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## COUNSELLING SERVICES FOR THE DISTANCE LEARNER

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V. WICKRAMARATNE

### **Abstract**

*The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL), attempts through its system of education, to enhance the personal development of its students. Different models of intervention are at present adopted with the view to realising this objective. It has been recognised by distance education institutions that counselling services extended to the distance learner stand out as one of the best ways of intervention. However the importance of counselling as an integral component in the OUSL system should be emphasised further taking into consideration the diverse needs of learners enrolled with OUSL. This paper focuses attention on the relevance of counselling services in relation to the nature of the needs of students following academic programmes and courses of study offered by the Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences and also examines the different models of counselling that could be adopted to support these students. Review of relevant information reveals that counselling intervention is appropriate to enhance the capacity of students to develop themselves and also to overcome barriers that they may encounter in the process of successful completion of programmes. But the models of counselling intervention that could be adopted should be determined in relation to the organisational and management procedure of the OUSL system.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Distance education as an educational approach is being increasingly accepted in many countries of the world. The opportunities for learning at a distance have expanded rapidly especially during the last few decades.

The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) instituted as an integral part of the university system of the country in 1980, is essentially a distance teaching university. Its registered student population which is 19,456 today, falls into the category of distance learners following programmes of study leading to certificates, diplomas, degrees and post graduate qualifications. The OUSL also offers associate student programmes and public education programmes which do not carry a formal qualification.

The main objectives of the OUSL are, to make higher education available to everyone, to provide mid-career training; to provide an opportunity to study while remaining in employment, to make life long education possible; to provide education even to geographically isolated areas, to promote social mobility and self improvement, to offer an opportunity to the disabled and to encourage and provide facilities for research.

The OUSL is intended for adult learners and enables its students to pursue further education at their own pace without disrupting the everyday necessities of work, whether at home, factory, school or office.

The system of education at the OUSL to a great extent is directed towards the learner. Besides, the system attempts in a large way to focus attention on the learner and the process of learning; unlike traditional pedagogy, where concentration is on the teacher and on teaching. The teachers are expected to facilitate learning and not indulge in mere instruction.

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The system of study adopted by the OUSL is a multimedia system with strong emphasis on distance education techniques, using printed materials and audio-visual aids. The printed course materials provide the primary material for self-study. These are supported by day-schools, consultancy sessions, audio-visual material, seminars / workshops, laboratory work, discussion classes etc. Hence what learning at the OUSL requires is not regular face to face contact with a teacher but interactive communication between the university and the learner.

Through its programmes of study the OUSL keeps the learners informed that learning depends on themselves, on their own motivation to learn, on their commitment to learn the lessons on their own, with guidance and support from the institution and the learning materials.

It has been stated that distance education requires an act of self discipline and that it is a purposeful testing of self-reliance and self determination (Manila 1989). It informs learners that not all knowledge and facts come directly from the teacher. It informs the learners that most knowledge, perceptions, and insights come only from their own actions. In the end, the distance learner comes to realize that the best teacher is really oneself, and that personal efforts in this connection are the most important. In essence distance education leads to the liberation of the learner and it provides opportunities for self determination which can lead to the development of self reliance and thereby to the enhancement of self-esteem and personal dignity.

Wright (1987) examines notions of independent learning, offering a definition as, 'the ability to take responsibility for one's own learning'. Further Wright explains that personal development results when taking responsibility develops into a meta – skill which enhances the ability to

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learn other things, resulting in a gain in 'personal power' or 'potential for action'.

In fact the overall aim of any teaching and learning system should be to enhance the personal development of a student through the process of studying a course. The kinds of intervention adopted by the OUSL via distance teaching, in promoting personal development through learning are many and varied. Among the different modes of intervention, counselling services extended to the distance learner stand out as one of the best ways. Tait and Sewart (1983) record that counselling in distance education covers activities which under another broad term can be described as student support services. Counselling covers a spectrum of activities of informing, advising and counselling.

Advising is a mixture of knowledge and learner dependence and strikes a balance between informing and counselling. Counselling however is entirely learner dependent rather than knowledge dependent. Hence counselling services could be academic or non-academic. Academic counselling tends to relate to specific and cognitive issues and non-academic counselling tends to relate to general and affective issues. Learners however will not draw this finer distinction.

Two other possible classifications of counselling are developmental counselling and problem solving counselling.

Developmental counselling is concerned with the development of learners, and covers issues related to clarification of course information, entry requirements; orientation to study at a distance, overall career directions; support to deal with the sense of frustration and disappointment; encouraging return to study, organising and structuring time and social demands etc.

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Problem solving counselling provides appropriate response to barriers in learner progress. Barriers to learner progress can be study-related, time-related, personal or institutional.

Whatever be the type of service extended, counselling could not only enhance the capacity of the learner to take responsibility for the learning but also could support the distance learner to acquire potential for action from what is learnt.

