

How Do You Counsel Distance Students in Higher Education Programme?

By

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Abstract

In the pursuit of higher education, distance students face many obstacles which they have to manage very tactfully in order to gain maximum benefit and success in their studies. For example, some students experience family problems, other students have hard time with finance, and yet some other students have work related problems, personal problems as well as problems in coping with student life. These problems are evidenced in our day-to-day involvement with distance students and also verified by some questionnaire surveys. Distance education institutions use a range of techniques to facilitate counselling activities which include print, audio-visual materials, telephone and computer-based communications as well as occasional face-to-face meetings.

Distance Education Centre of USM counsels its students right from the start through to the end of their study. The Centre uses mainly letter correspondence, telephone and occasional face-to-face meeting with students, either individually or in groups. At places parallel experiences of other institutions are also highlighted. Some of the counselling informations are given in print and elements of counselling are also incorporated in the self study materials as well as in the teletutorial sessions which could be classified as informations, advices, encouragements, supports as well as offering helps. In general, distance students at the Centre express their satisfaction with counselling services.

INTRODUCTION

The Centre for Distance Education (CDE) of Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) is currently managing various courses to a total of 3,296 external students throughout the country. This has been reported elsewhere (Idrus et. al, 1992; Mat Zin 1993). Distance students have a far more challenging learning context compared to their counterparts in conventional system. External students are separated from the teaching institutions as well as from other students with which/whom they must have teaching learning interactions. On top of that, since most of the external students in higher education programme are adult, their commitment for studies is only part-time, that is, studies have to be fitted around other responsibilities such as work and family. Because of this, external students need even more support than students in conventional system do, whether in the forms of guidance, encouragements and helps in the course of their studies. The need for a continuous support as such has long been recognised and well justified by various authors (See for examples Holmberg 1983; Sewart, cited in Keegan 1986). Independent and open learning do not subscribe to the meaning that teaching institutions can provide less dedicated support for external or distance students. Major student support services that are in operation at the Centre for Distance Education of (USM) now range from orientation week, residential intensive course, regional study centres as venue for libraries, laboratories, workshops and teletutorials, and counselling services.

The purpose of this paper is to describe some aspects of the counselling services for distance students at CDE of USM. This is centred around student problems, counselling activities and students response towards existing counselling services.

Counselling, as we may use the term, starts from the premise that it is our professional obligation to help students who have problems, be it personal, academic or administrative. It should be noted however that counselling in distance education does not include direct support to those with problems which are of a serious physical or mental nature. Counselors in distance education advise and support 'students,' they are not concerned with 'patients' (Sewart, 1983 p. 8). Now, how does this paper relate to the theme, "Higher Education for All"?

This could probably be best explained in terms of participation and equity. Now, it seems that higher education provisions in conventional system are well resourced and supported, including counselling services, the aspect that we will look at. Therefore, is it not the case that distance students should also benefit equally with respect to resources and supports. (For the discussion of participation and equity, see Anwyl, 1984). He once expresses his worry, "Even allowing that we can increase the quality of the external studies experience, how do we wish to see external studies developed as a low-cost substitute or alternative for full-time internal provision?" He further argues that if the group served by external studies has legitimate claim to educational provision should the costs sought to be lower than those applying to internal full-time and part-time studies? Presumably external students are entitled to the best possible provision? Likewise prevailing structure in educational provision in general and in distance education in particular, serve to enhance the needs of the institution at the expense of the individual students (Forster, 1983). If we must provide access to learning through distance education at all, shouldn't they (the students) be getting similar quality of educational provisions? In this paper, the focus is around what constitutes desirable counselling service at a distance?

TYPICAL PROBLEMS EXPERIENCED BY DISTANCE STUDENTS AT USM

From a three year survey conducted at USM from 1988 to 1990 it was found that the most cited problems by distance students who were studying in pure sciences, social sciences and humanities were of personal, family, vocational, financial and also of interaction with the institution (Mat Zin, et. al 1992). There were some variations in the size of a particular problem between students in the pure science programmes and those in the arts programmes. The problems in detail, together with percentage of each item are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1

Typical problems associated with distance students at the Centre for Distance Education of USM

