# UNIT 4   EVALUATION OF DISTANCE EDUCATION SUB-SYSTEMS

## Structure

## 4.0   OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you should be able to:

● describe at least three types of student assessment in the context of distance education institution;

● explain the evaluation processes involved in instructional materials;

● describe the evaluation processes concerned with support services in the distance education system ; and

● Identify the tools used for evaluating staff development activities.

## 4.1   INTRODUCTION

In this block you have already read in Units 1, 2 and 3 the concept, techniques and tools of evaluation. In section 1.3 of this block we have discussed the different tasks and concepts of curriculum evaluation in distance education. This would have given you an idea of the broad areas in a distance education system. Distance education has its sub-systems like services provided by the study centres, dispatch of learning materials, utilization of learning materials, personal contact programmes and evaluation. We have selected a few sub-systems, from the many, for our discussion in this unit. Here, you will find how evaluation practices are carried out in these sub-systems. While going through this unit we will realise that the boundaries between each of these sub-systems are conceptual and blurred. Each of the components/sub-systems in the distance education system is interdependent. It is essentially because of this reason that the effectiveness of one component or the lack of it is likely to have an impact upon other areas as a chain reaction. We have also touched upon various techniques and methods of evaluation (which have been discussed in unit 2 of this block) in order to explain how we can use a tool or a technique while evaluating an area.

## 4.2 ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT PERFORMANCE

Student assessment is at the heart of an integrated approach to students' learning. There are various reasons for which assessment can be used. They are:

- to assess/diagnose the entry level capabilities of a learner

- to measure students' progress during a course

- to give students feedback on the progress

- to consolidate students' learning and the work done so far

- to motivate students

- to give students a reward and a sense of achievement

- to give guidance to a learner as to what he/she will be tested on

- to assess the amount of effort put in

- to assess level of achievement at the end of a course

- to grade in relation to other students (norm-referenced)

- to grade in relation to criteria of excellence

- to maintain a desired standard

- to give feedback about the course

- to enable the course to be evaluated

- to provide an institution with patterns of regular entries and exits

- to provide an institution with a target and feedback information on success and failure

- to give universities/institutions public accountability

- to predict the future performance of a learner

- to assist the learner for personal development.

This clearly shows that student assessment has a significant role in an evaluation system.

### 4.2.1 Admission and Entrance Test

Besides the issues of distance education policies and the need for clarity about our educational goals, the calls for accountability also point to the need for greater attention to our methods of student assessment. One of the ways to improve distance teaching is through adopting various ways of testing. Just the mere collection of information about the distance learner does not mean this information is of sufficient value to use in our decisions about courses/programmes/learners: the *quality* of information is vital. Here we will focus on one of the methods/techniques of student assessment for registering in a course/programme.

Flexible course-entry means student admittance which is not dependent upon specific qualification. However, a few courses/programmes may require such qualifications because of their content demands, and so admission tests become necessary. Normally these entrance tests assess a prospective students' general awareness about the situation he/she lives in, his/her language competence and his/her skills at numeral and analytical abilities. These tests aim at assessing the aptitude of the learners for a particular course/programme. Success at such tests

does not qualify a candidate for any kind of certification; instead achieving a pre-determined minimum norm at such tests entitles the candidate to seek admission into the programme for which the entrance test is held.

### 4.2.2 Student Learning Assessment

Learning processes are not only concerned with the absorption of information but also with developing needs skills to locate and find relevant materials to assist the learning. Students often feel that they can learn by memorizing the required knowledge and practicing the required skills to get minimum marks. Indeed the students who have properly understood the principles involved and try to think problems through, may find themselves at a disadvantage in the limited time allowed in an examination. There seem to be good reasons therefore to test students' understanding, knowledge and skills with different kinds of tests.

