

E-counselling support during COVID-19 pandemic: analysis of learners' feedback

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Abstract

Purpose – This research study aimed to collect feedback from the learners on the usefulness and effectiveness of the online counselling sessions organised during COVID-19 lockdown through online platforms to provide academic support to the learners.

Design/methodology/approach – The link of a questionnaire designed in a Google Form sent to IGNOU learners of the January 2020 session enrolled under the jurisdiction of IGNOU Regional Centre (RC) Chandigarh through email as well as SMSs. Total responses received were 487, out of which 445 responses were complete, roughly 8% of the total registered learners during the January 2020 session. The questionnaire contained questions on a cross-section of online counselling issues, besides questions on the learners' profile.

Findings – Majority of the learners were satisfied with the input provided while organising online counselling sessions during COVID-19 lockdown in India. A significant proportion of learners (88%) used smartphones for attending counselling sessions. Facebook page of the RC rated as a relatively better option than other online platforms. However, more than 50% of learners faced Internet connection problems and found them a significant hurdle for smooth viewing of online counselling sessions. The proportion of learners who encountered difficulties in handling electronic devices was insignificant. The learner's feedback on many attributes such as usefulness and effectiveness of the online counselling sessions, interaction with the academic counsellors, e-content used in the counselling was significantly positive. A significant proportion of the learners have reported that face to face counselling could be replaced with online sessions in future, considering its flexibility in terms of place and schedule of learning and availability of recording of such sessions.

Research limitations/implications – The research study was conducted under Chandigarh region of IGNOU which has a predominantly urban population. Thus the results of the study are limited to Chandigarh region and the region with similar socio-economic settings. This certainly limits the scope of the study.

Practical implications – The study certainly provides valuable feedback to the ODL policymakers to consider replacing face-to-face counselling with an online mode in a phased manner. Online counselling options will be highly cost-effective, easily manageable, and provide flexibility for learners and resource persons, resulting in addressing learners' non-attendance related issues in the face-to-face counselling sessions.

Social implications – In the analysis of our finding it is clearly stated that the Internet connectivity and availability of electronic devices is an important issue to provide online counselling support to socially and economically disadvantaged groups. Therefore, the research study also identifies such social issues as a major challenge for providing online counselling support to the learners.

Originality/value – This is an original empirical research study and data collected is used in the analysis for the first time. This analysis is based on the feedback gathered from the learners registered at IGNOU RC Chandigarh during the January 2020 session. The data and derived results not used in any other study.

Keywords Open and distance learning, Online education, Academic counsellor, E-counselling

Paper type Research paper



1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted education systems globally, imposing formidable challenges to their smooth functioning, leading to a discontinuity in their operations. On the flip side, the pandemic's unprecedented situation has also compelled educational systems to respond with alternative mechanisms for providing teaching-learning support to the learners. The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), with its national and international presence, proactively transitioned to adopt a blended approach from the ODL mode to effectively combat the pandemic situation and maintain the educational pursuits of its learners. The existing ODL methodologies of face-to-face (f2f) counselling, the telecast, broadcast and web-based techniques have facilitated the pedagogic shift to online and remote teaching approaches (Lynch, 2020).

The academic activities in IGNOU for the January 2020 session were likely to commence through its Learner Support Centres (LSCs) which are the interface between the university and the learners. The academics at the Regional Centres (RCs) were planning and scheduling induction meetings for new entrants. However, the planned meetings of the RCs had to be postponed in compliance with the series of guidelines issued by the Ministry of Education (MOE), (erstwhile Ministry of Human Resources Development), Government of India (GOI), under the instructions given by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) in conformity with the SOPs of World Health Organization (WHO) to deal with COVID-19 crisis. Thus, the declaration of a nationwide lockdown in India to combat the spread of the COVID-19 (coronavirus) outbreak put all activities, including learner support services, on hold. The operations of educational institutions were severely hampered and kept on suspension sine die. IGNOU also suspended all its activities, including f2f interaction with the learners, i.e. including induction meetings and theory and practical counselling, which are essential academic activities immediately after commencement of a session.

Learners' pursuit of learning was disturbed due to this sudden closure of educational institutions. Learners were quondary, anxious and restless about their academic calendar and further study progress in the university. In the prevailing unprecedented situation, it was likely that the sudden discontinuation of communication with the learners would increase anxiety and restlessness among them (Dimri, 2018). They would be anxiously waiting for the information from the university to pace their learning schedule. To restore the learners' confidence, some RCs played a pioneering role by adopting several innovative approaches to establish communication and provide academic support through online mode during the lockdown period. Accordingly, RC Chandigarh decided to conduct an online induction meeting using RC Facebook page, zoom, and Google meet platforms to sustain the learners' interest, thereby enforcing and improving the quality of learning (Olcott, 2020). A series of e-induction meetings conducted to provide study-related information to the learners. The overwhelming response to the e-induction meetings encouraged the RC to take forward the scheduled plan for organising e-counselling sessions.

