

ONLINE TUTORING AND COUNSELLING OF DISTANCE LEARNERS: REDEFINING THE ROLE OF REGIONAL CENTRES AND LEARNER SUPPORT CENTRES IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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ABSTRACT

Counselling and tutoring are the backbone of any educational system whether Conventional or Open and Distance Learning (ODL), and this present scenario of social distancing has brought both the pattern of education on a single platform- Online mode. While the conventional system is struggling to find suitable ways of providing education without losing the ethos, ODL institutions are having the upper hand in dealing with these exceptional circumstances due to their inbuilt, inescapable requirement of using various technologies for the delivery of instruction and supporting their distance learners.

The pandemic of the coronavirus (COVID-19) has been a catalyst in speeding up the shift from face-to-face to online methods of tutoring and counselling distance learners. All Open Universities (OUs) and Directorates of Distance Education (DDEs) have to rethink their operations including redefining the roles and functions of their Regional Centres(RCs) and Learner Support Centres(LSCs), as brick and mortar institutions alone are not sufficient to provide counselling and tutoring support to distance learners in the times ahead.

This paper outlines the various online methods available for ODL institutions to switch over to, for providing effective counselling and tutoring support to their distance learners. An attempt has been made to identify the available technologies; define their characteristics: synchronous/asynchronous, number of learners it can serve, interactivity, etc.; and prepare a matrix on their utilization for different levels and types of tutoring and counselling. The new model that is being proposed will require re-designing the learner support system as such. In this context, the role of Regional Centres (RCs) and Learner Support Centres (LSCs) will need to be redefined. Also, the role of existing academic counsellors will need to be recast.

All the changes proposed by the researchers will completely overhaul the existing ODL system and facilitate the ODL institutions to respond to the need of the hour and make the learners well versed with the skills required for the 21st century.

INTRODUCTION

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is defined as a system of education in which the learner is separated from the teacher as well as peers- in both space and time, and instruction is provided through self-learning materials (SLMs). Initially, the standard learning package comprised SLM in print, as the master medium, coupled with the broadcasting of audio and video programmes and face-to-face academic counselling conducted at Learner Support Centres. Further, with the evolution of ICT and its adoption in education, there has been a shift from passive methods of instruction towards the use of more interactive media and technology to communicate, disseminate knowledge and engage the distance learners in the teaching-learning process. Thus, there emerged



the introduction of satellite-based two-way audio and one-way video through teleconferencing; interactive radio counselling; two-way video through web-conferencing; two-way communication through email; web-enabled learning through Learning Management System (LMS), Online repositories, Open Educational Resources (OERs), Massive Open and Online Courses (MOOCs), etc. (Srivastava, 2016).

Nevertheless, face-to-face counselling sessions are an important component of the learner support system, organized for both theory and practical courses. The time allotted to face to face counselling sessions is worked out following the nature and type of programme and the total credit weightage of the programme. The credit system has been standardized for the ODL system- a credit (equivalent to thirty study hours on the part of the learner) is the measure of study hours required to complete a course successfully. The courses are of 2, 4, 6 or 8 credits and many courses constitute a programme. There are standard norms laid down concerning the total credit weightage of the programme which is linked to the duration of the programme. As per the laid down norms a programme of six months duration will be of minimum 16 credits; one-year duration of minimum 32 credits, two years of minimum 64 credits and three years of minimum 96 credits. According to procedures, the number of counselling sessions for theory-based courses will be 10 % of the total stipulated time for the course, whereas for a practical course it will be 100% of that stipulated time (Government of India, 2017).

The counselling sessions are organized for distance learners, to provide them avenues for interaction with subject experts (academic counsellors) and peers; as close to their homes as possible. Counselling sessions are not lecture sessions, but sessions aimed at providing academic guidance, tutoring and counselling support to the learners, feedback on performance, facilitate reference work at libraries and develop required skills and competencies for the programme and practical courses (wherever required). In keeping with the flexibility of the ODL system, the learners don't need to attend counselling sessions organized for theory courses but attendance is mandatory in tutorials specially organized for theory courses under the Choice-Based Credit System (CBCS) and in all practical courses where 80% attendance is compulsory for the learners to be eligible to appear in the term-end examination.

