Research Paper

Academic Counselling in Open Universities in India: Insights from the Feedback of Academic Counsellors at KKHSOU, Assam

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Abstract
This paper examines the role of academic counseling in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) systems, highlighting its significance in facilitating learner success and personal development. Focusing on Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU) in Assam, the study analyzes feedback from 173 academic counselors across 28 districts. Findings reveal that effective counseling enhances student success, retention, and mental health. Challenges such as continuous admission issues impacting revenue are noted. The study recommends leveraging technology, collaborative support, and resource allocation to strengthen counseling services and academic standards, thereby addressing barriers to higher education accessibility.

Key Words: Counselling sessions, open and distance learning, lifelong learning, National Education Policy, 2020, study centres.

I. INTRODUCTION

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has emerged as a transformative force in education, providing flexible and accessible learning opportunities to a diverse population. In India, ODL has been instrumental in democratizing education, particularly for learners facing geographical, economic, or social barriers. The origins of distance education can be traced back to the 19th century with the advent of correspondence courses. Since then, the system has undergone a remarkable evolution, incorporating multimedia resources, e-learning platforms, and virtual classrooms to improve accessibility and learner engagement. Today, ODL plays a vital role in expanding literacy, promoting lifelong learning, and meeting the ever-growing global demand for education. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 also emphasizes increased access, equity, and inclusion in education through ODL and online learning, particularly for disadvantaged and disabled learners (NEP 2020, 9.3). Further, NEP 2020 suggests accredited institutions to offer ODL and online programs to enhance educational access, improve the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER), and promote lifelong learning (NEP 2020, 10.10).

A key factor in the effectiveness of the ODL system is its robust learner support services, among which academic counselling holds a pivotal position. Academic counselling in open universities serves as a guiding force that helps learners steer their academic journey, overcome challenges, and achieve success. Unlike conventional face-to-face education, where continuous interaction with instructors and peers enhances motivation and academic growth, distance learners often experience isolation and a lack of direct support. This can lead to difficulties in completing courses successfully. Academic counselling mitigates these challenges by offering structured guidance, motivation, and academic assistance, ensuring that students remain engaged and confident in their learning process.

In this context, the present study aims to explore the role of academic counselling in open universities in India, with a specific focus on Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU), Assam. By analyzing the feedback from academic counsellors at KKHSOU, the paper seeks to gain insights into the effectiveness of academic counselling services, the challenges faced by both counsellors and learners, and potential strategies for enhancing learner support in the ODL system. As open universities continue to expand their reach and impact, a

deeper understanding of academic counselling can contribute to improving the overall learning experience and success of distance learners.

Currently, KKHSOU operates 334 Study Centres (SCs) across 34 districts of Assam, primarily housed in provincialized colleges and state universities, along with 30 jail study centres. Notably, 218 of these centres are situated in rural areas, extending educational opportunities to remote regions. This study draws upon recent research that gathered data on various aspects of academic counselling from 173 Academic Counsellors representing study centres across 28 districts of Assam.

II.   NEP 2020 AND THE CHANGING CONTEXT OF ODL IN INDIA

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 introduces several provisions aimed at enhancing the quality and accessibility of ODL. One of the key aspects of the policy is the emphasis on the use of technology to facilitate learning. The policy advocates for the development of digital infrastructure and platforms to support online education, thereby making learning more accessible to students in remote areas (National Education Policy-2020, 2023). Another significant aspect of NEP 2020 is its focus on language inclusivity. The policy aims to remove language barriers by promoting the use of regional languages in educational content, thus making learning more inclusive and accessible to a broader audience (National Education Policy-2020, 2023).