Knowledge and skills expected of students can usually be identified quite easily against fixed performance "objectives". The assessment test should assess student performance against these objectives. Objective type questions can efficiently test certain types of knowledge and tasks related to skills, such as numeracy, literacy communication and interpersonal skills. These questions can be devised without much difficulty. Testing affective domain is however more difficult because the level of understanding and the feelings cannot be inferred from a learner's performance with certainty. Due to this reason, some use oral examinations. With distance teaching, the possibilities for oral examination are limited, though recorded cassettes can be used for this purpose. In distance education, projects are widely used for this purpose and can be designed to test understanding, though this is a very time consuming process.

### 4.2.3 Assessment Process

Assessment, as we have seen earlier, is a matter of judgement, not simply of computation. Marks, grades and percentages should not be treated as absolute values but as symbols to be used by evaluators to communicate their judgement of different aspects of a student's performance. The purpose of assessment is to enable distance learners to demonstrate that they have fulfilled the objectives of the programmes/courses of study and that they have achieved the standard required for the award(s) they seek.

Assessment helps to determine knowledge, ability, competence and experience in distance learning settings. These assessment activities, range from informal questioning during tutorials/counselling or working on in-text questions to formal assessment such as continuous assessment, term-end examination, project work, field visits, case studies, practical work etc.

In a distance education institution, student assessment for purposes of certification may have at least three, and in certain cases more than three components. The three components are:

i)   Self-assessment;

ii)  Continuous assessment; and

iii) Term-end examination

Though you have read about these components earlier in Unit 1 in the context of IGNOU, it is worthwhile to go through the following three components again, discussed from other angles.

**Self-assessment**

The first component of student assessment process is self-assessment. This provides the learner with tools to assess the learning processes they have been

engaged in and to consider what they mean for them. Learners do have an important role in the evaluation process not only as providers of feedback but also as evaluators of their own learning.

Evaluation can be more effectively conducted by creating a specific opportunity for the learners to reflect on their reasons for learning, what they are achieving out of learning and where they want to go next. We will discuss how self-evaluation of a learner does take place at various stages of learning.

Table 1 shows you the kinds of questions which would prompt thinking about reasons for study.

**Table 4.1: Learner self-review: reasons for learning**

| Reasons | Strongly | Agree | Undecided | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1) It would help me in my job | | | | | |
| 2) I would like to change my job | | | | | |
| 3) 1 enjoy learning | | | | | |

During the learning process and at its end an important part of the students' learning can be assessed by knowing their level of understanding of the facts, of their own strengths and weaknesses, inhibitions and styles of thinking and working in relation to the varieties of constraints and opportunities presented by the course.

We can use different types of tools for evaluating student performance during and after learning. Here are three types of tools which we can use for self-assessment;

i)      Self-assessment questions/activities;

ii)     Self-review exercise; and

iii)    Keeping a journal.

Let us talk about each one of them in the given order.

The first component of self-assessment comprises in-text questions/activities built in the self-instructional materials. Here the content and style of each item is designed to be appropriate for the particular learning objectives involved. As a rule, answers or suggestions leading to answers to these in-text questions are provided alongwith the study material. A distance learner is expected to work on these in-text questions on his/her own, and having worked on questions, to look for reinforcement in the answers provided in the materials themselves. Here the learner gets feedback on the progress he/she is making and this does not have to depend on the physical presence of a teacher, but can be built into the medium being used, by using a variety of in-text questions and activities. Thus, looked at differently, self-assessment in this case is a type of formative evaluation.

Self-review questions help the learner reflect back on a period of learning to review his/her own learning. He/she can pose three types of questions. They are:

i)      What is the purpose of this unit/section?

ii)     What have I learned?

iii)    How can I apply it?

If the learner feels that he/she is not able to answer the above questions he/she can again review the unit to achieve the objectives. The value of this exercise is that the learner is given time to think about what he/she has learned and how it might be applied to what he/she does in future.

Journal keeping is especially valuable where the content of the course-work is closely related to the learner's work context or life experience. Keeping a journal is an important means through which the learner works with and learns from his/her existing experience and integrates it with the new learning gained from the course.