Several factors determine the learners' satisfaction level while pursuing online courses, including supportive learning activities (Chen, 2007; Lister, 2014). Other equally essential elements comprise continuous feedback to the learner's performance (Britto and Rush, 2013), regular two-way interaction (Roper, 2007) and constructive interaction with peers besides availability of quality content, proper assessment, computer and Internet self-efficacy (Anderson and Dron, 2011). It is argued that "learners often appreciated synchronous online courses" as they find it an effective means of communication with improved participation and course completion rates (Yamagata-Lynch, 2014). Online education also helps to build rapport with peers and instructor so that course-related activities are accomplished in time (Watts, 2016). The learners' academic issues resolved by having real-time interaction and discussion; therefore, online course delivery helps to build strong relationship provided a suitable learning environment is created (Figlio *et al.*, 2013).

This research paper attempts to critically analyse the learners' feedback for the January 2020 session under RC Chandigarh, where online counselling sessions organised using various online platforms. The conduct of e-counselling sessions also monitored to ensure that productive academic deliberation held. If the delivery of content in a particular session was not up to the expectation of learners, the engagement of such Academic Counsellor (ACs) reviewed and feedback provided for further improvement.

2. Objectives of the study

The research study's main objective was to assess the effectiveness of the e-counselling sessions organised during the lockdown period. The other objectives which the research study addressed are:

- (1) Whether the content delivered through e-counselling sessions met the learners' study-related requirement?
- (2) Do the academic counsellors explain the topics with clarity?
- (3) Can online counselling sessions replace face to face counselling sessions?
- (4) Whether the online counselling sessions were interactive?

3. Literature review

While examining the use of technology to provide academic support to the learners in UKOU, [Tait \(2014\)](#) argued that e-learning is considered the 'next-generation education of distance education as it has been used widely by countries across the world. The author also analysed the dropout issues in distance education and e-learning and emphasised that the student support services should be "integrated with curriculum and assessment" to sustain learners' interest. The author further pointed out that if second-generation institutions are not ready to adjust with student support services methodology, the "new entrants to online learning will leapfrog their predecessors with an improved student experience".

Open and distance learning have witnessed several transitional phases, including the concept of "transactional distance, 'emphasising the tutors' role in supporting the learners ([Moore, 1993](#)). The use of ICT made interaction between learners and learners to tutor easy ([Tait, 2004](#)). The author further argued that the notion of constructivism influenced this notion". On the other hand, [Thorpe \(2002\)](#) opined clear cut conventional boundaries between learners' support and computer-mediated communication. She pointed out that computer-mediated communication is an integral part of the course content breaks down the "separation of learners support and teaching".

The digital divide and global access are the main concerns of many students, particularly in developing countries that do not have access to laptop and desktop ([Lynch, 2020](#)). Even if they had smartphones, they always worried about the amount of data likely to be consumed to attend Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). He further argued that students' digital skill to learn online was also not visualised before enforcement of ERT. Therefore, the focus should be on developing "better infrastructure, policies for quality improvement, accessibility standards and strategic plans for continued accesses".

It envisaged that distance education is interdisciplinary and evolved with time and is slightly different from the ERT. Distance education is defined as the distance in time and space between learners and learning resources, "whereas ERT emphasises' on spatial distance" ([Bozkurt and Sharma, 2020](#)). On the other hand, it expresses that distance education facilitates' interactions between different parties and through different channels to let learners be more engaged in the learning process ([Moore, 1989](#)). The authors also emphasised that "when things go back to normal, people will not remember the educational content

delivered, but they will remember how they felt, how we cared for them, and how we supported them” (Bozkurt and Sharma, 2020). Thus, ERT could be a means to establish communication with learners; it cannot substitute face-to-face classroom teaching. On the other hand, it emphasised (Golden, 2020) course delivery through ERT is a “temporary solution to the immediate problem” and cannot be considered distance teaching.

The majority of the respondents reported the usefulness of the availability of e-content for the preparation of assignments (Dimri, 2020). He further argued that the learners well-received support services provided during the lockdown. It helped them sustain their motivation and pursuit of learning despite having several problems such as non-availability of devices, uniform Internet speed, and partial e-content.

It emphasised (Hodges *et al.*, 2020) that abrupt migration to online learning due to the COVID-19 crisis followed by lockdown has “disturbed the life of students, staff and faculty comfort”. However, they argued that work with ERT would not be a continued priority; therefore, “asynchronous activities might be more reasonable than synchronous ones” (Clark *et al.*, 2015). The authors further argued that “COVID-19 will soon be a memory, and once the faculty will return to normal teaching, they will forget ERT” (Bozkurt and Sharma, 2020). Thus, COVID-19 has posed challenges for the teachers, students, and staff and given opportunities for them to cope with suitable strategies to implement ERT in a similar situation.

Online learning has grown manifolds over some time due to the integration of technology (Reiser and Dempsey, 2012); moreover, it is “convenient than traditional education for the learners and instructors and provides many learners opportunities to take admission simultaneously”. However, one of the major disadvantages of online education is the “separation of tutors and learners which prevents them from making a social connection with teachers and peers” (Moore and Kearsley, 2005). They further argued that the availability of “rich resources would help the learners to promote flexible social interaction with the teachers and the other learners. Thus, in addition to “cognitive factors, social factors are equally important for designing the online learning environment (Moore, 1989). Otherwise, the learners may feel a lack of immediacy in responses compared to f2f learning” (Mayer and Richard, 2012). They also argued that “social respect, social sharing, open mind, social identity and intimacy are also important factors for online learners” cognitive development.

