

# ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF ACADEMIC COUNSELORS IN ODL

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**Abstract:** Academic Counseling is critically important in ODL and a vital component of Student support services. Academic Counselors are pivotal link between university and distance learners, they help breaking learners state of isolation in ODL by interacting, guiding and advising them. Academic counselors provide all possible academic support to distance learners required by them during their study. The effectiveness of academic support and services provided by academic counselors ensures accomplishment of the expected goal of learners and the quality of academic services provided by the university. Present study was undertaken to know the roles and responsibilities of Academic counselors in ODL and the level of awareness among them about their roles and responsibilities. The study also reveals the gap between expected and practiced role of academic counselors in ODL.

**Keywords:** *Learner support services, Open and distance Learning (ODL), Academic counseling, learner support centres*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Open and distance learning is one of the most relevant mode of the education to democratize higher education for the large section of population in 21<sup>st</sup> century. It refers an industrialized form of education in which mass production and distribution of learning material as well as logistics aspect of administering and coordinating activities of dispersed populations of students and tutors take place (Peter 1973), according to Moore (1983) the term distance is utilized in the expression of teachers and learners in the educational process. The characteristics of Distance education may be placed as below:

- The separation of teachers and learners
- The influence of educational organization
- The use of technical media for potential learners
- The absence of group learning
- The provision of two-way communication
- Privatization of learning

Distance learners are self-directed and motivated person who are strong believer of flexibility, accessibility, equality and education for all and with having zeal to earn requisite knowledge on their own responsibility. The peoples who are unable to benefit from traditional education due to physical, economic or social barrier fulfill their educational need through distance mode. Distance education enables new career avenues for both teachers and learners in Distance education mode in the present global era. According to these, it may be concluded that –

- Distance education emphasize on learners autonomy in promotion of higher education, in this

form of education paradigms are shifted from teaching to learning.

- It is beyond the classroom learning and makes institutional boundaries irrelevant by offering off campus and life long learning.
- It helps learners to keep their motivation alive i.e. fail remark is never given in the learner's grade card instead it is written as "not completed" which does not demoralize learner.

## IGNOU:

Indira Gandhi national Open University (IGNOU) is the pioneer in higher distance education in India. Due to its learner centric approach, flexibility in admission rules, accessibility, affordability, quality of content and curriculum and largest jurisdiction, it has become a household name in India. It has been recognized as the system leader in the world, in its field. At present IGNOU offers its academic programmes through 21 schools of studies and a network of 67 regional centres and more than 3000 learner support centres. IGNOU structure is of three tier system, Headquarter at Delhi, Regional centres and Learner Support Centres.

**Learner support centre:** Although geographic separation of teacher and learner is inherent in distance education but to bridge this gap to some extent, Learner study centres play an important role in ODL. As per Section 2(o) of IGNOU Act 1985, Study Centre means: *"A centre established, maintained or recognized by the University for The purpose of advising, counseling or for rendering any other assistance required by the students"*.

Learner support centre is the place where learners interact with university in face to face mode and are assisted and facilitated by the staff of LSC for various support services i.e counseling classes, practical classes, project guidance, SLM, TEE form submission, assignment evaluation, liaison with regional centre and headquarters, term end theory and practical examination and entrance examination etc. Learner support Centres/ study centers are headed by Coordinator or Program In-Charge who is assisted by Assistant Coordinators or Assistants with other supporting staff. Academic counselors provide academic support to learners at LSC and are the face of the university who interacts with learners and bridge the gap between learner and university. An academic counselor not only guides and counsels learner but also plays various roles in ODL.

## II. ROLE OF ACADEMIC COUNSELORS

An Academic counselor is the representative of an institute/University who helps students acquire more effective and efficient study skills. In Distance Education the prerequisite for an Academic counselor is to understand the difference between conventional classroom teaching and academic counseling. The Academic Counselor is thus required to orient himself/herself in ODL system of education and understand the role they have to play in University.

- **Role of academic counselor as a general counselor:** In the educational context, counseling has been defined as "the advice, help and support given to learners to enable them to make satisfactory progress in the system". A counselor understands learners emotional and practical needs and uses his/her interpersonal skills and understanding in a relationship to help a learner to resolve those practical and personal difficulties related to his/ her study. An academic counselor is expected to possess the following qualities:

**Warmth:** The ability to communicate personal warmth and to make learners feel welcome and valued.

**Acceptance:** The quality of accepting the learner as an individual and not criticizing or judging them personally.

**Genuineness:** Open, friendly and not to be defensive.

**Empathy:** The ability to sense the feelings and experience of the student and so to fully appreciate them as if he/she was that person.