The paper attempts to review the relevance of counselling services in distance education in relation to the nature of the needs of students following academic programmes and courses of study offered by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences and to examine the different modes of counselling that could be adopted to support these students.

Of the programmes offered by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences the programmes selected for the purpose of the above review are the Certificate in Pre-school Education, Post Graduate Diploma in Education, the Foundation Programme in Social Sciences and the Diploma in Management.

### **STUDENT PROBLEMS IN LEARNING**

Considering the admission requirements for programmes as stipulated by the OUSL, all students registered, invariably are adult students over eighteen years of age.

Further the students registered for a particular programme invariably may have common characteristics as determined by the pre-requisites for entry. However the background characteristics of students generally vary in respect of the different programmes.

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Table 1 below shows us,

- i. The average male/female participation.
- ii. The average age range of students enrolled in respect of each programme, during the period 1998-2000.

Programme	Male/female participation		Age range (in years)
	Male	Female	
Certificate in Pre-school Education	0%	100%	21-56
Foundation Programme in Social Science	62%	38%	19-70
Diploma in Management	73%	27%	21-65
Post Graduate Diploma in Education	39%	61%	26-58

**Table 1 - Gender and age range of participants**

It could be noted that students registered for the Certificate in Pre-School Education programmes are all female students. But as regards the Diploma in Management programme and the programme in Social Sciences, male students outnumber female students. Of students registered for the Post Graduate Diploma in Education the majority are female students.

However there does not appear to be a great disparity in the minimum and the maximum age of students following the respective programmes.

As regards academic qualifications, students registered for the Certificate in Pre-school Education, the Foundation programme in Social Sciences and Diploma in Management programme have either passed G.C.E (O/L) examination or G.C.E (A/L) examination. Graduates or graduate teachers

employed in government schools, pirivenas, private schools, Teachers' Colleges and Technical Institutes of the country form the target audience of the Post Graduate Diploma in Education Programme.

Whatever may be the differences among students enrolled for the programmes under review, practically all of them are confronted with the problems of learning new subjects and may experience difficulties of mastering new concepts which are quite outside the range of their previous knowledge.

Further factors such as age, maturity, level of motivation, level of skills and abilities, problems encountered relating to time, employment and family support will vary not only within each group but also across groups and this in turn will influence students' perceptions of themselves as learners and of the services extended by the OUSL. Hence there could be problems that distance learners experience either because of individual differences among them or because of institutional factors.

Nearly 65% of these students follow the programmes while being employed and are studying part time. The difficulty of coping with family problems, the job and the study programme could make it difficult for some students to keep to schedules decided by the OUSL and hence they may experience stress.

Like all other distance education students, these students too are generally isolated and tend to be deprived of face to face support by fellow students and teachers. This in turn could lead to anxiety among the students especially due to their inability to compare performance levels with fellow students and hence they may be unable to set reasonable goals. Further it is likely that these students may experience a feeling of inadequacy as regards their ability to concentrate, to remember what is studied and to manage the

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process of revision. In fact a majority of the students used to the traditional mode of instruction that places emphasis on teaching, have to cope with the change to the distance mode of study. Both academic as well as non-academic counselling could make a valuable contribution to support these students who may experience the task of studying to be demanding and challenging.

It is assumed by some (Knowles 1980, Coggins 1989) that adult learners return to formal learning with a wealth of experience and skills that put them at a level capable of conceptualizing, being internally motivated, independent and self-disciplined. Along with these qualities, as Shomaker (1998) remarks, adult learners are capable of excellent critical thinking and are resourceful. But it may be observed that age does not guarantee this level of readiness to all adult learners and that there could be cultural differences as regards these abilities. Gamaathige and Dissanayake (1999) in relation to a study conducted on the Foundation Programme in Social Studies have concluded, that the younger students aged between 18 and 25 years performed better in the distance mode of learning than mature and older students.

It is likely that some, if not many, adult learners, have had negative previous experience and have not been continually enrolled on course work. As Farnes (1988) points out, such students may have difficulty in resuming a role left behind some years ago. Paul (1990) asserts a large number of students do not cope effectively with the demands for independence, time management and self direction posed by distance learning. However it should be noted that Paul's assertions do not limit the possibilities of growth and improvement throughout the learning process. In fact Beaty and Morgan (1992) found, resumption of education as an adult learner leads to marked improvement in levels of 'confidence, competence and control in learning'. The adult learners who returns to formal learning will in all



probability act deliberately to develop themselves and their education for personal pleasure or in support of their careers. But it does not preclude the continued need for support, feedback, direction and encouragement (Shomaker 1998). Nevertheless Shomaker further observes that it is not possible to assume that students who return to formal learning to study through the distance mode, although relatively independent and internally motivated, are all gifted with good interpersonal skills and with capacity for personal development. The students registered with the OUSL are no exception to this observation. Hence as educators it is our responsibility to look into how the OUSL should provide services to guide and counsel students to develop themselves. The services of a counsellor who places emphasis on the developmental dimension of counselling could provide services to promote effective peer interaction and personal development.