Online education is an “emerging field that lies at the junction of distance education, human-computer interaction with Internet, instructional technology and cognitive science” (Gorge and Gaea, 2016). The authors further emphasised that online education is a “case of instructional alternative for on-campus learning and teaching and case of distance learning”. Thus it is a convergence of technology with instruction scholarship of learning.

Although online education provided an opportunity to pursue quality education even to low-income students from developing countries, it has some issues to be addressed effectively. These include “adaptability, digital divide” (Bayrak *et al.*, 2020), technical capability, time management, required communication skills, learning styles and lack of feedback on the performance’. The authors also pointed out that excessive “virtual engagement to attend the classes, undertake assignments, and over engagement in discussion forum” are some of the drawbacks of online education (Kurucay and Inan, 2017).

Online education initiatives initially started by the premier universities and institutions across the world, including Columbia University, Yale University, Stanford University, the University of Chicago, the London School of Economics (LSE) and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) (Kriger, 2001; Woody, 1999). Nevertheless, it captured the world’s attention due to its flexible characteristics, and OERs and MOOCs have now become a reality in the education world. Hence, it felt pertinent to obtain and analyse learners’ feedback on the various aspects of online academic support.

4. Methodology

Before organising online counselling/classes, the RC organised a meeting of Coordinators of Study Centres using the zoom platform. The objective was the identification of suitable ACs and the selection of courses for e-counselling sessions. A comprehensive schedule was prepared and communicated to the learners through email, SMSs and uploaded on the RC website. In courses selection, the learners' feedback obtained during the induction meetings and through the mail considered. Each day, 3–5 online counselling sessions organised across the various programmes and courses depending on the availability of ACs. The survey research method adopted to accomplish the present research study.

Sample: The sample of the study comprised learners registered for the January 2020 admission cycle. During the lockdown, 387 online counselling sessions were organised, which covered the learners from the undergraduate and postgraduate levels in 65:35 ratios, respectively. The counselling support was also provided to the learners by the faculty in the IGNOU Headquarters, particularly to the learners of undergraduate and postgraduate computer science programmes and other courses such as Bachelor of Education, Masters in Psychology, Hindi, M Com, Diploma in Dairy Technology etc. The course selection for the online counselling was learners' enrolment in a particular course, availability of ACs and specific request from the learners. Though the learners from all the streams were covered yet, most learners (75%) were from the humanities and social sciences.

Tools employed: A questionnaire was designed and developed in Google form to elicit feedback from the learners enrolled in the January 2020 session under IGNOU RC Chandigarh, an operational area spanning the UT Chandigarh and parts of the states of Punjab and Haryana.

Administration of the tool: The learners' response obtained through the Google form by providing a link sent to the learners through email and SMSs. The link also sent through repeat SMSs and emails to remind the learners to submit the responses.

Design of the questionnaire: A questionnaire designed to collect information about learners' demographic and socio-economic profile, along with the details regarding the availability of electronic gadgets such as desktop, laptop, smartphone and problems faced by them in uniform accessibility of the Internet. The questions framed to obtain feedback on a five-point Likert scale on the following aspects:

- (1) Learners' awareness about the conduct of e-counselling sessions and their participation in such sessions.
- (2) Source of information/awareness about the organisation and conduct of the e-counselling sessions.
- (3) Problems encountered, if any, attending the counselling sessions about the availability of electronic gadgets, Internet access and intermittent Internet disturbances.
- (4) Quality of the e-counselling sessions.
- (5) Clarity in content delivery by the academic counsellors.
- (6) Whether the e-counselling sessions met their study requirement during the lockdown.
- (7) Comparison of face-to-face counselling with e-counselling.
- (8) Conduct of the e-induction meeting.
- (9) Usefulness of e-counselling sessions for preparing the assignments.
- (10) Whether the message conveyed through induction meetings met the distance learners' expectation to pace the learning.

After administration of the questionnaire, the number of responses received was 487. Since 42 responses were inconsistent, only 445 responses considered, which were complete in all respect. Thus, the responses have been analysed, interpreted, and discussed in a coherent frame of the study.

5. Data analysis and interpretation

5.1 Learner profile and information on various attributes that influence e-counselling

The profile of learners who responded to the questionnaire, in respect of various attributes, has been presented (Table 1):

Analysis of respondents' profile reveals that 42.59% of respondents pursued undergraduate programmes, 36.6% postgraduate, 15.2% diploma and 3.6% certificate programmes. Considering the total enrolment share, the proportion of respondents pursuing a PG diploma was only 1.6%, which was significantly low. The demographic profile reveals that 53.5% of respondents were from the urban areas and 46.5% from the rural area, which is contrary to the enrolment proportion of learners from urban and rural areas, respectively. Similarly, 53.3% of respondents were male, and 46.5% were female. Thus, there was no significant variation in the representation of respondents concerning background and sex.