- **Role of academic counselor as a tutor:** An Academic Counselor assumes a role of subject specialist where the emphasis is on dealing with

problems related to the subject. The academic counselors of IGNOU are less of a tutor and more of interpreter of a highly structured course material. Thus tutoring is helping students improve their learning strategies in order to become independent learner.

**Attributes essential for ideal tutoring:** Tutoring Provides clear explanations, Welcome extra questions, Locate one's fault but correct them kindly, Makes thorough but cheerful and constructive comments, helpful in achieving objectives and encourage a student in difficulty, Write all corrections legibly and with meaningful details Assessment & Evaluation.

- **Evaluation and Feedback:** Give feedback to the learners during the counseling session and through the written word on the evaluated assignments and Give feedback on counseling and assignment evaluation to the Coordinator/RC.
- **Supervision:** Work as a supervisor for practical, project and field work
- **Maintaining records of learners allotted:** An academic counselor maintains Records pertaining to:
  - Learners contact details (mobile phone number, email id and address),
  - Attendance records for the assigned sessions
  - Academic record of studying the Self Learning Material (SLM), doing self- check questions(SCQ) in the SLMs and working on assignments Assignments evaluation/ practical/ project/ internship/ workshop and other field work

## III. ESSENTIALS FOR ACADEMIC COUNSELOR IN ODL

a) **Awareness about the Credit- System:** IGNOU follows credit system for conducting counseling sessions. An academic counselor should be aware of the Number of counseling sessions to be organized for each course. Counseling session is based on:

- Number of credits and
- The number of learners allotted in the particular programme/course.

Duration of each counseling session in IGNOU is as per below:

Theory Session – two hours

Practical Session – four hours

Table 1

S.No.	No. of credits	Study. Hrs	Counselling Hours	Expected No. of Sessions
1.	2	60	6	3-4
2	4	120	12	5-6
3	6	180	18	8
4	8	240	24	10

The maximum number of learners to be assigned in a group is 60. If the number of learners exceeds 60 a second group may be formed. However, as a norm of the university, the number in any group should not be less than 10. In a situation when the number of learners enrolled in any course is less than 10, Intensive Counseling sessions may be organized.

- b) **Awareness about the Evaluation Methodology:** Evaluation methodology adopted in ODL mode is different from conventional mode. Evaluation of learners depends upon various instructional activities undertaken by them hence an Academic counselor need to know the methodology adopted by the university.

IGNOU adopts the three tier evaluation methodology to make evaluation process more effective:

- 1. Continuous assessment through Self Check Questions (SCQs) in the SLMs:** It helps to assess the progress of the learner at different stages of the course.
- 2. Assignments:** The (TMA) tutor marked assignment comprises of a variety of questions such as essay-type, short answer type, problem solving exercises etc. and it generally carries 25%-30% weightage towards the final grades.
- 3. Term End Examinations (TEE):** The TEE is held twice in a year June and December. The students can appear in either of the TEE depending upon their session. The TEE carries a weightage of 70% marks in the final result. If the learner fails to complete his/ her courses, the former can appear in the next TEE.

- c) **Awareness about the tutor marked assignment (TMA):** An Academic counselor needs to understand that the content of the written feedback on assignment will have tremendous impact on the learning process and thus will improve the quality of learning experience. The content of feedback should have degree of personalization, timing/ immediacy and regularity.

The need for tutor comments can be summarized as:

- **Two-way communication:** It builds two way communications in the process through feedback and remedial guidance.
  - **Clarifies ambiguities:** It clarifies ambiguities in difficult areas.
  - **Provides personal guidance:** It provides personal guidance and tips related to study skills/ study habits etc. On the basis of usage and nature of comments as follows (IGNOU, 2007): Two categories based on usage are:
    - **Marginal-** Specific comments written in the margin in the response sheet addressing a particular part/aspect of the response.
    - **Global-** Cover all questions of the assignment and are written in the prescribed format given. Based on nature, there are eight categories comments, which include
      - Nonteaching Comments:** (i) Harmful, (ii) Hollow, (iii) Misleading, (IV) Null, (v) Negative,
      - Teaching Comments:** (vi) Positive, (vii) Constructive and (viii) Personal.
- The counselors should completely abstain from giving non-teaching comments.
- d) **Awareness about preparation before start of counseling sessions:**
- **Availability of counseling schedule in advance:** An Academic Counselor needs to ensure that learners have counseling schedule in advance and information about units that would be covered during counseling sessions.
  - **Clarity about Aims and objectives of Counseling sessions:** AC should be clear about aims & objectives of each counseling sessions
  - **Obtaining assignments:** Assignments constitutes an important component of the evaluation process, An Academic counselor should be able to discuss these with learners in