To conduct these activities satisfactorily, ODL institutions have adopted a three-tier structure consisting of the Headquarters, Regional Centres (RCs) and Learner Support Centres (LSCs).

To reach out to the distance learners, ODL institutions establish Regional Centres (RCs) within their jurisdictional area which function as OU/ DDE sub-office. These RCs act as an interface of the institution in the region. The roles and responsibilities of an RC are predefined which are: delivery of academic programmes; promotion of ODL system; organization and conduct of learner support services through Learner Support Centres (LSCs); and establishment, maintenance and monitoring of LSCs in its region. RCs also have an important role in staff development activities at the local/State level.

ODL institutions establish LSCs to reach out to distance learners as close to their homes as possible to provide them support services such as face-to-face academic counselling, tutoring, library facilities, etc, basically to enhance their educational and learning experience through interaction with their peers and subject experts/ teachers (known as academic counsellors). According to UGC (ODL) Regulations, 2017 (Government of India, 2017), "Learner Support Centre" means 'a centre established, maintained or recognised by the Higher Educational Institution for advising, counselling, providing an interface between the teachers and the learners, and rendering any academic and any other related service and assistance required by the learners'. Through LSC, distance learners overcome the feeling of loneliness or being alone. LSC plays a very important role in bringing the learner closer to the university system and to provide her/him a sense of studentship.

An Academic Counsellor can be defined as a qualified teacher in a particular discipline, has teaching experience at a higher education institution (HEI), generally, the faculty member of HEI wherein the LSC is established. Eligibility criteria for an academic counsellor are clearly defined in the UGC (ODL) Regulations, 2017 (Government of India, 2017) i.e. '*No academic staff in the Study Centre or Learner Support Centre shall be appointed who does not fulfil the minimum qualifications as laid down in the University Grants Commission (Minimum Qualifications for Appointment of Teachers and other Academic Staff in the Universities and Colleges*



and Measures for the Maintenance of Standards in Higher Education) Regulations, 2010 as modified from time to time'. Academic counsellors must be acquainted with the characteristics of distance learners and their needs. They can differentiate between the teaching techniques utilized in the conventional system and various techniques and technologies required in the ODL system. They must be aware of the instructional design, have familiarity with the learner-centred approach in a blended mode of learning, can use different delivery media including online and computer-mediated communication, and ICT enabled learning.

University Grants Commission (UGC) also acknowledges the importance of online learning and to maintain the quality in online courses/ programmes, notified the UGC (Online Courses or Programmes) Regulations through Gazette Notification on 4th July 2018. It put more emphasis on taking adequate measures for training and capacity building of its teaching and administrative staff at regular intervals. The UGC (Online programmes/ courses) Regulations (2018) also state that '*Higher Educational Institutions shall provide adequate support for advising, counselling, mentoring and guidance to ensure the best possible learning experience for the learners and there shall be clear guidelines on academic integrity and netiquette (internet etiquette) expectations regarding lesson activities, group discussions, chats and plagiarism'. This notification also defines 'Self-Learning e-Module' as a modular unit of e-learning material which should be self- explanatory, self-contained, and self-directed for the learner, and amenable to self-evaluation, and enables the learner to acquire the prescribed level of learning in a course of study. It has also suggested some "e-Learning content, namely (a) e-Text Materials, (b) Video Lectures, (c) Audio-Visual interactive material, (d) Virtual Classroom sessions, (e) Audio Podcasts, (f) Virtual Simulation, and (g) Self-Assessment Quizzes or Tests." (GoI, 2018).*