Self-review exercises and the keeping of a journal are important ways of recognising the significance of the learners' own involvement in the learning process, and of encouraging him/ her to spend some time thinking through the outcomes and implications of his/her study.

**Continuous assessment**

The second component of student assessment is operated through assignments. These assignments form a part of the total evaluation of the students' progress and provide the students feedback on how well they are progressing throughout the course. Students are expected to work on assignments provided with the self-instructional materials. These assignments demand written responses which are evaluated by the distance education institutions, these assignment-responses are commented upon and also graded with a view to helping the students improve their performance and also learn about the drawbacks or weaknesses in their responses. The comments are expected to be elaborate and of the teaching type. Thus, besides being a vehicle for two-way communication, assignments serve as tools for assessment of student performance. In other words, assignments are used for two purposes at one and the same time: they serve the purpose of formative evaluation and also the purpose of summative evaluation. The grades scored in assignments constitute a component of the overall score a student makes in a course. This component is called 'continuous assessment'. Also assignments can be written and commented upon on-line, as in the case of web-based courses.

Formative and/or assessment is possible by ensuring that each assignment contains plenty of opportunities for learners to receive detailed, positive and timely feedback, with lots of advice on how to improve. This not only informs distance learners' activities but also enables them to develop continuously and to achieve better results. Through a self-evaluation where they are asked to make review of their own study, they learn a lot about the processes of assessment and learning and this gives them insights into ways of improving their work.

**Term-end examination**

In open/distance education institutions the measurement of whether adequate learning has taken place is usually left to formal examination and continuous assessment systems. The overall student assessment is based on the term-end examination which in most cases is a conventional three-hour written examination. This component serves the purpose of summative evaluation. Most courses end with a formal and external examination.

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**Check Your Progress 1**

*Notes :* a) *Space is given below for your answer.*
b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this Unit.

State the process of continuous evaluation in distance teaching.

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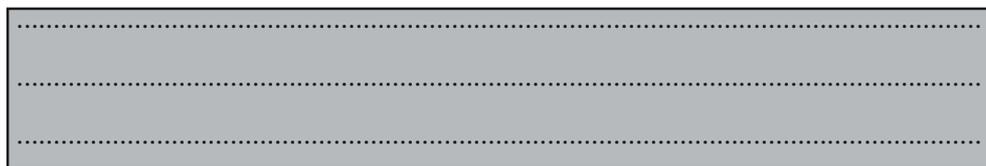
## 4.3 COURSE EVALUATION

Programme evaluation comprises of evaluation of all the components of a programme, starting from the need analysis and objectives of the programme, through learning experiences, to the learning outcomes. Course evaluation is a part of this process in which a particular course and its components are evaluated. Evaluation of the course by completion rates, comparison of academic achievement between off-campus and on-campus students and qualitative feedback from students demonstrates that the distance education mode is as successful as on-campus teaching in providing high quality teaching in developing countries. Quality control in distance education frequently centres upon the review, evaluation and subsequent redesign of distance learning materials. The evaluation of distance learning materials is an umbrella term which encompasses evaluation of a single course or whole courses or a programme(s), or curriculum. The aim of evaluation is to identify whether a course is well managed, well presented and up to date. When undertaken periodically, evaluation helps statements to be made about the appropriateness, worth, coherence and relative balance of the learning situations provided in relation to their intended outcomes. Woodley (1992) states that the aim of course evaluation is to improve the quality and effectiveness of the teaching and learning that takes place. The evaluation of distance teaching materials may seek to provide information that can be used during the process of developing or preparing materials for learning experiences-formative evaluation procedures -- or information about how well the 'finished' instruction has worked in normal use summative evaluation procedures.