the counseling sessions and motivate learners to submit assignments in due time.

- **Familiarize with the programme guide:** It helps academic counselor to give a thorough knowledge of programme structure and tasks expected of them during the course.
- **Information about University rules:** An Academic counselor must be aware of the attendance rules of university, and should be informed about multi-media inputs offered by the University such as Teleconferencing, Interactive Radio Counseling, GyanDarshan, GyanVani, webconferencing and library facilities.
- **Knowledge of calendar of the University activities:** It includes date of submission of Assignments responses, Term end examination forms, re-registration forms etc.

**Organizing Theory Counseling sessions:** It is very important that the academic Counsellor plans the activity well in advance for Counseling session as it will set the tone for the Counselor-(tutor)- learner interaction:

Counseling sessions consist of:

- Opening the session.
- Discussing the issues.
- Developing the plan of action.
- Recording and closing the session.

Ideally, a counseling session results in a learner's commitment to a plan of action. Assessment of the plan of action becomes the starting point for follow up counseling.

**Absenteeism in Counseling sessions:** This aspect should be closely monitored by having a record keeping mechanism in place. Counselors should inform the Coordinator about decline of learner's number in counseling sessions.

**Organizing Practical counseling Sessions:** An academic Counselor may need to organize practical sessions if required. All practical based programmes have resource books/lab manuals to guide the Counselors in organizing the conduct of practical sessions, i.e., duration of each session, the requirements of equipment, materials, apparatus, physical tests etc. The practical work should be properly recorded and the record of work performed

should be monitored regularly by the Counselor.

#### e) **Awareness about obtaining feedback on counseling sessions:**

In ODL, Feedback on Counselling sessions is crucial for improvement in existing practices and methods for ensuring effective learner support. It is thus suggested that regular feedback should be obtained from: Learners on the counselling sessions and Academic Counsellors on learners performance.

#### IV. **IGNOU REGIONAL CENTRE JABALPUR**

In order to cater to the educational needs of the disadvantaged sections of the society, especially the tribes of Madhya Pradesh, the University established a Regional Centre at Jabalpur in July 2005.

Total 20 districts of Madhya Pradesh, all of them mostly dominated by the tribal population were kept under the operational area of IGNOU Regional Centre, Jabalpur. These districts were Jabalpur, Narsinghpur, Balaghat, Seoni, Chhindwara, Katni, Shahdol, Umariya, Anuppur, Sidhi, Singrauli, Dindori, Rewa, Satna, Panna, Damoh, Sagar, Chhatarpur and Tikamgarh. The population as per Census 2011 of these 20 districts of Madhya Pradesh is 2,89,93,519 persons. Out of them 1,49,55,232 male and 1,40,38,278 are female. Catering to the educational needs of this huge population is a great challenge since it sparsely distributed poor transport network, low per capita income and extremely low penetration of technology in the region.