5.2 Availability and accessibility of electronic gadgets

Learners' response to essential attributes, including electronic devices, information about e-counselling sessions, and participation in the counselling sessions also collected and analysed. Analysis of the media's used to provide information to the learners reveals that 47.2% of respondents received information regarding e-counselling through SMSs. It is pertinent to note that frequent SMSs sent to the learners to participate in the e-counselling sessions. On the other hand, 33.9% of respondents reported that they got information through email. Similarly, 15.1% of respondents received information through the RC Facebook page. However, the proportion of respondents who received information through RC and IGNOU Hqtrs websites was insignificant. It is pertinent to mention that SMS was the most effective method of information dissemination than other means.

Several e-platforms such as Webex, Microsoft team, zoom, Google meet, GoToMeeting etc. used during lockdown for various purposes. However, RC used only three platforms for organising e-counselling sessions, i.e. zoom, Google meet and RC FB page. Feedback from the respondents also collected on the suitability of different platforms used to conduct e-counselling sessions (Table 2 and Figure 1). The platforms used for e-sessions have one or the other limitations; for instance, the zoom meeting is allowed for a limited time and has a problem with data security. Facebook has a broader reach, but any FB friend can join it. Such participants may create nuisance during the live session. Thus, the selection of a platform is essential for enhancing learning; therefore, Google meet was considered a suitable platform for interaction as it could accommodate up to 250 participants.

Attributes		No	%
Background	Rural	207	46.5
	Urban	238	53.5
	Total	445	100.0
Sex	Male	208	46.7
	Female	237	53.3
	Total	445	100.0

Table 1.
Profile of the learners

Table 2.
Essential attributes for conducting e-counselling

Variables	No	%	
Sources of information regarding e-counselling	email	151	33.9
	SMS	210	47.2
	RC FB Page	67	15.01
	RC website	9	2.0
	HQ website	8	1.2
	Total	445	100.0
Electronic device used	Smartphone	387	88.6
	Laptop	43	9.8
	Desktop	7	1.6
	Total	445	100.0
Suitability of e-counselling platform	FB page	221	49.7
	Zoom cloud App	97	21.8
	Meet.Google.com	127	28.8
	Total	445	100.0
Problem-related to Internet	Slow speed	242	54.4
	Intermittent break	153	34.38
	Problem with device	43	9.7
	Internet not available	7	1.6
	Total	445	100.0

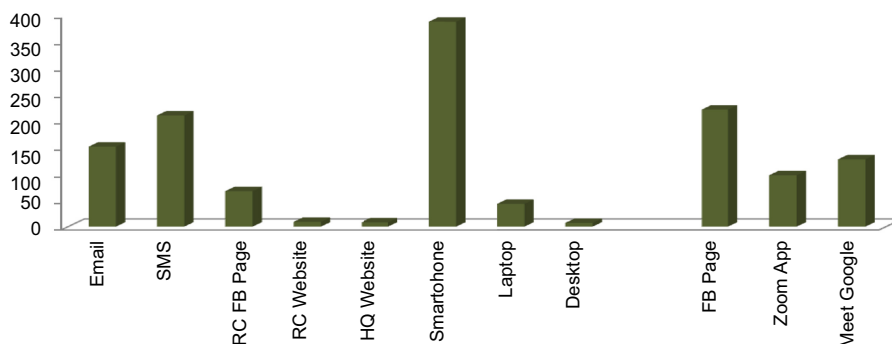


Figure 1.
Feedback on information dissemination, device and platform

Analysis of the respondents' feedback on media preference revealed that 49.7% of respondents had their choice for FB page, followed by 28.8% Google meet. There have been several arguments on the use of a digital platform for online learning. Moore *et al.* (2018) argued that the students in India who have "access to a device might not have the digital skill to learn online effectively". An online learning ecosystem needs to be developed suitably in a country like India (Lynch, 2020). This argument is substantiated because, initially, only the top 100 universities were allowed by the University Grant Commission in India to offer online courses. Therefore, these factors need attention while adopting the online mode of academic counselling.

On the other hand, 54.4% of respondents reported that Internet speed was very slow; thus, there was discontinuity during the sessions. However, the respondents were happy to find the recorded version of sessions on the RC website and FB page. These efforts of RC appreciated by the learners who were even outside the jurisdiction of RC. For instance, Bala Krishan Puthiya Purayil, a student from Kerala, states, "I think the best way to get classes conducted by RC is to make available the recorded content on the RC Facebook page as done by RC. . .Chandigarh". Similarly, Sai Teja comments, "Chandigarh RC is uploading their recorded content on their RC FB page" regularly. Another vital feedback about the Internet was the intermittent break in Internet accessibility. 34.38% of respondents reported that there was an

intermittent Internet break due to which they could not participate in the entire session. As discussed in the preceding section, the argument of several scholars stands to reason that the digital divide will create a considerable gap; therefore, the accessibility of online counselling session will not be uniform (Moore *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, lack of the skills to handle the device will also jeopardise organising e-counselling sessions. Nonetheless, the finding reveals that only 9.7% (Table 2) of respondents faced the problem in handling the electronic gadgets due to lack of proper skill and first-time experience. Thus, the number of learners who have reported non-availability of the Internet for attending the e-counselling sessions was insignificant (1.6%). Such a response could probably be attributed to the predominance of learners from semi-urban areas with relatively more access to electronic devices and the Internet.