**Reasons for course evaluation**

Most evaluation concepts have as their main aim helping to develop courses under optimal conditions neglecting the review of real conditions under which the course material is actually used. These evaluation concepts involve certain risk, because in principle they suggest that it is possible to have the full range of knowledge about all future conditions and that to develop perfect course materials for use under all conditions. Researchers do not accept this point of view on the basis that the conditions will change, necessitating new didactical decisions. It is worth noting that courses are designed and developed under ideal/lab conditions. This has to be improved upon for their use in real-study conditions of a distance learner. The reason for this is that investigations into the behaviour of human beings under quasi-experimental conditions yield only limited information about real-life conditions. For this reason, it seems absolutely necessary to evaluate course materials under real-study conditions because only then will its true values become clear.

For evaluation of the effectiveness of the whole course, we need to collect information from

- students;
- course writers;
- buyers/users /employers; and
- other stakeholders.

For evaluating a course we need feedback/information from different audiences and we have to use various tools and techniques. Now let us discuss four methods in the context of course evaluation.

**Formative evaluation:** This approach refers to the process of evaluating the courses to provide feedback and information that can be used during course development. This can be conducted in the following two ways:

i) critical commenting

ii) Developmental testing

You may look at the stages involved in course development process in the following diagram, and locate the activities undertaken for formative evaluation:
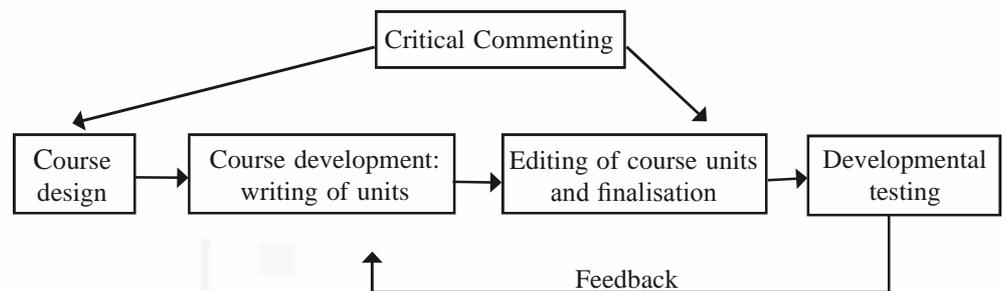


Fig. 4.1: Stages of course development

Critical commenting includes reviewing of course design, course objectives, learning experiences, instructional materials, student assessment, etc. by subject specialists, instructional designers, teaching technology experts and psychologists. This requires a clear framework against which feedback is sought further; in open/distance education contexts peer review of draft materials is a common process. At an informal level this may simply involve one or more colleagues reading or looking at draft materials and providing comments in terms of the suitability of content, the style of presentation and so on. On the other hand, arrangements may be made for systematic critical commenting, with tutors or course writers reviewing the materials prepared by others working on the same course or programme. The reactions of colleagues can also be augmented by adopting the more formal procedure of collecting data with the help of a questionnaire or inviting one or more experts in the field to act as assessors to comment on the draft materials or both.

The aim of developmental testing is to get students to work through the materials while they are in draft form in order to identify problems with such aspects as:

- clarity of aims and objectives;

- sequencing and logical arrangement of the content;

- retention of interest;

- comprehension;

- difficulty level;

- work load; and

- feasibility of student activity.

Developmental testing takes place during the preparation phase and involves trying-out draft teaching materials with students. The feedback obtained is used to guide and inform course writers' revisions of materials before they are committed to print or tape. Such testing may range from a fairly informal student trial of a single unit to an elaborate procedure for testing draft materials for a whole course of instruction.

The use of review of learning experience of the learners at the developmental stage of a course is very helpful in itself and it is a way of getting learners to identify their own problems as well as any weakness in the course. Feedback questions with tutorial support could be used to improve the learning condition as well as to make changes for the benefit of prospective learners.