Reviewing further the needs and problems of students registered for the programmes under review, experience suggests that the complexity of the procedures related to registration, re-registration, maintenance of studentship and examinations could also create problems to students especially in view of the large numbers enrolled for each of the programmes. Table 2 presents the total number enrolled in the year 2000 for each of the programmes under review in relation to staff numbers (academic and academic support staff) in each department.

Department	Programme	Staff (academic & non academic)	Number enrolled each pro.
Early Childhood Education	Certificate in Pre-school Education	3	601
Education	PGDE in Education	18	2320
Management	Diploma in Management	15	1865
Social Sciences	Foundation in Social Sciences	15	648

**Table 2 - Number enrolled for each programme and staff of each department**

While serving a large number of students enrolled for these programmes the respective departments with limited staff have to cater to the needs of students enrolled for other programmes as well. The students invariably will get little opportunity to interact with the academic staff. The academic guidance offered to these students at the limited number of face to face sessions is not at all adequate to ensure effective learning. Further due to the large numbers, the departments find it difficult to send marked assignments to students early. For example the Department of Education having enrolled annually an average of nearly 2230 Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) students has to handle 6690 essay type tutor marked assignments for a year, in addition to handling other issues related to the PGDE programme and other programmes. It is obvious that for these reasons students do not get the marked assignments early thus enabling them to continuously get information on their level of achievement and progress. The students have disclosed that the lack of adequate information on criteria of success and feedback on progress causes anxiety. Hence we see that a good portion of students following the programmes under review

are likely to encounter barriers which may impede effective learning. The services of a counsellor, no doubt, could enhance the capacity of the learner.

However there is provision in the OUSL system to make available on print, general information about the programmes. But it may be that the students being accustomed to the traditional mode of instruction received through the formal school system, are unable to comprehend and interpret meaningfully the information furnished. Under these circumstances the students often have to proceed with the programmes without having defined manageable goals that stimulate interest and enthusiasm. As such these students need support to sustain motivation and the expected level of achievement. Ismail (1997) has revealed a strong relationship between students' decision to dropout from the educational programmes offered by the OUSL and their satisfaction with the support provided by the institution. From the point of view of students, low student integration with the OUSL is a strong reason for drop out from programmes. It was clearly made evident through this study that an opportunity for more contact, preferably in the form of human contact, between the students and the institution should be provided. Successful mastery of knowledge and skills and the inculcation of favourable attitudes in students therefore demand closer interaction between students and the staff, thus emphasizing the need for services of tutors and counsellors.

The kind of support these students need could broadly be classified into two major categories namely personal and study related. But very often what might be identified as a study related need, could actually be a personal need and vice-versa.

## COUNSELLING AS A SOLUTION

Counselling is seen as both integral to the teaching and learning process and dependent on the developmental dimension of the whole person. Among the different modes of intervention adopted via distance teaching in promoting personal development through learning, counselling forms one of the best ways of clarifying the needs of students, reconciling the conflicting demands of home and work, and coming to terms with isolation and previous experience.

A variety of modes could be made use of to extend counselling services to distance students in need. But financial constraints as well as limitations related to organizational and management aspects of the OUSL, need to be reckoned with in deciding upon the different strategies to be adopted in providing counselling services to the distance learner.

Like in any other educational setting, face to face counselling becomes the most important medium of counselling for the distance learner at the OUSL as well. But this is extremely expensive in terms of staff time, especially in view of the large numbers registered for each programme and the many programmes handled by the various departments.

Experiences of other distance educational institutions could however provide an insight into the strengths and limitation of different strategies.

Earwaker (1998) asserts that a tutor, meeting a student in what is essentially a working relationship, helps a student not so much as a helping agent but rather as instrumental in facilitating the helping process. Earwaker further explains that the tutor does not bring to the encounter 'a superior wisdom' with which to solve the student's problems, but rather that the tutor by virtue of the role occupied, the human qualities shown, and the professional skills deployed, enables the solution process to occur. In fact in addition to

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skill, a tutor needs to possess or to acquire such qualities which have traditionally been defined as 'moral', patience, respect for the other, a willingness to put the other's interests above one's own, altruism, and caring. It is when these qualities are dependably present in a tutor that this tutorial relationship works best and is supportive and helpful to the distance learner. Lewis (1982) reports that the National Extension College, United Kingdom does all that it can to encourage tutors and students to communicate across a distance. The tutor creates for the student the supportive context more usually associated with the informally run conventional class. The tutor is very much more than a 'script marker'. According to Lewis the tutor in his written comments not only communicates with but also supports and motivates the learners as well as assessing their work.