The implementation of NEP 2020 has led to a notable increase in enrollment in ODL programs. The policy's emphasis on technology and inclusivity has attracted a diverse range of learners, contributing to the expansion of ODL's reach. Government initiatives, such as the Digital India campaign, have further facilitated this growth by improving digital infrastructure and connectivity (Growth and Development of Distance Education in India, 2025). In the changing context, the private institutions have also played a significant role in the expansion of ODL, offering innovative programs and leveraging technology to enhance learning experiences. Case studies of successful ODL programs, such as those offered by IGNOU and other State Open Universities, highlight the potential of distance education to provide quality education to a large population.

III.   ACADEMIC COUNSELLING IN OPEN UNIVERSITIES

Academic counselling is a vital component of open universities, particularly in India, where it supports a diverse and growing student population. Effective counselling services contribute to student success, retention, and well-being. The primary role of academic counselling in open universities is to support students in achieving their academic and personal goals. In the system of open and distance learning, academic counselling has the broad objectives, like: (a) assisting students in understanding course requirements and expectations, (b) providing guidance on effective study techniques and time management, (c) offering career advice and helping students align their studies with career aspirations, and (d) addressing personal issues that may affect academic performance.

3.1   Counselling in ODL: Learnings from Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) and other SOUs

IGNOU, the largest open university in India, has a well-established academic counselling framework. It offers a range of services, including face-to-face counselling at regional centers, telephonic support, and online resources.

IGNOU employs various strategies to enhance its counselling services. IGNOU uses both face-to-face and online counselling to reach a wider audience. It also undertakes training programs for counsellors to ensure that counsellors are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge. Further, a feedback mechanism is there to regularly collect students' feedback to improve services.

Learnings from IGNOU: IGNOU's academic counselling services have contributed to improved student retention and success rates. Many students have reported enhanced academic performance and personal growth as a result of the support received.

A Comparative Study with Other Open Universities in India: While IGNOU is a leader in academic counselling, other State Open Universities (SOUs) in India also offer valuable services. For instance, the Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University and the Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University have implemented innovative counselling practices, such as mobile counselling units and community-based support. Evidences suggest that academic counselling become successful, when: (a) technologies are integrated in counseling, (b) commumity engagement is undertaken and (c) when continuous improvement is done by way of feedback collection follow-up actions. Thus, open universities in India are offering effective counselling services by utilising digital tools, which provide flexible and accessible counselling services. Involving local communities in counselling efforts also promotes the support networks and leads to more efficient counselling services. Last, but not the least, regular improvement in counselling practices based on student feedback and emerging trends also improves the outcome of the counselling services.

IV.   ACADEMIC COUNSELLNG IN KKHSOU: FINDINGS FROM SURVEY DATA

The key components and activities involved in academic counselling in KKHSOU are: (a) orientation sessions: This is a general session, which is conducted to introduce the learners about the university's resources, services, curricula and the overall transaction/pedagogy of the programme. Sometimes, such orientation sessions are also conducted before the admission sessions, which are also called as Pre-Admission Counselling. (b) Personal contact programmes/counselling sessions: Personal contact programmes. also called as counselling sessions are arranged to address individual student needs. These also help in overall transactions of the academic curricula. In general, out of the total credits assigned to a course, a minimum of 10 percent counselling classes (hours) are undertaken in a study cetnre. For example, for a 4 credit course, the total study hours are calculated as 120 hours (30 hours per credit), and out of that 12 hours of counselling sessions are conducted in the study centres. (c) Projects and Seminars: Counsellors also provide guidance in the preparation of project reports/seminar papers, as and when required, as per the curricula structure.