In the Digital Age, all HEIs, particularly ODL HEIs, need to harness technologies, to provide counselling and tutoring services to the distance learners on their desktops/devices and remove the physical distance altogether. Paterson, Laajala & Lehtelä (2019) found online counselling as an optimal alternative for face-to-face student-teacher meeting. Iwasaki et al. (2019) also found merit in online tutoring for learners at a distance. Learner support services need to be revamped to provide online services that are instant, accurate and timely anywhere anytime. At the same time online platforms should be created for interaction amongst peers and also with academic counsellors, synchronously and asynchronously, for enhancing motivation levels; to provide feedback; and acquisition of required skills and competencies. Rao (2020) also advocated for the replacement of face-to-face counselling with online tutoring and counselling. However, he advocated the use of digital content in different formats such as audio, video, animations, simulations, virtual labs. etc. during the online counselling sessions. The skills of successful teamwork are regarded as essential in today's work environment. Learners need to be engaged in authentic learning through real-life simulations and experiences, to promote active learning.

HEIs have no other option but to rethink their operations of meeting the requirements of a technology-driven ecosystem. The shift in the educational ecosystem and online programmes will become the commonplace (Mckay et al.,2018). However, the faculty need to ensure appropriate instructional technology suited to such learners. The existing structure of Learner Support Services through Regional Centres and Learner Support Centres need to be re-designed in sync with the adoption of online methods of tutoring and counselling distance learners. Wong, Bonn, Tam, & Wong (2018) in their study found the online counselling more effective than the face to face counselling and thus, propagated for creation of online counselling centres in the educational institutions. Srivastava et al (2020) also found the online counselling very effective during the Pendamic times. Thus, A disruption of the existing system is the need of the hour.

OBJECTIVES

This study is being undertaken with the following objectives:

- To identify the technologies available for online tutoring and counselling;
- To define the characteristics of the identified technologies;
- To prepare a matrix on their utilization for different levels and types of tutoring and counselling;



- To redefine the role of Regional Centres;
- To revisit the role of Learner Support Centres; and
- To recast the existing role of academic counsellors.

COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES FOR ONLINE TUTORING AND COUNSELLING

The communication on the Internet takes place in two ways - Synchronously and Asynchronously. The communication that happens in real-time and the sender and the receiver of the communication is connected in real-time are part of the synchronous communication. The communication that does not necessitate the connectivity of the sender and the receiver at the same time, and provides an opportunity to receive the communication and respond to it with a time gap; form part of the asynchronous communication. The online technologies used for pedagogical purposes by the open and distance learning institutions also can be classified in the same manner. These technologies follow collaborative learning principles (Hung & Nichani, 2001).

In the asynchronous environment of communication, the teaching and learning process takes place in real-time between the teacher and the learners while they are separated by space (Pulist, 2002). The real-time interaction with the teacher serves as a motivating factor for the learners. Some of the web tools facilitating online two-way communication synchronously are listed below: **Chat Applications** which provide the facility of exchanging audio, video, images, and graphics in addition to text messages which can be used for live interaction synchronously (WhatsApp, Yahoo Messenger FaceBook Messenger, WeChat, Telegram, etc.); and **Web-conferencing tools** which provide access to two-way communication through Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) (CISCO Webex, BlueJeans, Google Meet, Microsoft Team, Skype, WhatsApp Audio and Video conferencing, etc.).

The asynchronous technologies facilitate the communication between the teacher and the learners remotely, not necessarily there being connected in real-time. The teaching and learning in this environment do not take place simultaneously. This format communication decreases the dependence of the sender and receiver to be available simultaneously. The receiver of the message can give a response to his/her convenience. Some of the applications used in the asynchronous environment are mentioned below:

An email which is a common method of communication today; Online repositories for storage of video content (TeacherTube, Vimeo, YouTube, etc), and storage of textual material (e-Gyankosh, SAKSHAT, etc); Mailing Lists and Discussion Boards can be used for communication from one to many; Social Networking Applications are being explored for educational purposes given their popular usage (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, etc.); Online Classrooms online learning platforms have come up in the virtual environment that offer tools for communication, collaboration, counselling and tutoring at a distance. The teacher can create a personalised pace for the learners while tracking their progress in the learning process. These platforms enable the teachers to conduct quizzes & online polls, assign & receive assignments, share content and communicate with learners in an effective manner (Google Classroom, Easy Class, WizIQ, VEDAMO, LearnCube, Edmodo, etc).