5.3 Attributes of e-counselling sessions

Learners’ feedback on the awareness regarding e-counselling sessions’ reveals that 78% of respondents are aware of e-counselling sessions, and 64% participated in the e-counselling sessions (Table 3). However, a considerable number of respondents (36%) did not participate in the e-counselling sessions. Understanding the reasons for the reluctance of such a large number of learners will require further investigation. However, 61.1% of respondents reported that they encountered problems associated with the Internet, including slow speed and intermittent break. Moreover, “last-minute cramming in internet-based courses is rampant” (Figlio *et al.*, 2013), which also influences learners’ participation rate to a great extent.

It is also pertinent to note that 49.2% of respondents who participated in the e-counselling sessions also interacted with the ACs, and 69.2% reported that the e-counselling sessions were interactive (Table 3 and Figure 2). The interaction in the e-counselling could address the academic issues of the learners. The learners have given encouraging feedback regarding the replacement of f2f counselling with e-counselling. In this context, 58.7% of respondents have expressed that f2f counselling replaced with e-counselling. Further, 83.8% of respondents reported that IGNOU should organise more e-counselling sessions (Figure 3). The opinions of academics sharply divided on organising online counselling. It has been argued that the universities might “enjoy financial benefits with internet-based courses as the video lectures” once produced could be repeated in the subsequent sessions. However, favourable economies of scale are derived at the cost of the low level of interaction with the learners and compromising with the benefits of f2f interaction (Figlio *et al.*, 2013).

Variables	Responses		Variables	Responses		Total
	Yes (%)	No (%)		Yes (%)	No (%)	
<i>Awareness</i>			<i>Interactivities</i>			
About e-counselling sessions	347 (78)	78 (22)	Participation in e-counselling sessions	285 (64)	160 (36)	445 (100)
Participation in induction meeting	245 (55.1)	200 (44.9)	Interaction in e-counselling sessions	308 (69.2)	137 (30.8)	
Support for preparation of TEE	305 (69.21)	140 (31.4)	Took part in Interaction	219 (49.2)	226 (50.8)	445 (100)
<i>Usefulness</i>			<i>Challenges</i>			
The usefulness of e-counselling sessions for preparation of assignments	299 (67.2)	146 (32.8)	Problem-related to Internet	272 (61.1)	173 (38.9)	445 (100)
Demand for more e-counselling sessions	373 (83.8)	72 (16.2)	<i>Recommendation</i>			
			Face to face counselling to be replaced by e-counselling	261 (58.7)	184 (41.3)	445 (100)

Table 3. Learners’ response to various attributes about e-counselling

5.4 Feedback on e-induction meetings

Learners' feedback was also obtained on their participation in the induction meetings, and 55.1% reported that they participated in the induction meeting (Table 3). A considerable proportion of respondents (44.9%) could not participate in the induction meeting. Still, most of them reported that they could view the recording of the induction meetings uploaded on the RC FB page and website. The meeting's reach was for 1.6K learners with 220 comments and 813 engagements. A similar response recorded in the successive induction meetings organised to cover the remaining learners.

Learners' response to the online induction meetings indicates that most of them (91.9%) appreciated the efforts to organise the e-induction meeting to set the pace for learning during the lockdown, and more than one-third of the respondents (35.0%) have reported that conducting e-induction meetings was a rewarding experience. Similarly, 27% of respondents believed that probably conducting e-induction meetings was a welcome initiative. On the other hand, 28% of respondents were neutral and reported that it was helpful for them. The proportion of respondents who have given negative feedback was insignificant, with 6.1% poor and 3.6% very poor (Table 4). However, the input is considered a constructive measure to sustain efforts in the future.

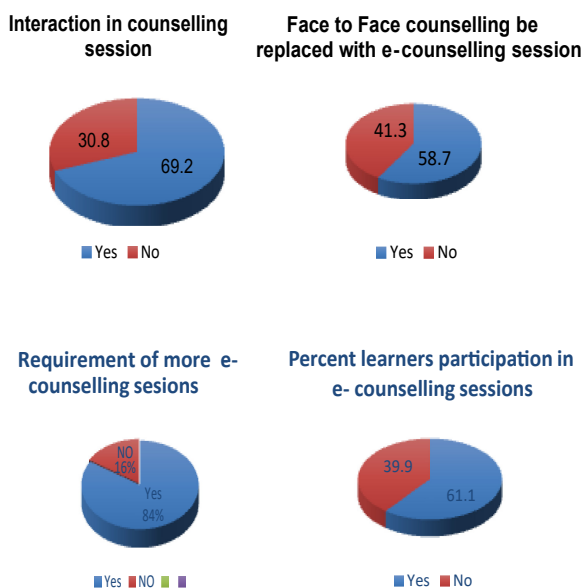


Figure 2. Analysis of feedback on attributes of e-counselling

Variables	Excellent	Very good	Fair	Poor	Very poor	Total
Effectiveness of induction meeting to pace the learning	156 (35)	120 (27)	125 (28.1)	28 (6.1)	16 (3.6)	445 (100.0)
Rating for the information provided in the e-induction meetings	97 (21.8)	178 (40)	130 (29.2)	27 (6.1)	13 (2.9)	445 (100.0)