To derive some understanding on some of the important aspects on academic counselling at the study centres of the University, a survey was conducted in the month of June, 2024 among the Academic Counsellor of KKHSOU who are engaged in undertaking academic counselling across the state of Assam. The purpose of this survey was to get an overview on Academic Counsellling process that are being organised by the study centres of the University. The survey was conducted by posting a Questionnaire in Google Form to the Academic Counsellors of different study centres of the University who had participated a three-day online academic counsellor's workshop that was organised by KKHSOU-CEMCA collaboratively. In response to this, a total 173 academic counsellors from 28 districts of Assam were responded and the findings of the survey is presented below:

Figure 1: Experience (in years) in Academic Counselling

(Total responses: 170)
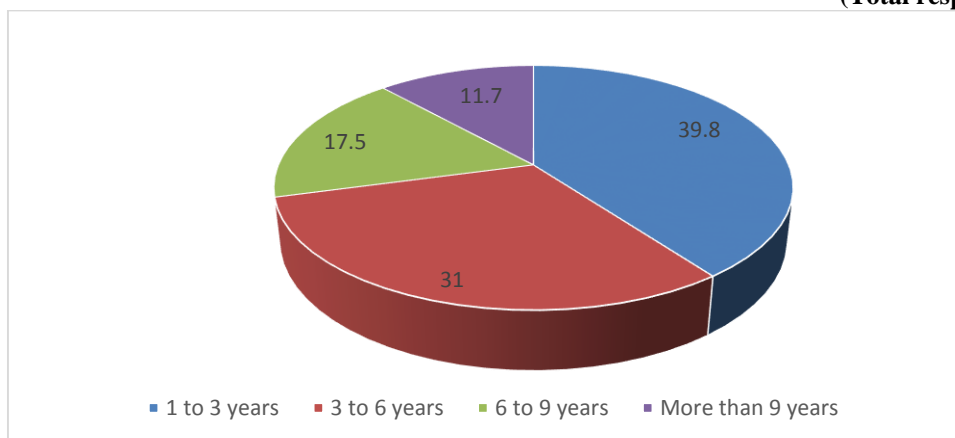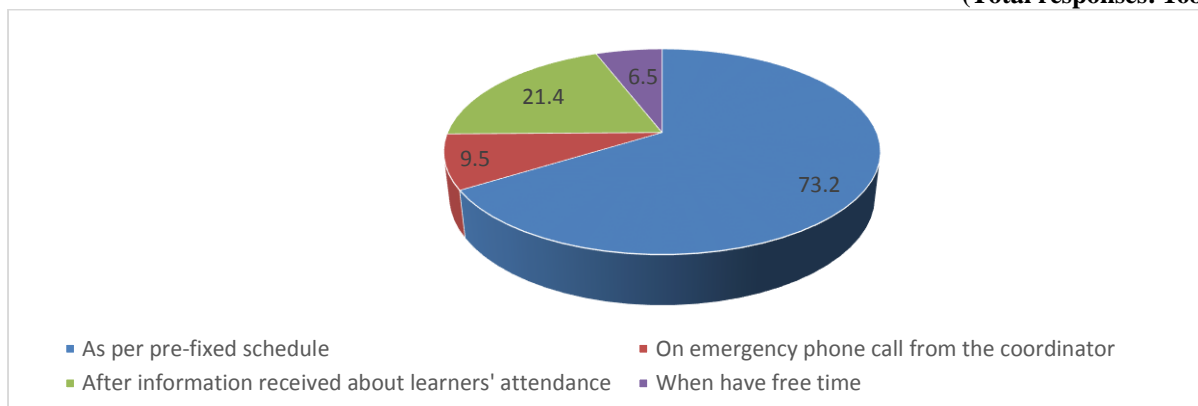

Source: Survey data.

Previous Experience in counselling job in ODL: Figure 1 shows that most of the academic counsellors in KKHSOU are having less than 3 years of experience, while approximately 12 percent academic counsellors have more than 9 years of experience in the job. The academic counsellors were also asked as to why they chose to join as an academic counsellor? 82.4 percent (out of total 170) respondents mentioned that they came forward willingly for the mutual benefit of themselves and the learners.