Breakdown of the main problems		Percentage of the respondents
Personal	- Health	3.5
	- emotional stress	5.9
	- lack of learning ability	10.7
	- decrease in motivation	8.9
Family	- Death of a family member	1.7
	- Illness of a family member	3.5
	- child delivery	3.5
	- marital conflict	3.5
	- did not get husband/wife's consent	5.3
Vocational	- leave is limited	12.5
	- difficult to get leave	8.9
	- cannot leave the job	12.5
	- change of job	1.7
Financial	- cannot afford to pay	12.5
	- money used for unexpected purposes	12.5
	- increase of debt	5.6
	- cannot justify to pay for the residential school	16.7
Interaction with Institution	- Did not satisfy with teaching-learning provisions	17.8
	- support services were not adequate	14.2
	- difficult to adapt personal life with distance education	16.0

Of late the Centre has also offered degree in Civil Engineering through distance, and a survey to find out how the students feel about counselling services was conducted. It revealed, out of 54 students that 75% were having academic and administrative problems. Some 20% stated that they have problems related to work, children and financial. Some 55% experienced difficulty in keeping motivation to study; not less also those who were difficult to obtain leave from work. Commuting to and from Regional Study Centre became problems to some 33% of respondents (Mat Zin, 1995).

Of one hundred cases, which were dealt with using telephone contacts, for the last two years (1993 and 1994), the figure can be broken down to 38.2% of work related problems, 20.6% of personal, 12.7% of family, 11.8% concerning administration and academic matters, 10.8% of interaction with the learning context and 5.9% contributed to financial. There was many a case where student experienced multiple problems at a particular time, for example student had problem related to work, family and interaction simultaneously. Problem in one aspect of student's life may lead to other problem was also found, take as an example, heavy office work during day time caused some students to feel exhausted to study at night. Some students who were working on temporary appointment which usually received low salary, found it hard to pay both for living and school fees.

Our findings are parallel with the experience of others, for instance Jegede (1994) reported that anxiety level is high among distance students and in the opinion of the students, the factors such as content of the study materials, finance, readiness to study, time and employment effect their learning at a distance. Otto Peters (1992) listed adult student's personal life which is involving professional and family obligations and other commitments as one of the influencing factors for high early student drop-out rate at Fern Universitat (German).

COUNSELLING ACTIVITIES CONDUCTED AT CDE

As students in the distance education programme are dispersed over a wide area, counselling via face-to-face meeting is limited to certain occasions, thus the counselling sessions have to rely a lot on correspondence and telephone calls. In British Open University, tutor-counselors meet face-to-face with their students at the beginning of the academic session, then followed by telephone calls, exchange of letters and audio cassettes (Sewart, 1983; Paine, 1983). The CDE, Universiti Sains Malaysia, offers

counselling and advice to its students through a combination of face-to-face meetings, printed materials, correspondence, and telephone communications.

Counselling through face-to-face meeting

Meeting with students and lecturer-counsellors occurs in three occasions, that is, during orientation week (for new intakes), during residential intensive course for all students and during occasional staff visit to the Regional Centres.

☐ Orientations Week

Freshmen attend orientation programme at USM's main campus in Penang for 5 days. They are briefed about course selection, introduced to student support facilities, and given information about counselling services in a series of meeting involving university's protocols, academic and supporting staff of the Centre and lecturer - counsellors.

Information for counselling emphasizes on the context of distance learning, the advantages and disadvantages of the system, and to alert new students of their role to assess their own circumstances, their present commitments, and how all these can be put together with the task of learning that they are going to undertake for the next 5 or 7 years. Knowing the learning context and their own circumstances, they are asked to plan their study accordingly .

This will allow students to make a rough estimate; of how long they will graduate, thus how many credits/papers they should take in one particular academic session.

Another important message that we would like to pass on to the students is that we, the staff at the CDE, are ready and committed to offer advices and supports to students during their study with USM. The usefulness to create good relationship with new students in the orientation program is well described by Carter and Clilverd (1993):

Students' first contacts with Open Training & Education Network (OTEN) NSW Tech & Future Education of Australia in the orientation week determine what sort of relationship they will have with us. They must have information that is accessible and welcoming but also complete and accurate in order to chose their goal wisely. The system of enrolment must be as smooth, simple and fast as possible, and ensure their special needs are identified and appropriate contact made.