A system whereby a tutor builds a counselling dimension into his work and performs the role of a tutor – counsellor could provide services to solve students' problems, whether they are concerned with subject matter, study organization, personal/social difficulties or administration.

#### **MODES OF COUNSELLING**

Counselling is possible in a group situation through the tutor – counsellor. Counselling in a group setting will not only provide information and advice, but also encourage students to develop their own skills, to obtain information for themselves. Further counselling in a group setting will enable and empower students to become more active, to ask questions, interpret, assess and make their own decisions.

Face to face contact with tutors/tutor counsellors could be very effective in tasks, such as persuasion or establishing a relationship. Tutors or tutor counsellors may have to be recruited as part time staff. Locally based part

time staff cannot be expected to be conversant with the increased complexities of OUSL courses and regulations etc. In order to ensure they function efficiently, it is necessary that they become conversant with up-to-date information about programmes and also receive proper guidance to master relevant skills. Either an intensive training programme for tutor/, tutor counsellors should be conducted or a properly designed manual to serve as a preliminary guide should be developed, in order to empower tutors/tutor counsellors, to perform their tasks efficiently.

Simpson (1988) identifies the importance of counselling by letter. Counselling is carried out by letter in distance education, especially in the developing world where other forms of communication can be tenuous. Clearly, correspondence counselling is most useful for giving relatively simple information and advice. It may be that sometimes, useful things too can be achieved, even where the problems presented are difficult and likely to need lengthy resolution. However counselling by letter obviously has limitations; it is slow, two way dialogue is difficult, and it is hard to convey feelings accurately. Yet there are advantages. It is possible to read the initial letter carefully, without the need to make an immediate response – a luxury denied to the face to face counsellor (Simpson 1998). Further there may be helpful clues in the writing and the distance learner has a permanent record to pursue at leisure and think over. Considering its advantages counselling by letter could be effectively devised by OUSL staff.

Simpson (1988) interested in devising effective but economical ways of meeting distance students' emotional and organizational needs which he believes are as important as their cognitive needs, examines other forms of specially prepared documents for counselling purposes. Simpson describes a range of interactive texts, for example, open ended questions, charts for completion and examples of other students' experiences and feelings. The aim of these interactive texts according to Simpson is to encourage students

to reflect on their feelings, motives and experiences in the hope of clarifying them. These materials are widely used in distance education in the East Anglian Regional Centre of the Open University, United Kingdom particularly for developmental counselling issues such as orientation to study at a distance, encouraging return to study and clarification of motives for study. If properly designed to suit our needs, interactive texts could be used by the OUSL too, particularly for developmental counselling issues such as orientation to study at a distance, overall career direction, organising and structuring time and social demands etc.

Lewis (1986) and Simpson (1988) suggest that any distance education institution which has some regular student newsletter has the possibility of instituting "a problem page" which deals with students' personal or study related problems.

In the United Kingdom, the Open University student newspaper '*Sesame*' is 'the problem shared page'. Students are invited to write in about their concerns – for example about examination anxiety. The letters are published anonymously if preferred, and the readers are invited to respond with their own experiences, ideas and solutions. Such a format could be appealing to OUSL students too especially because of the 'self-help' traditions of distance education.

Counselling by audio and video cassettes is becoming popular in many parts of the world. But for obvious economic reasons the audio-cassette may be preferred to the video cassette in counselling the distance learner at OUSL. It could be observed that audio-cassettes could be made use of especially in anxiety counselling. These audio-cassettes could be of different types. For example a counselling tape of relaxation exercises designed to help anxious learners to reduce their level of tension before an examination could be of much value to OUSL students.

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Broadcasting offers very little possibilities of either two-way or interactive working so that counselling by broadcasting appear to be useful essentially for ordinary information purposes. Nevertheless there are possibilities of developing broadcasting programmes for distance learners of OUSL to run 'a problem question and answer session'.

Counselling by computer or interactive video – disc is another effective strategy used particularly in the developed world today. The chances of adopting this strategy in Sri Lanka is rather remote in the present context. But with enhanced resources and a stronger regional and study centre network, computer and interactive video-disc could be effectively used particularly in developmental counselling.

Telephone tutoring and tele conferencing could also be an effective mode of counselling students particularly in enhancing information or opinion, asking questions or solving problems. However since telephone tutoring is not accessible to a wide range of students in Sri Lanka, face to face counselling sessions at local centres appear to be more appropriate in developmental as well as in problem solving situations.

## **CONCLUSION**

The characteristics of the OUSL as a distance teaching university, the characteristics of its learners and of the learning process, emphasize the need for counselling intervention with the view to meet both personal and study related needs of the learner. Of course there is no way of predicting who is likely to seek counselling service. The OUSL is called upon to support the diversity of needs of students enrolled at a distance.



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