Orientation/Training to undertake Counselling in ODL: Again, out of 171 respondents, 42.1 percent academic counsellors told that they received orientation/training in undertaking the job of academic counsellors, while the rest (approximately 58 percent) did not have any orientation/training in undertaking academic counselling job in the ODL system.
Findings of the study also reveal that out of 170 respondents, 57.1 percent counsellors believed that counselling is different from regular face-to-face teaching, while 14.1 percent counsellors said that they are same. On the other hand, 28.8 percent academic counsellors were not much sure if there is any distinction between the two or not.

Timing of undertaking academic counselling: The respondents were also asked as to when they come for counselling sessions. The responses have been shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Academic Counsellors response w.r.to time of counselling sessions
**(Total responses: 168)**

Source: Survey data.

It is clear most of the counselling sessions are organized as per pre-fixed schedules only. However, data also indicate that counselling sessions are also organized at random, and in some cases, counsellors also attend counselling session only based on availability of learners at the study centres.

The respondents were also asked if they guide the learners to come prepared for the counselling sessions. Out of 170 respondents, approximately 93 percent replied in the affirmative.

*Method followed in undertaking counselling session*s: Respondents were asked regarding the method they used in undertaking counselling sessions. The findings have been shown with the help of Figure 3.

Figure 3: Methods followed in undertaking counselling sessions (in percentage)
**(Total responses: 170)**
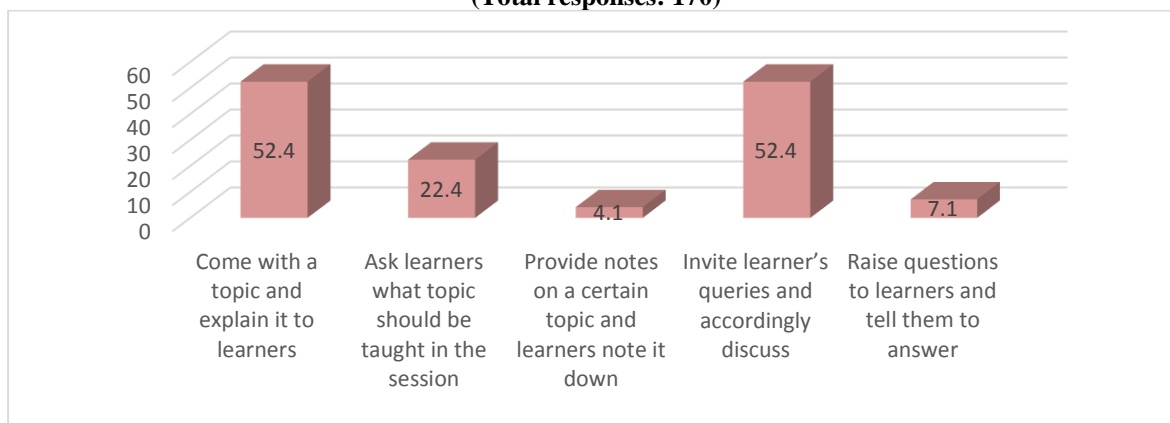
Source: Survey data.

Findings of the study also reveal that out of 170 respondents, 87.1 percent counsellors believed that counselling is always desirable for individual learner's specific needs and study orientation, while only 1.2 percent counsellors responded in the negative. On the other hand, 11.7 percent academic counsellors were not much sure if counselling is desirable for meeting individual learners' specific learning needs or not.

Counsellors were also asked if they do individual counselling at the study centres. Out of 171 respondents 41.5 percent responded yes, while 8.8 percent replied in the negative. On the other hand, 49.7 percent counsellors responded that only group counselling is arranged at the study centres.

Support regarding home assignment (HA): Counsellors were asked what type of support they offer to the learners. Out of the 170 respondents, 130 responded that they discuss HA as a regular activity of counselling, while 33 counsellors responded that they help the learners on HA only based on their requests. Fourteen counsellors responded that they help the learners to improve their initial draft answers. Only one counsellor that neither s/he undertook discussion on HA, neither the learners requested any such discussions.