In the conventional face-to-face provisions, a classroom teacher receives a whole range of informal feedback from students about the relevance and quality of a course. The attendance of the students at the tutorials, the enthusiasm and knowledge they display in their oral, practical and written work, their comments to the teacher and their success in assessment will all combine to give the teacher a great deal of information about the learning effectiveness of the course. However, with open distance learning, it is likely that there may be little or no direct contact between the course designers, the course providers and the distance learners. Course feedback may be the main, if not the only channel of communication between the students and those who carry the responsibility for their distance teaching. In effect, course evaluation at the presentation stage has to act as the students' voice. At the same time, there may also be support staff working with the students who will have their own views on the learning effectiveness of the course and on the role they are expected to undertake.

## 4.4 EVALUATION OF INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

Evaluation of instructional materials comprises the following aspects:

- Didactic aspects     :     Suitability of materials for self-study, degree of difficulty, interest and clarity of texts, graphic presentation, audio-video aids, etc.

- Scientific aspects     :     A balanced presentation of varied scientific approaches, updating of materials, relevant bibliography, research studies, etc.

Nevertheless, these criteria are to some extent abstract. While evaluating instructional material it is essential to examine a "live course" in order to assess the effect it has upon students. Data therefore should be periodically collected with regard to all course components and made available to course teams.

For the evaluation of the instructional materials, we may have any one or more of the following approaches of evaluation:

- Piloting;
- special evaluation; and
- routine evaluation.

**Piloting:** In this approach, the materials are tried out with the first batch of students and revisions are brought about subsequently. This is a well known approach and very often the management takes to it almost without giving any thought to its utility in relation to its cost. There are also reasons for not adopting this approach for each and every instructional materials.

It is not advisable, as far as educational ethics is concerned, to always use the first batch of students as guinea pigs.

Financial as well as human resources may or may not be adequate for conducting piloting and then offering an improved course to the second batch of students.

Operationally, bringing in revisions immediately after the first launch affects distribution and support services adversely.

The cost of course design and rate of course production also get adversely affected by this approach.

**Special evaluation:** This should come in whenever needed and proposed as a project for which the resources are requested for or they are available from a source other than the institution. Obviously, such evaluation will need to have a purpose and, therefore, resources should be available for fulfilling the purpose. Such evaluation is obviously not a matter of routine and so it has to be selective. Two main considerations for opting for the special evaluation of instructional materials are:

- In case of unusual and inexplicable poor performance of students including adverse reaction by students/counsellors and academics to the materials.

- In cases when a funding external agency asks for such evaluation.

**Routine evaluation:** Routine evaluation is best done as a part of management process. This approach keeps the faculty/schools in constant touch with the students and the materials, resulting in an appropriate and timely feedback to the schools, course writers and academic counsellors. It will eventually feed into the process of course maintenance which can be carried out through supplementary materials without wasting resources. In addition to instructional materials, assignments and the term-end examination question papers also are evaluated.

You may note that no single approach can provide reliable and valid data for evaluating instructional materials. A particular approach adopted by any particular team of course designers must depend on the *circumstances*, the *constraints* and the *contexts* within which they are working.

### 4.4.1  Print Materials

Print material is utilised well in distance education courses as this form of technology is the cheapest. It is also the only form of technology that can reach a wider range of learners and especially those in the very remote areas. Print medium remains by far the most widely used medium for tertiary level distance education. They are made up of many textual components and design features with psychological inputs. Various research studies have been conducted on how the presentation of texts for distance education be improved by seeking opinion from theoreticians, practitioners, psychologists, distance learners and other users so that it should be effective from a pedagogical point of view.

You may note that by their very nature, distance education print materials are subject to re-drafting and updating with the aim of improving their usability. We use different types of tools for evaluating this specific medium. Many tools for evaluating this medium include attitude scales, rating scale, and checklists, questionnaires, interview schedules and tests. We can also conduct the following quasi-experimental design for evaluating the materials.

i)   pre-test/post-test evaluation; and

ii)  follow-up evaluation.

For the procedure for using these, you can refer to Units 1 and 2 of this block, in which we have already discussed how to use them for evaluation of course materials.

