, 4, 5, 6 (all administrative functions). At the study centre 1, 3 (learner involved activities)

b) Ideally the central despatch department should see to this; 2 and 4 are clear responsibilities; 3 is a personal matter and not for you; 5 is a difficult one as you might help as an individual, but you have no duty to do so.

6

Specific tasks of an academic counsellor of IGNOU:
• initiating learners into distance learning
• guiding the self learning in a desirable direction
• identifying mislearning and undoing the same
• providing non-print instructional interventions
• promoting and sustaining learner motivation
• identifying person specific problems and helping to overcome learning handicaps
• providing distance tuition (teaching) through tutor comments on assignment responses
• grading learners’ assignments.
REFERENCES


Spencer, Derek (1995) "Role of Tutors and Tutor Counsellors at the UKOU," in PGDDE Course, ES-313, Block 2, Unit 3, New Delhi, IGNOU.
Dear Student,

While studying the units of this block, you may have found certain portions of the text difficult to comprehend. We wish to know your difficulties and suggestions, in order to improve the course. Therefore, we request you to fill out and send us the following questionnaire, which pertains to this block. If you find the space provided insufficient, kindly use a separate sheet.

**Questionnaire**

Enrollment No. ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

1. How many hours did you need for studying the units?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit no.</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of hours</td>
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2. Please give your reactions to the following items based on your reading of the block:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Very Good</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Give specific examples, if poor</th>
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<td>Presentation Quality</td>
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<td>Illustrations Used (diagrams, tables, etc.)</td>
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<td>Conceptual Clarity</td>
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<td>Check Your Progress Questions</td>
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<td>Feedback to CYP Questions</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

3. Any other comments:

Mail to:
Course Coordinator (ES-313)
STRIDE, IGNOU, Maldan Garhi
New Delhi - 110068, India.