Figure 4: Academic Counsellor's Support regarding Home Assignments

(Total responses: 170)
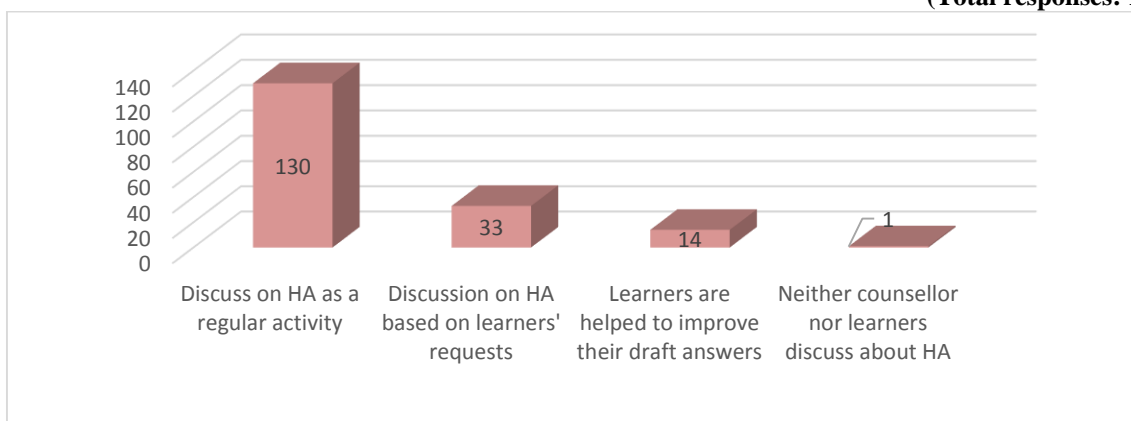
Source: Survey data.

Academic counsellors were also asked if they undertake HA evaluation. Out of 171 respondents, 77.2 percent respondents replied in affirmative. Again, regarding providing feedback on assignments, 75.8 academic counsellors responded that they provide feedback on HA.

Conduct of need-based counselling sessions: Academic counsellors were asked if they suggest the study centre coordinators if they suggested conduct of any need-based counselling sessions. The responses received have been shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Suggestions and conduct of need-based counselling sessions (in percentage)

(Total responses: 171)
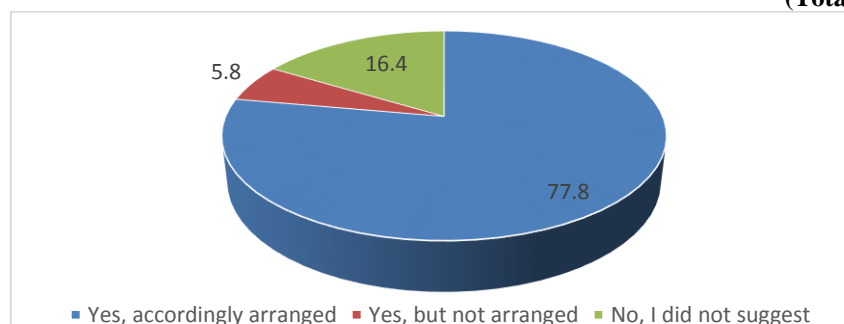
Source: Survey data.

From Figure 5 it can be seen that more than 16 percent academic counsellors responded that their suggestions to conduct need-based counselling was not accommodated.

Using technologies in the conduct counselling sessions: On asking if the academic counsellors also conduct online counselling sessions, out of 170 respondents, approximately 47 percent replied in the affirmative. Again, academic counsellors were also asked which technology they frequently use in the conduct of online counselling sessions. The responses received have been shown in Figure 6. It can be seen that out of 90 respondents, 74.4 percent academic counsellors used social networking tools, viz., WhatsApp. More than 44 percent respondents also said that they did counselling also over mobile phone calls.