## 4.4.2 Electronic Materials

Some instructional objectives, especially those concerned with acquiring *skills and/or attitudes* cannot be realised by written materials alone. A few research studies have focused upon the use of every medium within the total media mix of a course. Here we will focus upon audio broadcasts and computer based electronic materials, while keeping matters such as functionality, costs, feasibility and compatibility with the principles of distance education constantly in mind. Audio tapes are a simple, unsophisticated medium. In terms of accessibility the audio tape runs almost equal to print-based materials. Despite its inherent simplicity and the ubiquitous availability of cassette players, audio tapes are a much underutilized medium for the delivery of educational materials.

While evaluating the audio tapes the following **criteria** should be considered.

i)   Simplicity—easy to use, can be played, paused and stopped for a period.

ii)  Flexibility—can complement a variety of other media.

iii) User control—the learner can use whenever she/he needs.

iv)  Humanising tutor—student relationship.

v)   Stimulating and motivating learners by using sense organs (ear), variations in phase etc.

vi)  Variable concentration.

vii) Time.

Depending on the above criteria, audio cassettes can be pilot tested with the help of a questionnaire administered to the tutors/students (present and past).

**Television-based materials**

The various forms of television-based materials used for distance teaching are broadcast, cable, satellite, video tape, video disc, etc. The use of video for distance teaching is well established and its advantages are well documented (Kirkwood, 1990; Bates, 1993). This medium is a potentially powerful component because it has the capacity to integrate the two most important senses in the transfer of information: visual and aural. Broadcast television has the potential of reaching mass audiences. The video tape medium allows storage of information for individual, group or mass audiences. These can be used or repeated as often as required. Combinations of video tape, satellite, micro wave, digital and cable technologies allow targeting of specialised groups and audiences, and the possibility of two-way communication and even interactive networks.

While evaluating television based materials the following criteria should be considered:

i)   delivery system;

ii)  picture quality;

iii) efficiency of operation;

iv)  access;

v)   correctness;

vi)  Reliability;

vii) validity;

viii) maintenance;

ix) life-span;

x) documentation; and

xi) user-friendliness.

Three main areas considered for evaluation of computer-assisted learning (CAL) are:

a) Case of use (user evaluation);

b) Programme performance (functional evaluation); and

c) Accuracy, clarity and depth of evaluation (content evaluation).

The major purpose of *user evaluation* is to determine whether or not the interfaces are consistent and easy to use. *Functional evaluation* consists of determining whether or not the programmes perform as specified. The *evaluation* of content will ensure accuracy and determine whether or not students are able to meet the objectives.

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**Check Your Progress 2**

*Notes:*   a)   *Space is given below for you to write your answer.*
            b)   *Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this Unit.*

List at least five criteria for evaluating an audio cassette.

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## 4.5   STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

The student support services provided to a distance learner are an aggregate of the organisation of the teaching-learning process to enable him/her to acquire learning skills. It also includes individual tutoring and group tutoring, counselling, contact programmes, two-way communication between the learners and tutors. The evaluation of tutoring and counselling will help improve the support services and the course design and thus will help to meet the needs of distance learners.

To evaluate student support services we seek answers to the following questions:

- Do these services cater to information needs promptly, adequately and convincingly?

- Do these services provide for advice at pre-course, on-course and post-course stages adequately and effectively?

- Do these services provide for academic-counselling adequately and conveniently? This includes the effectiveness of tutors with regard to their work on assignment-responses and face-to-face situations.

- Are these services easily accessible?

- Are the staff involved in these services attitudinally tuned to the kind of work assigned to them'?

- How do the students rate the support services?

- Do the support services make a pedagogically rational use of various media in operation?

- Do the support services help the learners get a good score in the examination?

These questions pertaining to evaluation of student support services involve a number of variables.

These variables are:

i) human beings in the roles of coordinators, academic counselors, etc.;

ii) geographical situations such as towns, remote areas, rural areas, etc.

iii) pedagogical factors such as classroom techniques, counselling, advising, etc.