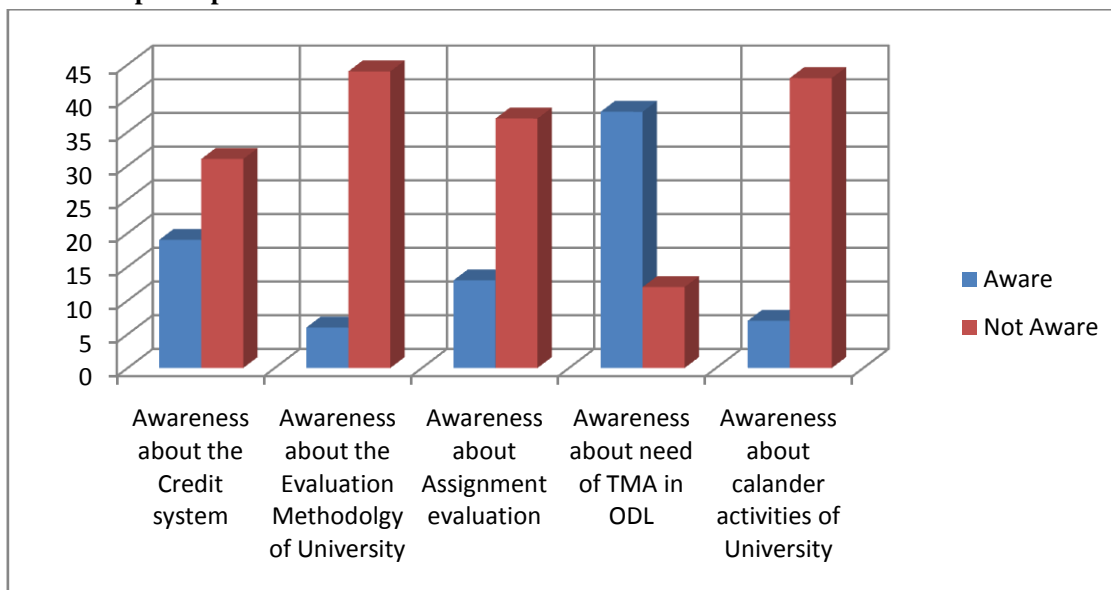
RC Jabalpur has 45 active learner support centres and 813 approved academic counselors in various programmes.

#### V. **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The present study is an attempt to know the awareness among academic counselors about the essentials for Academic counselors in University. Total 50 academic counselors were randomly selected from different study centres coming under jurisdiction of RC-Jabalpur. Interview method was undertaken for data collection in the study. The essential considered in the study for Academic counselors to perform their role effectively were:

- Awareness about the Credit System
- Awareness about Evaluation Methodology of University
- Awareness about assignment evaluation
- Awareness about need of TMA in ODL
- Awareness about Calendar activities of University

Graphical presentation of Academic Counselor's awareness about essentials in ODL



The following results were recorded on the basis of data analysis and the chart shown above:

- **Awareness about the credit system:** As per the study 38% of Counselors are aware of the credit system of the university.
- **Awareness about the Evaluation Methodology of IGNOU:** As per the study 14% of academic counselor's are aware of the three tier evaluation methodology of University.
- **Awareness about Assignments evaluation:** As per the study only 35% counselors are writing tutor comments on assignments and are aware of the purpose of writing comments. 65% Counselors are not aware of writing tutor comments on comment sheet. In majority of cases the comments given are very short and basic in nature and do not mention/ suggest required improvement in assignments therefore TMA does not serve the purpose it is meant for.
- **Awareness about need of TMA in ODL:** As per the study 68% counselors understand the need of TMA in ODL. They are evaluating assignments in time and returning back to students before TEE exam so as the learners could get feedback and accordingly prepare for TEE.
- **Awareness about calendar activities of University:** As per the study 88% Counselors are not aware of the calendar activities of university and are not visiting University/RC website. They did not show interest for

knowing about the date sheet/calendar activities of university.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

In the present paper an attempt was made to know the effectiveness of the academic counseling services being provided at learner support centres coming under jurisdiction of IGNOU Regional Centre Jabalpur.

Present study reveals that academic counselors are lacking proper orientation towards ODL system of University. The counselors are drawn from conventional system and are not able to overcome biases of teaching methods therefore easily revert to the lecture method. When discussed with coordinators it was revealed that majority of counselors are overloaded with duties of their regular job and are usually in hurry to complete classes and rush back thus limited to one way communication in their classes, they usually do not show interest for having extra dialogue with learners to provide personal guidance. Counselors are not aware of the calendar activities of university and due to paucity of time are not able to visit University/ RC Website on regular basis. The information they receive is from coordinator. Majority of academic counselors are not aware of the proper assignment evaluation, most of them are unaware of global comment sheet, a few counselors are writing comments on assignments but usually these are not detailed comments therefore not helping learners to improve their performance.

The study suggests that regular orientation programme for academic counselors at Regional Centre level needs to be organized. After empanelment, Academic counselor need to be oriented in ODL system so as they

could understand needs of learners and ODL system. Orientation programmes will help academic counselors to induce themselves into ODL system. Proper orientation will help them to know the roles they need to play in ODL and the essentials they need to know to perform their roles effectively so as to match the level of learner's and University expectations.

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