Figure 6: Using technologies in the conduct of counselling sessions (in percentage)
(Total responses: 90)

Legend: ■ Email ■ WhatsApp ■ Facebook ■ Over mobile phone
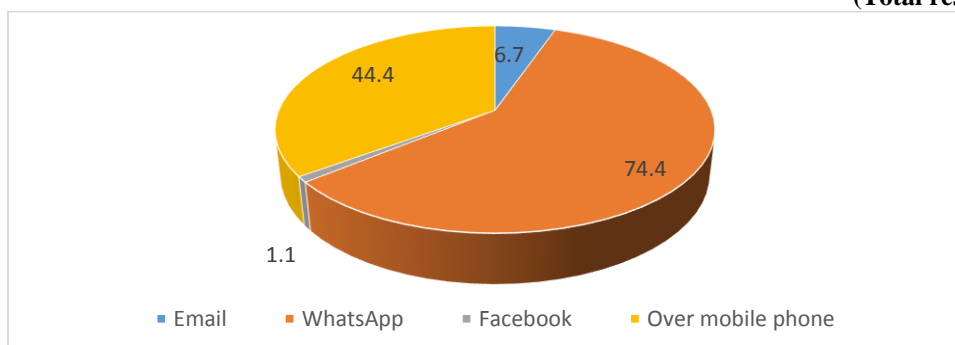
Source: Survey data.

Feedback on remuneration and operating problems: Academic counsellors if they were satisfied with the remuneration offered to them. Out of 165 respondents, 77 percent responded in the affirmative while 23 percent were unsatisfied.

Academic counsellors were also asked what major problems they encountered in the conduct of counselling sessions. From the responses shown in Figure 7 it can be seen that approximately 56 percent academic counsellors said that learners do not turn up to the counselling sessions. More than 29 percent academic counsellors said that the counselling sessions were just like regular face-to-face teaching as learners do not come with previous studies and specific queries. More than 17 percent counsellors also responded that it is sometime difficult to make the learners follow the discussion, which also may be because of the age and prior experience of the learners (12.6 percent).

Figure 7: Major problems faced conduct of counselling sessions (in percentage)
(Total responses: 167)
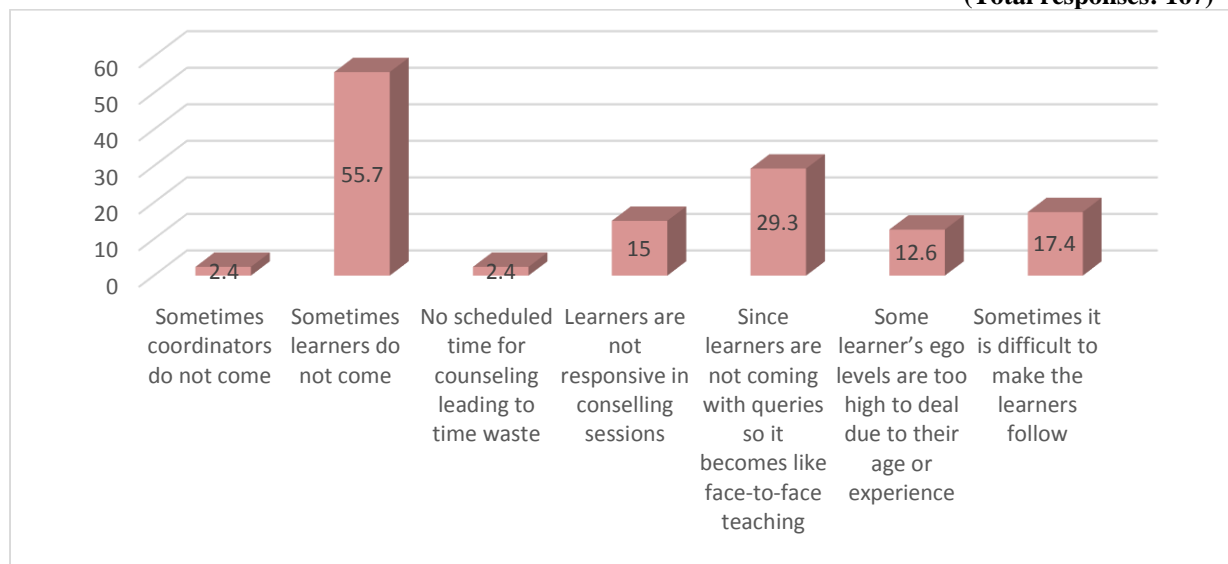
Source: Survey data.