The salient features of the synchronous and asynchronous communication technologies suitable for tutoring and counselling distance learners are presented in **Table-1**.



Name of Technology	Synchronous/ Asynchronous	Type of interaction	No of Participants	Suitability for the type of activities
WhatsApp Chat	Synchronous	Real-time interaction	The formation of groups and channels on these Chat applications provide the option to reach many students at the same time without much effort. This application also provides the facility for conducting video conferencing while managing the chat room activities. The sharing of the documents and presentations is possible with them.	The academic counsellors can make use of these chat applications for providing academic guidance to the learners. This application is most suited for counselling, tutoring and online lecturing. The learners can also be allowed to present their cases online before other learners.
Facebook Messenger	Synchronous	Real-time interaction	The formation of groups and channels on these Chat applications provide the option to reach many students at the same time without much effort.	The academic counsellors can make use of these chat applications for providing academic guidance to the learners.
WeChat	Synchronous	Real-time interaction	The formation of groups and channels on these Chat applications provide the option to reach many students at the same time without much effort.	The academic counsellors can make use of these chat applications for providing academic guidance to the learners.
Telegram	Synchronous	Real-time interaction	The formation of groups and channels on these Chat applications provide the option to reach many students at the same time without much effort.	The academic counsellors can make use of these chat applications for providing academic guidance to the learners.

Table-1: Salient features of the synchronous and asynchronous communication technologies for online tutoring and counselling



CISCO Webex	Synchronous	Real-time interaction	This application provides the facility for conducting video conferencing while managing the chat room activities. The sharing of the documents and presentations is possible with them.	This application is most suited or counselling, tutoring and online lecturing. The learners can also be allowed to present their cases online before other learners.
BlueJeans,	Synchronous	Real-time interaction	This application provides the facility for conducting video conferencing while managing the chat room activities. The sharing of the documents and presentations is possible with them.	This application is most suited or counselling, tutoring and online lecturing. The learners can also be allowed to present their cases online before other learners.
Google Meet	Synchronous	Real-time interaction	This application provides the facility for conducting video conferencing while managing the chat room activities. The sharing of the documents and presentations is possible with them.	This application is most suited or counselling, tutoring and online lecturing. The learners can also be allowed to present their cases online before other learners.
Microsoft Team	Synchronous	Real-time interaction	This application provides the facility for conducting video conferencing while managing the chat room activities. The sharing of the documents and presentations is possible with them.	This application is most suited or counselling, tutoring and online lecturing. The learners can also be allowed to present their cases online before other learners.
Skype	Synchronous	Real-time interaction	This application provides the facility for conducting video conferencing while managing the chat room activities. The sharing of the documents and presentations is possible with them.	This application is most suited or counselling, tutoring and online lecturing. The learners can also be allowed to present their cases online before other learners.