Note(s): Figures in the table denotes number and percentage in brackets

Figure 3. Preference for e-counselling sessions

Table 4. Learners' feedback on the content and methodology of e-counselling sessions

The learners also asked to rate the induction meetings' information on a five-point Likert scale. On the other hand, 21.8% of responses were for the highest rating with excellent feedback, followed by 40% very good and 29.2% fair. Thus, most of the respondents (90%) were satisfied with the information provided during e-induction meetings. On the other hand, about 10% of respondents have a poor rating for the information provided in the induction meetings,' with 6.1% poor and 2.1% very poor (Table 5 and Figure 4).

5.5 Learners' feedback on the effectiveness of e-counselling

The respondent's feedback received on various attributes to assess the efficacy of the e-counselling sessions, and the analysis of the same presented below (Table 5):

The analysis of respondents' feedback on the Likert five-point scale revealed that 36.9% of respondents definitely agree with e-counselling sessions as it met their study requirements. On the other hand, 21.8% of respondents reported that the e-counselling sessions probably met their study requirements. Similarly, 22.5% of respondents said that it has possibly met the study requirements. An online education system using "interactive multimedia" can help the learners to understand the learning content better and enhance achievement level and "learning performance comparable" to f2f learning (Zhang and Zhou, 2003). However, 18.9% of respondents have given negative feedback, 11.5% of them were moderate in recording negative feedback, and 7.4% of respondents have reported that e-counselling efforts have definitely not met the learning requirements. It certainly warrants the attention of academic support providers.

Variables	Definitely	Probably	Possibly	Possibly Not	Definitely Not	Total
e-Counselling sessions met study requirements	164 (36.9)	97 (21.8)	100 (22.5)	51 (11.5)	33 (7.4)	445 (100.0)
Enhancement of study skill	172 (38.7)	95 (21.3)	116 (26.1)	36 (8.1)	26 (5.8)	445 (100.0)
Rating for the content delivered by the academic counsellors	95 (21.3)	166 (37.3)	136 (30.6)	31 (7.0)	17 (3.8)	445 (100.0)
Rating for the methodology used by the academic counsellors	88 (19.9)	163 (36.6)	150 (33.7)	32 (7.7)	12 (2.7)	445 (100.0)
Learners feedback on the initiative during the lockdown	111 (24.9)	170 (38.2)	125 (28.1)	28 (6.3)	11 (2.5)	445 (100.0)

Table 5. Learners feedback on the effectiveness of e-counselling

Note(s): Figures in the table denotes number and percentages in brackets

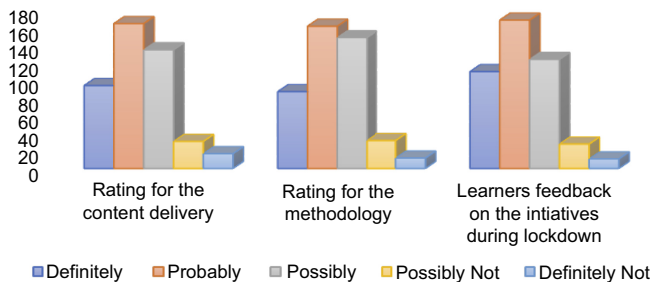


Figure 4. Learners rating on effectiveness of e-counselling

An attempt made to establish a relationship between the conduct of e-counselling sessions and enhancement of learning skills. Interestingly, 38.7% of respondents have reported that e-counselling sessions have definitely enhanced their study skills. Whereas 21.3% of respondents believed that it probably enhanced the study skills, 26.4% of respondents have reported that it possibly enhanced the study skills. The feedback of 8.1% of respondents was possibly not, and 5.8% definitely not. However, most of the respondents reported that e-counselling sessions helped enhance their study skills and the finding supported by researchers in their empirical studies (Kirby, 1999; Roper, 2007). Though the proportion of learners who have given negative feedback is insignificant, further research will improve their efforts to provide e-counselling support.

An attempt also made to involve ACs with rich experience and exposure to deliver content to the learners using smart classes. A meeting was held with the academic counsellors to discuss the nature of e-counselling sessions to be organised. The focus should be on delivering the content as per IGNOU's counselling norms rather than addressing learners' anxiety. In the Initial one hour, course content discussed, followed by half an hour on interaction, and the uniform pattern observed across all e-counselling sessions.