V. DISCUSSION ON THE MAJOR FINDINGS

Counselling sessions are one of the pillars of the ODL system. Since beginning, KKHSOU has laid major emphasis on providing effective counselling sessions of the learners. Many training sessions/workshops were also held to train the academic counsellors on the pedagogical aspects of conducting counselling sessions to the learners. So far, the University has conducted numerous training sessions across the state of Assam. However, the study outlines the need of conducting such training workshops as it was found that more than 73 percent academic counsellors have less than 3 years of experience in the conduct of counselling sessions. Further, it was also found that approximately 58 percent academic counsellors did not receive any orientation/training in to conduct academic counselling in the ODL system. It is also significant to note that more than 14 percent academic counsellors considered academic counselling in the ODL system as similar to the face-to-face teaching. And more than 28 percent actually did not have any idea if they are same or different.

The study also reveals that there is a need to orient the learners towards undertaking studies in the ODL system. It was found that out of 170 academic counsellors, approximately 93 percent said that they guide the learners to come prepared for the counselling sessions. But more than 29 percent (Figure 7) academic counsellors also revealed that learners do not come with any queries or previous studies, due to which conduct of counselling sessions become same as face-to-face teaching. Further, learners not attending the counselling sessions is another issue, which is basically systemic. This is because in the ODL system, attending the counselling session on the part of the learners is voluntary. However, non-response behaviour at the counselling sessions (15 percent), having ego problems because of age and prior experience in other fields (12.1 percent) and the non-learning attitude (17.4 percent) are some the issues that a proper orientation to the ODL system can help to overcome. Conduct of need-based and personalised counselling should be promoted. The NEP 2020 also outlines to address such needs.

The University regularly provides online support to the learners, in the forms of online counselling sessions, which are conducted directly from the University City Campus. Further, all the learners are communicated in WhatsApp/Telegram groups, where they receive all important updates regarding counselling, examination schedules etc. Other than these, radio counselling is also provided through its community radio station (90.0 *Jnan Taranga* CRS), which is also available as internet radio, making it accessible to anyone at any time from across the globe. As such, the University should devise a proper etiquette/policy to undertake technology-based counselling to facilitate learners' interaction, both at its Headquarters level and also at regional and study centre levels.

VI.   CONCLUSION AND POLICY RELEVANCE

It has been seen that like other Open Universities, KKHSOU is also facing issues in the continuous admission of the learners. As a result, there is revenue loss and also it is adversely affecting the cause of education at micro level (learners' end) and macro level (drop outs). Academic counselling has a significant impact on student success and retention. By providing personalized support and guidance, counselling helps the learners overcome academic challenges and stay motivated, leading to higher completion rates. Counselling services also play a crucial role in supporting students' mental health. By addressing personal and academic stressors, the University should undertake counselling as also tools to helping the learners maintain a healthy balance, resulting in improved academic performance. The University may also partner with mental health organizations, NGOs, local civil society organisations to provide holistic support to the learners. The University should offer comprehensive online counselling platforms to reach the learners both from its Headquarters and also from the regional and study centre levels.

Further, ways and means should be worked out to allocate more resources (other than financial as well) to support counselling services in open universities. Workshop/training to conduct counselling should be organized. Last but not the least, raising awareness and proper orientation about the importance of academic counselling among learners, educators and other stakeholders can help in raising academic standards to a higher level.

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