Email (Gmail, Yahoo, Hotmail, Rediffmail, etc)	Asynchronous	Live interactive communication as well as communication at the convenience	To many receivers at the same time following one to many communication systems.	The audio, video, graphics and text files can be sent through email as an attachment to the sender. The collaborative peer/ group learning is possible through this system. The email system can be used by the academic counsellors for tutoring and counselling of the learners. The audio and video lectures along with graphics can be sent to the learners for better understanding of the concepts. The learners can submit their home assignments through email which can be assessed by the academic counsellors for providing constructive feedback to the learners.
TeacherTube	Asynchronous	Online repository dedicated to educational video content.	Educational organisations and teachers can share their educational content such as audio, video, slides etc. with the educational community.	The academic counsellors can share their academic content meant for counselling purposes through this website with their learners. The repository hosts a mix of teaching and learning resources developed by the experts in their respective areas
YouTube	Asynchronous	Online repository dedicated to educational video content.	Educational organisations and teachers can share their educational content such as audio, video, slides etc. with the educational community.	The academic counsellors can share their academic content meant for counselling purposes through this website with their learners. The repository hosts a mix of teaching and learning resources developed by the experts in their respective areas



Vimeo	Asynchronous	Online repository dedicated to educational video content.	Educational organisations and teachers can share their educational content such as audio, video, slides etc. with the educational community.	The academic counsellors can share their academic content meant for counselling purposes through this website with their learners. The repository hosts a mix of teaching and learning resources developed by the experts in their respective areas.
Social Networking application (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, etc)	Asynchronous	Live interactive communication as well as communication at the convenience.	These can be used for organising or sharing sessions as well as live interactive sessions with a large number of users.	These sites allow the users to share content, opinion, audio, video and graphic presentation with the rest of the world. These applications are being used for pedagogical purposes by the education institutions especially the ODL institutions. In addition to sharing useful content over these websites, The ODL institutions can well make use of their educational potential for arranging counselling sessions with learners at large
Online Classrooms (Google Classroom, Easy Class, WizIQ, VEDAMO, LearnCube, Edmodo, etc.,)	Asynchronous	Online learning platforms with a virtual environment that offer tools for communication, collaboration, counselling and tutoring at a distance.	The teacher can create a personalized pace for the learners while tracking their progress in the learning process.	These platforms enable the teachers to conduct quizzes & online polls, assign & receive assignments, share content and effectively communicate with learners. Many of them provide evaluation tools in the form of rubrics that can be used by the teachers for evaluating the performance of the learners and awarding their grades. The ODL institutions can make use of these platforms for reaching their learners with content, tutoring, evaluation and scaffolding services in an integrated manner.



Appropriateness of Technology

The modern communication technologies have made the teaching and learning process easier, cost-effective and faster. The article suggests different applications for various pedagogical purposes especially the tutoring and counselling which are representative only. Several other applications are available to the users at different costs and tariffs. While some of the applications are available freely for personal use, institutional/enterprise versions can be acquired by the institutions at a cost. The ODL institutions may identify and make use of the applications keeping in view their requirements, resources and expertise. However, a version control mechanism over different versions of technologies to be used for academic activities needs to be put in place as a policy keeping in view the fact that users with different versions of technologies would be accessing the institutional servers and consequently, may face compatibility issues. Use of advanced versions of technology by the institutions may restrict the access of the virtual environment to the learners who might still be using older versions of applications. In addition to this, management and upkeep of data centres housing prominent student data would be a crucial area seeking the attention of the institutions. A robust data security system would go a long way in preserving the sanctity of the data in the cyberspace and providing seamless linkage and access to the institutional resources.

METHODS OF ONLINE TUTORING AND COUNSELLING: AN OPERATIONAL MODEL

Each programme offered through ODL mode consists of many courses, depending upon the duration and level of the programme. All programmes have the component of academic counselling and tutoring. For programmes in Sciences, Computer Sciences, Library Sciences, Health Sciences, etc., there are practical components which are to be transacted through laboratories/ hands-on training/ skill development centres, etc. All ODL programmes follow a learning outcome-based curriculum framework (LOCF). Accordingly, programme specific outcomes (PSO) and course-specific outcomes (CSO) are spelt out and the evaluation methodology is pre-decided as per the LOCF. To minimise the transactional distance and overcome the isolation of distance learners, and keep them motivated, on-track, regular academic counselling and guidance are provided throughout the study. Also to enrich their learning experience, avenues are created for interaction with peers and subject experts. Learners are also provided regular updates; tested through tools of assessment and provided feedback on performance. The learners are also facilitated for reference work at library and field activities for acquisition of necessary skills and competencies. Table-2 provides the details of different academic components of an ODL programme and suggestive technologies which can be used to accomplish these activities.