While analysing the learners' feedback on the content delivered through e-counselling sessions, 21.3% reported, it was excellent. On the other hand, 37.3% of respondents (Table 5) confirmed that the delivered content was very good. However, 30.6% of respondents were neutral in their approach and rated the content as fair. However, 7% of respondents rated content poor and 3.8% very poor. Data analysis reveals that the majority of the learners were satisfied with the content delivered in e-counselling sessions. An attempt also made to collect feedback on the methodology of e-counselling sessions, such as sharing PPT, video etc., for making presentations effective. Thus, 19.9% of respondents reported that the methodology used for e-counselling sessions was excellent, and 36.6% responded it was very good and 33.7% fair. On the other hand, 7.7% of respondents rated it poor and 2.7 very poor (Table 5 Figure 4).

The objective of organising e-counselling sessions was to ensure that the learners' learning requirement is met during the lockdown to continue their efforts to prepare assignments and start preparation for the Term End Examination. Accordingly, learners' feedback obtained on the clarity in delivering the topic by the ACs and the data analysis presented below (Table 6 and Figure 5):

As far as clarity regarding content is concerned, 24% of respondents have reported a high level of clarity in explaining the content of the topic by the ACs in e-counselling sessions. Similarly, 42.2% of respondents reported that the ACs had explained the topic with clarity. However, 28.1% of learners were neutral in their approach and reported that they could not say whether the ACs has explained the topic with clarity. Nevertheless, two-thirds of respondents (66.2%) reported that ACs explained the subject with clarity. On the other hand, 2.9% of respondents have given poor rating under this topic, with 2.7% very poor; thus, the proportion of respondents who have negative feedback is very small and insignificant.

The interaction with the learners is equally vital in the e-counselling sessions to gauge their interest and satisfaction level (Kurucay and Inan, 2017). Accordingly, an attempt was made to collect the learners' feedback on the interaction in the e-counselling sessions. 18.2%

Variables	Very clear	Clear	Can't say	Poor	Very poor	Total
AC explain the topic with clarity	107 (24)	188 (42.2)	125 (28.1)	13 (2.9)	12 (2.7)	445 (100.0)
Clarity at the level of interaction	81 (18.2)	177 (39.8)	152 (34.2)	26 (5.8)	9 (2)	445 (100.0)

Note(s): Figures in the table denotes number and percentage in brackets

Table 6.
Feedback of the learners on the clarity of the topic and interaction

of respondents reported that the level of interaction with ACs was very effective, useful and clear, 39.8% of respondents realised that the level of interaction was precise, and 34.2% of respondents were neutral while rating the clarity in interaction level. The importance of clarity in content delivery dealt with in several studies. [Hrastinski et al. \(2010\)](#) argued that in online course delivery, the interaction level sustains the interest and motivation of the learners. On the other hand, 5.8% of respondents have a poor rating for clarity in interaction, with 2.0% very poor. However, most of the respondents were satisfied with the level of interaction in e-counselling sessions with ACs. The proportion of learners who gave negative feedback is insignificant, considering the size of the sample. However, such feedback could be regarded as important and would undoubtedly help to improve the e-counselling sessions.

Analysis of learners' feedback on the university's initiative to organise the e-counselling sessions revealed that 24.4% of respondents realised it was definitely an excellent initiative to organise e-counselling sessions during the lockdown ([Table 5](#)). 38.2% of respondents reported that probably it was an initiative that helped the learners. Similarly, 28.1% of respondents expressed that possibly it was a good effort. It is interesting to note that more than 90% of respondents have supported the university's efforts to organise the e-counselling sessions during the lockdown. The learners' positive inclination towards online counselling also studied in several research studies ([Kirby, 1999](#); [Zhang and Zhou, 2003](#)). Only 8.8% of learners have given negative feedback, and further investigation will help to determine their dissatisfaction.

6. Findings and recommendations of the study

In the preceding section, we analysed the feedback of the learners. The findings of the same synthesised and presented next:

- (1) The variation in the male-female and rural-urban composition of respondents was not very significant. The proportion of urban respondents (53.8%) and female respondents (53.2%) was marginally higher.
- (2) Although the learners used different electronic gadgets such as laptops, desktop and smartphones, most of the respondents (88.6%) used smartphones to attend e-counselling sessions organised during the lockdown.
- (3) SMS was a vital medium (47.2%) for disseminating information to the learners regarding e-counselling sessions followed by email (33.9%). However, 15.9% of respondents obtained information through the RC FB page. The proportion of respondents who used IGNOU Hqtrs and RC websites for getting information for e-counselling sessions was insignificant.

