INFORMATION ERA: ADDRESSING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS OF DISTANCE LEARNERS THROUGH GUIDANCE AND COUNSELING

by:

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Separation between student and the institution is a key characteristic of Distance Education System. Resultantly, distance learners face more psychological problems as compared to the students of formal institutions. Distance learners require more guidance and counseling facilities than their counterparts in the formal institutions. Due to unimaginable potential and unparallel opportunities, information and communication technologies (ICTs) have disseminated these distances by providing an easy access to the electronic ocean of knowledge and information on the threshold of distance learners. Eventually, swift and simultaneous guidance and counseling services are being provided to distance learners.
This study was conducted in the regions of Islamabad, Rawalpindi and Sargodha to assess the current practices of guidance and counseling provision and use of ICTs in these services. A questionnaire was administered on the sample of 300 students. Research tool was piloted and its reliability was 0.84 (Alpha Coefficient). The study revealed that existing guidance and counseling services at every regional office of AIOU are not enough for the learners. Learners’ psychological problems were not solved through guidance and counseling. There is no regular training program for tutors about guidance and counseling to learners. Most of the learners and tutors were unaware about the appointment of a student counselor at the regional offices of AIOU. Though respondents have positive attitude towards ICTs yet, no use of these technologies in guidance and counseling was witnessed.

**Key words:** Information Era, Distance education, Psychological problems, Guidance and Counseling Services

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**INTRODUCTION**

Distance Education is a cheaper way of getting education at all levels especially at higher level, so this system is indispensable for the developing countries in getting their educational targets (Urhobo, 2000). In Pakistan the formal system of education did not expand with the increased growth of population. Moreover the dropout rate has been very high. In order to meet such challenges, The Allama Iqbal Open University was established in 1974. Within a modest period the University has been able to offer courses from literacy to PhD level.

The Allama Iqbal Open University, a Mega University, is a unique institution in many ways, affording educational facility to all children from ‘nine to ninety’. Being the only Open University of Pakistan, the AIOU, since its inception, has been serving the nation by producing a highly educated human capital. Taking a meager start from an Elementary Arabic course, the AIOU has now reached to the pinnacle-imparting education to the level of PhD, M.Phil, Executive MBA/MPA, MSc. etc. On the other hand the AIOU has come up as the largest University of Pakistan in terms of course enrolment and course programs as it is offering more than 135 programs and imparting education to students exceeding 11, 70,379 in number. (Vice Chancellor's Reports (2004-05 & 2009-10)

The AIOU won NOMA award (UNESCO Paris) for an innovative teaching methodology for all adult illiterates (Sarfraz and Brennan 1990) and according to Iltaf (2002, p.17), “The innovative approach used in the literacy initiatives earned AIOU the UNESCO award of Raja Roy Singh.”
Distance learner is generally separated from the supporting organization and in this way suffers a lot as compared to a formal system student. He fails to get immediate feedback from the teachers, lacks access to a good library to supplement these studies and further, he does not get opportunities to interact and meet his fellow students and the staff of his supporting organization. So to overcome these disadvantages distance-teaching organizations have developed student support services program that normally consists of; **Tutorials, Workshops, Regional Offices, Study Centers, Library Services, Guidance and Counseling services and Media Support etc.**

Guidance is a multi-aspect process in which learners are assisted and helped in all aspects to overcome the educational difficulties and problems, so that they can easily and successfully continue their learning process in achieving educational outcomes (Koshy, 2004).

Counseling is very important part of guidance program in which counselor helps the students in solving their problems. Counseling is very important aspect in the teaching learning process of distance education system. Student’s counseling begins with the pre-admission period, continues through the duration of the program or the course, and it is helpful even after the course is completed. Student’s counselors, by personal contact, through correspondence or electronic resources, help student to reach the right person at the right time. Counseling is a short cut for an otherwise long trip. (Rashid, 2001)

Counseling is very important, interesting and fruitful part of teaching learning process. In distance education system, counseling means the advice, help and support given to students to enable them to make satisfactory progress in the system. Following are the key functions of guidance and counseling unit:

- To provide a confidential personal counseling service.
- To enable learners to face and work through personal difficulties in a way which enhance their ability to live and work effectively.
- To offer consultancy and training to academic and support staff.
- To contribute to the quality of the student experience in academic and personal areas.
- To be embedded within the institution and be mindful of its aims policies.
- To provide information, act as a resource and liaise where appropriate with other agencies.
- To adhere to the University’s Equal Opportunities Policy.