This    should give us an idea that evaluation of support services is a complex area and so should be dealt with carefully.

## 4.5.1 Tutoring and Counselling

We have talked about these concepts at length in MDE-411. Tutors/academic counsellors are essentially engaged in a wide range of tasks as shown here.
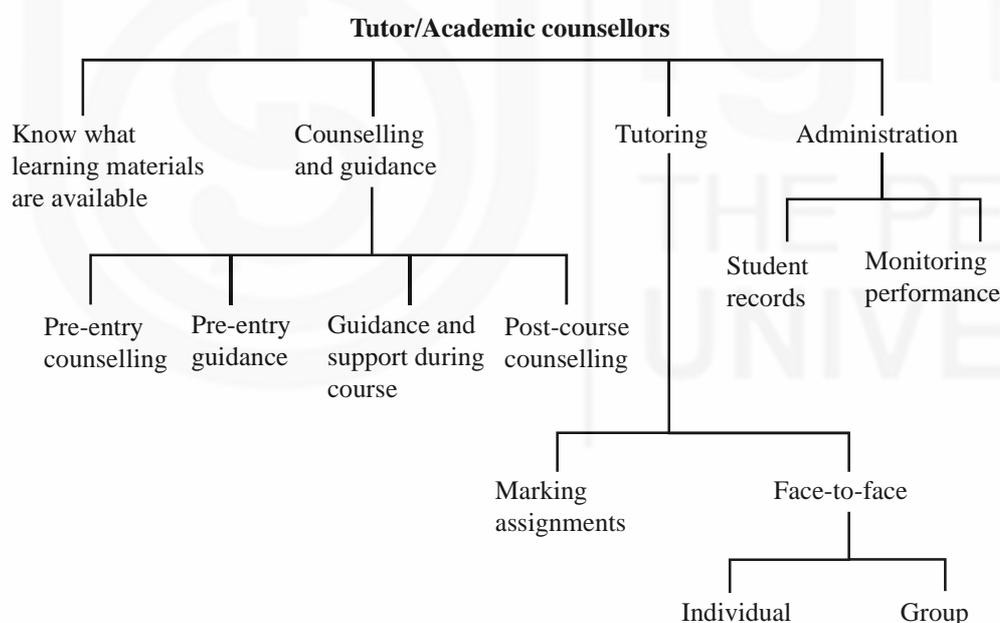


Fig. 4.2:  Tasks of academic counsellors

In other words, one can say that the role/task of a tutor is to:

- inform, advise and counsel students;

- meet students in face-to-face situations for a number of sessions during an academic year;

- assess assignment-responses; and

- help distance learners learn to learn.

- Correspondingly, evaluating the tutoring/counselling sessions involves:

- understanding the nature of communication between academic counsellors and the students — through letters/telephone/or in face-to-face situations;

- assessing the quality of their comments on assignment-responses;

- evaluating the reliability and validity of the assessment of assignment-responses; and

- analysing the turn around rate of assessed assignment-responses.

As you know in most forms of distance learning, face-to-face tuition has a voluntary aspect. It is provided with the assumption that learners should use them. But do they in fact use it, and for *how long and how often?* Were the facilities adequate? Is it for better learning or do the arrangements match learner convenience? These are important questions particularly for providers where tutorial attendance is not made compulsory in most of the programmes.

Evaluation of face-to-face tuition is essential for two main purposes: the first to ascertain the nature and distribution across the year of tutorial and counselling tasks; second to provide indicators and its effectiveness as a medium for teaching and learner support. In this case, the value of attendance serves as indicators. This requires the cooperation of learners, clerical staff and tutors depending on the system. Monitoring of attendance can help us know how often students have used the session. This is vital for organising tutorial sessions.

As far as face-to-face sessions are concerned, we evaluate academic counsellors' competencies, clarity of presentation and handling of discussions, punctuality, regularity, nature of rapport with students, quality of the conduct of sessions, motivation or enthusiasm and students' satisfaction.