Sr No.	Programme Components	Description of Activities	Suggestive Technologies
1.	Self-Learning Material	All courses that constitute a Programme	Blocks/Modules(Print),TeacherTube,YouTube,OERs(web-based),MOOCsOERs(SWAYAM),Onlinecourses(LMS),Digital repositoriesCourses
2.	Informing and Updating	Updates of different activities or deadlines during studies	SMS alerts, ChatBot, YouTube, WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, Announcements on Website, Email, etc.

Table 2: Suggestive Technologies for various Components of Counselling and Tutoring:



Sr No.	Programme Components	Description of Activities	Suggestive Technologies	
3.	Advising and Counselling	Providing advice and person-specific counselling to overcome hurdles during the study.	FAQs on Website, Email, SMS, WhatsApp, Facebook Live, Google Meet, Skype, BlueJeans, Microsoft Team, Facebook- Messenger, WhatsApp Chat, Telegram, WizIQ, etc	
4.	Continuous assessment	For evaluating learner outcomes during the course and providing feedback on performance (Tutor Marked Assignments (TMA) (Essay type questions, Short answer questions, and multiple-choice questions), Computer Marked Assignments (CMA) multiple-choice questions), Online tests (Multiple choice questions)	Pdf attachment through email, Online quizzes, Google Drive, OneDrive, Google Forms,	
5.	Academic Counselling (Subject-specific)	Providing subject/course-specific academic guidance and counselling: Theory Courses (10% of the total study hours) Practical Courses (100% of the total study hours)	Theory Courses: Google Meet, Skype, BlueJeans, Microsoft Team, Facebook WhatsApp Chat, WhatsApp Telegram, Facebook Live, etc. Practical Courses: Virtual labs, Online Simulation Programmes, Virtual Reality, Virtual Tours, Second Life, Augmented Reality Programmes, etc.	
6.	Guidance	Guiding for preparing Project/Dissertations(Project work/ Dissertation/ Project Report)	WhatsApp, Email, Google Meet, Webex, BlueJeans, Skype, Google Classroom, Edmodo	

The academic counsellor is responsible for providing academic counselling and tutoring support to distance learners at LSC for the conduct of different activities mentioned in Table 2. Currently, these activities are mostly performed in a face to face situation on weekends/ holidays as per the counselling schedules prepared by LSCs. However, the focus of this paper is a paradigm shift from face to face counselling and tutoring to online methods of tutoring and counselling. This paper provides a framework to enable the Academic Counsellor to plan these activities through the selection of appropriate available technologies suggested in Table 1. Academic counsellors may choose various types of media – text, image, audio, video to communicate with learners through various available online tools. It can be synchronous communication or asynchronous communication. The template given in Table-3 will facilitate the academic counsellor to systematically plan the delivery of a course allotted to her/him. This will also serve as a checklist for them to ensure that the LOCF of the particular course is



not overlooked and the learning resources to be utilized including the tutoring and counselling tools and activities that would ensure the acquisition of required skills and competencies by the learners.

Table 3: Plan for online counselling and tutoring

Name of the Programme:						
Name of the Course	Learning Outcomes	Learning Resource(s)	Tutoring and Counselling Tool(s)	Assessment Tool(s)	Suggestive Activities (to be guided by Academic counsellor)	

RE-CONTEXTUALIZED ROLE OF REGIONAL CENTRES

The RCs serving as the sub-offices of the OU/ DDE in the region would be re-contextualized to the changed scenario. The number of RCs could also be scaled down depending on the logistics and requirement of the ODL institution to coordinate with the LSCs/DLHs in the region.