(Manchester Metropolitan University, 2005)
INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES IN GUIDANCE AND COUNSELING

Undoubtedly, Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have revolutionized every aspect of human life especially the education and training. The growth of websites and help lines as form of technically mediated service delivery means that the potential of ICTs as a change agent is now greater than ever before (Bandele, 2006 and Oye et al, 2012). These technologies bring modernity and offer people more opportunities to improve their life fashions (Dincyulerk & Uygarer, 2012). ICTs are very useful in the provision of guidance and counseling to distance learners. According to Bullock (2003) “these technologies increase accessibility to resources, dissemination of information, counseling interventions and communicating with colleagues, teachers, students, and parents” (Gerter, 1995; Stones & Turba, 1999 and Van Hom & Myrick, 2001). Regarding impact of these technologies Bullock (2003) also quoted that, these technologies have impact on the delivery of educational material including use of resources like CD-ROMs, Power point, desktop publishing, satellite feeds, cable television, and utilizing the Internet for research and publishing (Canniss, 2002; Hines, 2002; McFadden, 2000; Gale & McKee, 2002; Johnson & Sampson, 1985; and Quinn, et al., 2002). As the number of Internet users is increasing day by day (the most users are young), online guidance and counseling is becoming more popular and beneficial. Though, there is a worldwide growing need and trend of web-based counseling yet, developing countries like Pakistan are still making their way towards Internet counseling.

GUIDANCE AND CONSOLING AT THE REGIONAL OFFICES OF AIOU

The National Education Policy (1992,p.19) describes that “a suitable instructional structure shall be established for the management of guidance and career counseling programs to be introduced at the school, college and university levels”. Due to pivotal role of guidance and counseling in distance education nineteen student counselors/ field workers (lady) have been appointed in the eighteen Regional Offices of AIOU. In big regions they are appointed in grade 16 and are called counselors while in small regions they are appointed in grade 14 and are called field workers while 11 of them are permanent and remaining 8 are on daily wages. They are working as liaison officers between the students and the Directorate of Student Affairs. These counselors are facilitating learners with guidance and counseling services regarding AIOU programs, admission and examination schedule. Provision of pre-admission and post admission guidance and redressing the queries of the learners is included in their duty. However none of them is master of psychology, M.Phil or Ph.D. with specialization in distance and non-formal education but these are facilitating learners according to their potential, ability, skill and experience. Proper and suitable training workshop system is not functioning.
They keep on apprising the Directorate of Student Affairs about the current problems faced by the students in the Regions and also provide feedback on various problems of the University. These counselors have been very helpful in solving the problems of the students by coordinating with the Campus. Hundreds of pending cases of Examinations and Admission have been solved through the assistance of these Counselors. (Vice Chancellor’s Annual Report 2004-05)

**MAIN OBJECTIVES**

- The study sought to achieve the following main objectives:
- To investigate into the existing guidance and counseling services at the regional offices of AIOU.
- To suggest the measures for guidance and counseling provision at regional offices of AIOU.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

**POPULATION AND SAMPLING**

Population of the study consisted of students (300) of M.A (Education)/M.Ed (DNFE) in the regions of Sargodha, Rawalpindi and Islamabad. 100% population was taken as SAMPLE.

**INSTRUMENTS AND THEIR DEVELOPMENT**

Keeping in view the nature of the problem, descriptive i.e. survey type study was carried out to collect the data. Therefore, to elicit the opinion of the respective respondents, a questionnaire was constructed. All the statements of the questionnaire were close-ended except the last one, so that respondents could write a free response in his/her own words.

**VALIDATION OF THE QUESTIONNAIRES**

The Questionnaire was pilot tested on 35 students. After incorporating observations given by the distance learners, the questionnaire was finalized under the guidance of experts and its reliability was 0.84 (Alpha Coefficient).

**DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

After finalizing, the questionnaire was administered through prepaid postage and e-mail to the respective respondents but where applicable these were personally handed over to the respective respondents. Out of 300 questionnaires, 265 were returned and finally 260 properly filled questionnaires were analyzed by using mean (x) and percentage (%) formulas.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S. No</th>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>UNC</th>
<th>DA</th>
<th>SDA</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Mean Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Distance learners face more problems than formal students.</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>4.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Learners need individual guidance and counseling.</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>4.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Guidance and counseling is necessary for the solution of psychological problems.</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>3.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Guidance makes the learners more confident and efficient.</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>4.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Important and latest information are available at regional office.</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>2.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Tutors and counselor use modern skills and techniques for guidance and counseling.</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>06</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>2.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Learners have the facility of counseling about exam anxiety.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>62.23</td>
<td>2.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Counselor gives counsels to learners about depression.</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>2.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Counselor gives counsels to learners about anxiety.</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>2.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Counselor gives counsels to learners about stress.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>2.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Internet counseling is available for learners.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>1.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Pre and post admission guidance facilities are available at regional office.</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>2.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Orientation workshop is arranged for newly enrolled students.  

| learners are facilitated with telephonic counseling at the regional office.  

| special training is required to tutors and counselors for guidance and counseling.  

| tutors’ and counselors’ guidance is enough for the learners in solving their problems.  

| learners are satisfied with tutors’ and counselors’ guidance and counseling.  

| existing guidance and counseling services at regional offices are enough for the learners.  

| there is a dire need of counselor at every regional office.  

| guidance and counseling cell at every regional office will improve distance education.  

| Scale value for this table is SA (Strongly Agreed) =5, A (Agreed) =4, UNC (Uncertain) =3, DA (Disagreed) =2 and SDA (Strongly Disagreed) =1  

It is evident from the table that Distance learners face more problems than formal students in the preparation of assignments, course work and examination, tutorials and workshops etc. (mean score is 4.10). They feel need for individual guidance and counseling form tutors and counselors for the successful competition of their studies (mean score is 4.03) because they suffer lot of problems especially psychological problems which can be solved through guidance and counseling (mean score is 3.88). Solution of their problems builds confidence in learners and makes them more efficient in their studies (mean score is 4.30). Learners’ exam anxiety, depression, anxiety, stress, Internet counseling and pre and post-admission counseling is not available at the regional offices (mean scores are 2.33, 2.11, 2.10, 2.11 1.86 and 2.05). In spite of this valuable perception about
guidance and counseling learners are not satisfied with existing services at the regional offices because important and latest information are not displayed at the regional offices of AIOU even changing the procedure of fee submission for admission (mean score is 2.38).

Tutors and counselors do not use new skills and modern techniques for guiding learners (mean score is 2.01). There is lack of orientation workshops and telephonic counseling (mean scores are 2.19 and 2.11). Special training for guidance and counseling is necessary for counselors and there is a dire need for a counselor at every regional office to strengthening counseling facilities while establishment of guidance and counseling cell will cause improvement in distance education in Pakistan.

Although 19 lady counselors are working in 18 regional offices yet learners of the remaining 14 regional offices are still deprived of this facility. There is a big gap between demand and requirement of guidance and counseling and the facilities and services provided by AIOU. A huge number of the learners is suffering a lot and is waiting for some need oriented and broad steps from the AIOU in respect of their guidance and counseling.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Existing guidance and counseling system is not enough for addressing learners’ problems especially the psychological problems. Interestingly, most of the learners and tutors are unaware about the appointment of counselor at the regional offices of AIOU. Despite of prime importance, provision of career information is not available at the regional offices of AIOU and similarly, telephonic counseling is also not available at the regional offices. Pre-admission and post-admission guidance services are not available at regional offices of AIOU. Orientation meetings are not arranged for new students. Hence, orientation meetings may be arranged for new students at every regional office or tehsil headquarter. There is no regular training for student counselors and tutors. Therefore, a continuous training program for the counselors may be developed and launched. There is utmost need of a student counselor at every regional office. Therefore, to address these problems, a comprehensive technology based counseling model may be devised and launched at AIOU. Guidance and counseling services may be improved in two phases: a) A student counselor may be appointed at every regional office of AIOU. b) A student counseling cell may gradually be established at every regional office of AIOU. Existing guidance and counseling services may be advertised in the prospectuses and on the website of AIOU. Free telephonic counseling may be provided and at the time of admission, course choice guidance facility may be provided to students. Maximum use of Internet counseling may be ensured so that optimum benefits may be achieved from this technology.
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