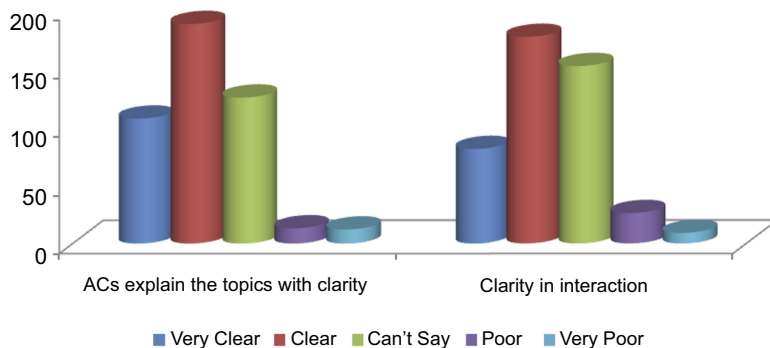


Figure 5. Learners' feedback on clarity in understanding the content

- (4) The majority of the learners (49.7%) have preferred FB page for attending e-counselling sessions over Google meet and Zoom platforms.
- (5) Although most learners appreciated the efforts of RC to organise e-counselling sessions, slow Internet speed (54.4%) and intermittent Internet break (34.38%) were the significant challenges for the smooth conduct of e-counselling sessions. The proportion of learners who faced problem in handling electronic gadgets was 9.7% which was relatively low.
- (6) The majority of the respondents (78%) were aware of the university's initiatives to organise e-counselling sessions, and 64% of them participated in the e-counselling sessions.
- (7) Almost three-fifth (58.7%) of respondents reported that face-to-face counselling be replaced with e-counselling sessions. 69.2% of respondents reported that e-counselling sessions were interactive, and 64.2% participated in the interaction.
- (8) It is also encouraging to note that 83.8% of respondents reported that the university should organise more e-counselling sessions to fulfil their learning pursuit.
- (9) Similarly, 67.2% of respondents reported that e-counselling sessions provided useful input, helped to prepare assignments, and 69.21% reported the usefulness of inputs for preparing the Term End Examination. Among these learners, 36.6% reported that it definitely proved valuable input, and 21.8% reported that the input was possibly useful. University should undertake more online counselling sessions in future by strengthening infrastructures at its RCs. However, 22% of respondents were not clear in providing feedback. Approximately one-fifth of respondents were not satisfied with the input provided through e-counselling sessions. This feedback certainly warrants attention and implies more focus of the university on monitoring of e-counselling sessions.
- (10) A significantly higher proportion of respondents (60%) reported that e-counselling sessions enhanced their study skills. However, 13.9% of respondents believed that e-counselling support was not adequate.
- (11) It is also encouraging to note that 63.1% of respondents appreciated the university's efforts to organise e-counselling sessions during the lockdown. Among such respondents, only 8.8% of learners have negative feedback which could be attributed to electronic gadgets, uniform access to the Internet, Internet speed and handling electronic devices.
- (12) The majority of the respondents (58.6%) also appreciated the content used by the ACs. However, there was an insignificant proportion of respondents (10.8%) who were not satisfied with the e-content used during the lockdown. On the other hand, a similar proportion of learners appreciated the methodology used by the ACs.
- (13) The majority of the learners reported that the ACs explained the topic with clarity, and the level of clarity was very high during the interaction. Although the learners were satisfied with the input provided by ACs, however, the panel of ACs prepared at the RC level, and capacity building programme for handling online counselling session effectively is essential.
- (14) The learners also appreciated the information provided in the induction meeting, and 60% of them reported that the information was beneficial.

- (15) Suitable infrastructure should be developed at RC for the recording and dissemination of online content effectively.
- (16) Capacity building of academics posted at the RCs is essential on various aspects of e-counselling and content delivery for effective online and digital education.
- (17) It is also essential to re-visit the existing part-time staffing pattern at the LSCs in the context of lesser workload due to online course delivery; this will reduce the cost substantially, besides conducting inter and intra-region online counselling.

7. Conclusion

This empirical research study analysed the respondents' feedback on various issues about e-counselling sessions organised during the lockdown. Although most of the respondents appreciated the efforts to provide academic support, nearly one-tenth respondent was not satisfied with various attributes. The dissatisfaction probably could be due to device, Internet connectivity, or the delivered academic inputs and interaction level. Since academic support linked with performance, the findings of the study certainly indicate that more sustained efforts are required to address the academic issues of the learners while providing online classes. Therefore, a better monitoring mechanism would undoubtedly help to make academic support services more effective in sustaining their interest in learning pursuit. A shift to online academic support also warrants the capacity building of ACs through training and orientation for effectively managing online learning so that a robust and sustainable educational system put in place.

We may conclude that these efforts to provide e-counselling sessions motivated the learners during the lockdown and helped to sustain their interest in their learning pursuits and minimise the unrest and anxiety. However, the critics' argument that the ERT support provided to the learners during the lockdown will quickly be forgotten by the learners once normalcy returns also warrants in-depth investigation in time to come. Nonetheless, specific issues include the digital divide, the problem of devices, uniform Internet accessibility and intermittent break in Internet supply that need to be addressed at the policy level to make e-counselling support effective besides ensuring social interaction (Mayer and Richard, 2012). Finally, we may conclude that the learner's feedback was encouraging and provides ample scope for further improvement and gives an option to replace f2f counselling with online and digital education. However, any decision for this paradigm shift would require more in-depth empirical studies with a more significant segment of learners, besides creating suitable infrastructure by assessing the prerequisites for programme delivery and capacity building. Conducting online counselling will undoubtedly be cost-effective (Figlio *et al.*, 2013) as it favours the ODL institutions and the universities and deprives the learners of the benefit of f2f interaction. Therefore, a blend of both f2f and online counselling can be a more appropriate option.

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