❑ Residential Intensive Course

A three week November intensive course is held annually at the main campus in Penang. During this short period, counselling sessions are conducted face-to-face. Two main activities which students normally have, one is individual meeting with lecturer-counsellors and another is counselling forum. At a time lecturer-counsellor meets students in group, however it is found that group meeting is not liked by the students. Since 1992/93 individual student can see his/her lecturer-counsellor in private. With individual meeting, student can be more open to discuss his/her problem without fear that other students will be listening if it was to be conducted in group. Feedbacks from lecturer-counsellors indicated that individual meeting is better preferred by students than the group meeting although counsellors said it demands more time from them.

In the counselling forum, invited panel address on some important skills for distance students. Some of the topics which have been discussed for the past few years and have been rated as important by students, are listed below:

- Independent and self-directed learning;
- Study and Time Management;
- Effective Reading;
- Essay Writing Techniques;
- Stress Management; and
- Preparation for examination

Printed Materials

Important informations concerning academic structure, programme of studies, list of courses, fees, facilities and all the regulations related to students are given in the form of pamphlets, brochures and a manual book. Academic calendar for planner and a guide book for counselling which describes learning context and valuable study skills are also given to students.

In particular, Deakin University (Australia) uses a system which is called 'Self-counselling process' where candidates are given a small manual which contains a section 'Making your decision to enrol in Off-Campus Program'. This section encourage students to identify the main objectives of their learning - what they

want to learn, how and where. This manual is given well in advance since not all candidates have very clear idea of what they want to learn in the first place. This is to ensure that candidate who apply for admission have certain maturity of what they want to learn, and can thus put aside those who are undecided (Moran and Croker 1981-82).

The Centre for Distance Education of USM is also experiencing early student drop-out phenomenon similar to what is happening in other places, such as in Australia (Roberts, 1984; Peters, 1992, p. 234). At USM for instance, in the academic year of 1993/94 and before, most of the students who failed to attend residential intensive course were those in the first year and in the Foundation Science Programme (more than 70%). In most distance teaching system the drop-out rate in the first year of studies is above average. Similar counselling approach should be introduced at the Centre if early drop-out rate is to be further reduced. Pre-course/pre-enrolment counselling similar to what is practiced by Open University in UK (Paine, 1983), or of 'self-counselling process' is the kind of approach needed to be incorporated in the advice and counselling system of CDE of USM. We have not done so, but we hope to be able exercise this in the near future. It was found that the enrolled students who were given pre-counselling booklet showed out-standing persistence and productivity (Zajkowski, 1993)

In the preparation of modular self study materials the elements of counselling are well incorporated. It ranges from identifying starting conditions, learning objectives, learning context, learning activities, media, evaluation as well as the style of writing which usually takes the form of personal, colloquial and conversational (Volake, 1993). By this it is hoped that a situation whereby student feel at ease with the study materials is created and most important of all is that the students are getting helps and encouragements to work through the material.

Another occasion where subject lecturers can have the opportunity to advise students (in group) is during teletutorial (audio-graphic) sessions. A subject may have two to six teletutorial sessions, therefore chances are many for the lecturers to strengthen their advising relationship with students during teletutorials although the main purpose of teletutorials is to discuss academic content.

Counselling through correspondence

Lecturer-counsellors of the CDE always keep in touch with the following group of students.

- those under probation status
- those in year 1 of their study
- Foundation Science Students
- those with high risk of dropping-out

Probational students are those who obtained an average marks below passing grade (<D) in the final examination and those with high risk are students who passed with grade (D) in the final examination. Lecturers-counsellors are advised to contact these students once within two months, although, at present more care is given to the probational students. Apart from these, there are also students who postponed their studies. They are advised by the counselling section once at the early time of the postponement so that they work out plan to overcome their problems and resume their study in the following session with fresh feeling.

Students who apply for postponement or withdrawal from the programme are also looked at by the counselling section. In normal circumstances, these students are contacted by telephone, if this were not possible, they are contacted through mail. After having feedback from students, or at least after we have tried to contact them, only then we processed their application forms. On average we have 1.2% withdrawal and 5.0% postponement cases per academic session.

Counselling through telephone

As I have mentioned, whenever there are applications for withdrawal or for postponement of studies and the cases cannot be taken as 'straight-forward', first, students have to be contacted through telephone. We found that these students rarely changed their minds. Only a small percentage of those who applied for withdrawal changed their minds to postpone their studies and resume study in the following session. Some students stayed longer than one academic session in postponement and also before the start of a new term/session.