a) Conversion of LSCs to Digital Learning Hubs (DLHs)

The first step would be to convert the existing LSCs into Digital Learning Hubs (DLHs) (Srivastava & Suman, 2018). The LSCs having computer labs can be easily converted into DLHs where the academic counsellors and learners can access computers with internet connections for participating in the proposed online tutoring and counselling services. This is necessary to facilitate the learners and academic counsellors, who may not have access to digital media or internet connectivity. The learners can access other online educational resources at these locations.

b) Establishment of Data Centre for Database Management

The proposed paradigm shift will exponentially enhance the traffic to the central servers. It will also lead to the generation of huge databases with live access to the stakeholders. Given this, there is a need for the creation of a Data Centre at all RCs for management of data of various academic activities that has to be kept secure and protected with uninterrupted power supply and proper backup facilities.

c) Distribution of learners and allotment to DLHs

The enrollment data of the learners available at the regional level would be used for data mining and distribution of learners and allotment to various DLHs. RCs will beforehand obtain information from the learners and academic counsellors regarding the availability of devices with internet connectivity, to do a reality check before commencing the activities.

d) Training of DLH staff and Academic Counsellors

The RC should conduct orientation programmes for the academic counsellors and learners to familiarize them with the new technologies and demonstrate how to use them effectively in the teaching-learning process.

e) Online Helpdesk



The database management needs to be put in place due to the creation of the Data Centre, coupled with the adoption of Interactive Voice Response (IVR) that allows a computer to respond by taking the inputs, processing it and giving the output through the use of voice. This will enable RCs to introduce a fully automated Online Helpdesk for attending to learners and responding to them accurately and timely. Introduction of institutional ChatBots can play a substantial role in this process. Both academic and administrative support can be provided through this approach. Academic queries could be forwarded to the concerned academic counsellors on email, to respond to the learners via email.

f) Cell for Student Tracking

All registered learners should be tracked and fed with regular updates by a dedicated Cell set up for this purpose. Learning analytics will strengthen the decision-making process in the interest of providing seamless tracking of the learners. Such measures will motivate the learners and also reduce dropouts as the purpose would be to track the progress made by the distance learners and identify those learners who are unable to navigate through the learning path charted for them and are lagging and require additional support in terms of tutoring and counselling. Accordingly, changes could be made and special initiatives were undertaken to benefit the latter.

g) Cell for Learning Analytics

RCs would be required to set up a separate Cell for Learning Analytics whose primary task would proactively facilitate the learners by identifying the diverse learner groups by adopting a segmented approach, namely: old age learners, homemakers, PwDs, defence and security personnel, economically weaker learners, learners residing in remote areas/ difficult terrains/ backward areas/ rural areas, among others. Also, analysis of data at all stages of the student lifecycle will provide insights about how they learn, what their preferences are, and predict the correlations in their contexts. Both the Cells for Student Tracking and Learner Analytics could work in tandem to assist the ODL institution in making informed decisions in providing the much needed special support required by the at-risk learners and helping them continue to be mainstream learners.

REDEFINING THE ROLE AND FUNCTIONS OF LEARNER SUPPORT CENTRES

The role of the existing LSCs would also change in the proposed scenario. Learner support services are paramount in the ODL system whether it is distance learning or online learning. The chances of a distance learner to complete his/her programme of study successfully, primarily depends on the effectiveness of the support services offered by the ODL institution at its LSCs. The changes required at the level of the LSC are as follows:

a) Converting LSC into Digital Learning Hub (DLH)

Presently, the requirements of LSC includes infrastructure like lecture theatres/ classrooms, office space, library etc. But after opting for online counselling, there will be a requirement of well-equipped computer labs with latest computer machines and a provision of internet connectivity e.g. Wi-Fi, broadband, etc. The design of the DLH should be a space that promotes informal learning where the learners can come and study online using computers with internet connections (Srivastava & Suman, 2018). The academic counsellors should also have access to these computers in case they do not have the required facilities at their homes. Harrad & Banks (2016) opined that the counsellors should design online counselling sessions to be time-sensitive in such a way to promote richness and depth in conversations. Ensuring a positive and rewarding experience of online counselling, the DLH must provide equitable support infrastructures that are also appropriately translated into the online environment (Pullan, 2011).