Students are encouraged to initiate telephone contact with their lecturer-counsellors at CDE. Some lecturer - counsellors allow students to make telephone call to their houses outside office hours (night time and weekend), some with time restriction, for example up to 10 p.m. while some do not give time limit. There is no free toll telephone service for counselling, thus students have to pay for their calls.

For students' convenience, a set of telephone answering machine is kept in the counselling office so that students can call CDE 24 hours and can leave messages if they like to do so. We receive some 5 - 10 messages per week. The calls can be more frequent during early session, just before the intensive course, as well as before and after examination.

Messages that are normally communicated through telephone answering machine are related mostly to administrative matters such as payment of fees, complaint about mailing packages, time tabling for examination and of directly related to academic content. It is very rare that students bring forward their personal problem such as emotional stress or lack of study skills in telephone conversations. If the problem is of administrative or academic nature, the matter is directed to the appropriate section for action.

Telephone, as we all aware, can provide immediate and interactive communication. It is expected to be better than using letters to reduce the feeling of isolation or loneliness among distance students as well as can help maintain students motivation to continue study. Using telephone, students can describe their problems to lecturers or counselors at an instance, but using letter it may take a few days.

Although telephone is effective for transferring information, for exchange of views, for discussion and solving academic problems it is reported to be less effective for handling psychological cases. Interpersonal relation, negotiation and persuasion is more effective if done through face-to-face or direct meeting (Robinson, 1984; Colman, 1983). In addition counselling using telephone is rather less secure for keeping the privacy of individual, thus it demands more skills and precaution on the part of counselors whenever telephone conversation is used to discuss problems which are personal and private in nature. The facts

are also recognised by other authors (Jung, 1995; Brand, 1990). As Brand (1990) put it:

The value of media is incontestable. Yet it seems to be a fact, too, that counselling requires private consultation or discussion and personal contact, the degree of intensity depending on the individual needs of a person.

HOW DO STUDENTS FEEL ABOUT COUNSELLING ACTIVITIES AT CDE?

We have conducted a few questionnaire surveys in separate occasions with different samples of students. In the first instance we asked in one of the questions, a sample of 150 students who did not attend the compulsory intensive course, whether the counselling service was satisfactory. Only 7% of the respondents (56 or 37% reply) said they lost interest because of the insufficient counselling service (Mat Zin, 1992, p. 13), thus more than 90% satisfied with the service or at least they did not complain. In the second survey, it was conducted among first year students (also the first intake) who were studying Civil Engineering programme. The survey was specifically asking about counselling service provided for them. The questionnaire were given to 54 student during residential intensive course, that is after they have been in the programmes for five months. In this occasion we have a 100% return. The finding showed that 54% of the sample satisfied with counselling service although more than half (55%) felt that pre-enrolment counselling should be given to them (Mat Zin, 1995, p.6). Very small number (5%) said they lost interest in their study because of dissatisfied with counselling services.

TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT AND COUNSELLING SERVICE

In many parts of the world computer mediated communication (CMC) has also been used for counselling purposes as complement to existing electronic media such a telephone/fax, audio cassettes, etc. The forms of CMC that are being integrated into the advising process are electronic mail, access to library database, expert system and also computer conferencing. It provides tremendous help in bridging the distance between students and teachers and students with

students, both in terms of space and time. Numerous writings on the topic have been recorded (Deek, 1995; Teshome, 1992; and Jung, 1995)

At USM we are in the process of developing CMC networking which connects USM main campus with all the branch campuses and the regional study centres in the first instance and eventually will make ways to students' homes.

CONCLUSION

In most part of the world counselling and student advice in distance education system uses some form of media, for example, correspondence of letters, printed materials, through telephone and audio cassettes. Computer-based communication such electronic mail has also been used in the developed countries such as in USA, UK and other European countries and Australia.

At CDE (USM) counselling activities through media are limited to the use of correspondence and telephone. An area in particular which the Centre could improve upon is by introducing pre-enrolment counselling using print as well as audio tapes. Electronic communication media especially CMC will also be used in near future in order to increase student - teacher and student interactions.

In counselling distance students as it should always be for other support services, we like the view of Sewart (1983, p. 7) who sees counselling in distance education to be a sine qua non of successful distance education. It is of vital importance for the continued well-being of distance teaching and learning. Dedicated support does explain why you see UK's Open University success rate is around 45% whereas in Costa Rica and Venezuela, obviously with less resources, the success rate is as low as around 20% (Peters, 1992, p. 245). At USM we have completion rate around 60%.

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