b) Assistance to Utilize Technology:

In India, where the population of digital illiterates and digital immigrants is higher than the population of digital natives, it is important to provide human support and training to distance learners to handle the technology. The



most vital support to the learners is freely available online-friendly academic resources and sufficient opportunities for interaction with the academic counsellors (student-instructor interaction) (Cannady, 2015).

c) Orientation of Distance Learners

Although the assistance to distance learners can be provided at LSC yet it is important to orient learners on how to access the technology and avail the facility of online counselling. It is also mentioned by Cho (2012) that providing orientation services, to the learners, is essential to integrate the current environment into their new online learning environment. It is proven that orientation programmes have improved student retention and academic performance.

d) Identification and Training of Academic Counsellors

It is one of the important roles of DLHs to identify the academic counsellors as per the eligibility criteria mentioned in UGC (ODL) Regulations, 2017 (GOI, 2017). Academic counsellors should be trained by the RC academic staff/faculty at the Headquarters in the usage of the web-based technologies and familiarized with online pedagogical requirements of online tutoring and counselling. Roddy, *et al* (2017) also pointed out that learners adopting study *via* intensive modes (online counselling) have increased expectations of their instructors (academic counsellors). Therefore, to meet the expectations of distance learners availability of well trained academic counsellors is necessary.

e) Availability of e-Library

The proposed DLH is expected to act as educational resource centres also. Therefore, every DLH must have the facility of an e-library for the learners. To ensure maximum utilization of library services, DLH should subscribe to online library services, e-resources like e-books, e-journals etc. and provide remote access to its learners. Development of a mechanism to share the subscription of education digital resources available with the central library of the ODL institutions can also be thought of sharing with the DLHs.

CONCLUSION

The ODL system has the potential to fill in the knowledge and skill gaps in bulk, to serve the needs and aspirations of millions of learners. The Indian Government also realizes the importance of online education therefore the regulations particularly for the online programme was notified in the current year only to maintain the quality in higher education through online mode. Due to pandemic digital learning is trending nowadays, yet it can be considered as the future of teaching and learning. Keeping this vision in mind, the National Education Policy (GOI, 2020) of India also focused on online education. It suggests that leading educational institutions will conduct pilot studies on various areas of online education like student device addiction, most preferred formats of e-content, etc.

Efforts are also required to overhaul the system with the adoption of the latest technologies that can be more effective than traditional classroom-based instruction which is still regarded as more superior to ODL methods of teaching-learning. Digital technologies are disrupting the entire Higher Education system and there is an urgent need to recast the system in the interest of the present and future generations who are tuned to process information differently using digital media. Uninterrupted power supply and availability of internet connectivity is a must for effective implementation of Online Education and making these available is a major challenge for Online Education. Although Internet access to the remote area is gradually increasing and quality of Internet speed is also improving, that is not enough, Online Education requires more rigours speed, security, and availability of the equipment and tools to realise the Internet-driven virtual classrooms. Restructuring educational institutions, re-skilling faculty in online teaching and familiarizing the learners to virtual learning is a big task ahead. To address the need for basic infrastructure which is required for online education the NEP, 2020 make the provision of budget to develop the infrastructure and resources for extensive use of technology.



Further, for making the online counselling and tutoring more successful the readiness of HEIs of shifting from traditional methods to contemporary methods of teaching and learning is of utmost importance. L Price *et al* (2007) also suggested that there is a dire need of training opportunities for educators and learners for effective online communication and there is a requirement to understand the nature of online tuition and prerequisites for effective online interaction.

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