For example, we would like to explore the value of tuition and quality of the role of the tutor in general. For this purpose, we can design a questionnaire and students can be asked to respond to a very wide range of statements both about the course and about their experience in the tutoring sessions.

For this, we can develop a 5-point attitude scale as given in Table 4.2.

The evaluation of the support system also consists in evaluating the counselling. In open distance education, counselling involves:

i) developing study skills in people who left or did not have formal education;

ii) helping the students with some constructive responses when they come out with personal problems over the phone/or to the study center; and

iii) helping students with study methods at (a) start of course (b) during the course, and (c) near examinations.

**Table 4.2: Student evaluation of the role of the tutor and tuition**

| Attitude statements | Strongly agree | Agree | Undecided | Decided | Strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1) A good tutor can make a course more interesting | | | | | |
| 2) Some aspects of most courses can only be taught effectively on a face-to-face basis. | | | | | |

| Attitude statements | Strongly agree | Agree | Undecided | Decided | Strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3) If the amount of tutor support is reduced, it would adversely affect my ability to cope with open university studies. | | | | | |
| 4) Without the help of a tutor I would probably have dropped out from at least one course that I stuck with. | | | | | |

Issues in evaluation of counselling session

Distance education practitioners turn to evaluation of counselling to provide clues about the need for counselling, perhaps more realistically, evidence of the demand for it, which can inform decisions about how best to provide it. Thus, the major issues in counselling evaluation are:

- How much is counselling used and by how many learners?

- Should tutors also offer counselling or should there be separate counsellor?

- How well do part-time counsellors as well as full-time staff perform these functions effectively? What training do they need?

- Is it possible to counsel at a distance with the learner using the telephone or written communication or both?

## 4.5.2 Two-Way Communication

Tutoring and counseling, and communication through assignment-responses facilitate personal interaction between a tutor and a distance learner. Tutor comments (written on assignment-responses) provide feedback to students about their own progress. Although grades awarded on assignment-responses are very important to the learner, the purpose of the assignments includes the assessment of the student's progress in a course. Tutor comments are thus a vehicle for two-way communication between a distance learner and tutor. In a distance teaching context, monitoring of tutor comments requires that assignment-responses already evaluated by a tutor may be assessed by a different person. A particular percentage of evaluated assignment-responses may be used for this purpose.

*The reliability and validity of the assessment-responses*: The speed with which tutors mark and return assignments is not the only important issue. There is also the issue of reliability and validity in awarding grades. In the present case, we are concerned with how truthfully an assignment question measures what it purports to measure. In Block 4 of this course we have already studied that reliability is a prerequisite of validity, that is, to be valid a test must be reliable. Reliability controls validity. Some of the most effective measures for improving the reliability of a test however revolve around opportunities for tutors to discuss their expectations together—the marking process.

*The turn around rate of assessed assignment-responses:* In this process, we evaluate how quickly the learner gets back an assignment, after posting or handing in, and how much time is taken by the tutor in evaluating it. Many distance education institutions can monitor tutor turn-around very easily because distance learners mail/submit their assignment-responses directly to the institution. The institution therefore knows and records when the

tutor should have received what, and can 'chase' late returners, if there are any. However, when the student number is larger, this does pose operational problems.

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**Check Your Progress 3**

*Notes:* a) *Space is given below for you to write your answer.*
  b) *Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.*

State how you can evaluate the tutoring/counselling sessions.

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## 4.6  STAFF DEVELOPMENT

In a staff development programme we generally evaluate two things: learning and performance. Although these two components are related, each needs to be considered separately. If you are not clear at the start of the programme about what you intend to find out from evaluating each area, it will be impossible for you to get this information when the training programme ends. Since evaluation deals with change, you will first need to determine the distance education practitioners' current level of performance. In this way you will be provided with information about what has changed and what changes you can expect when the employee returns to his/her work place.

A training programme delivered through a contact mode or distance mode should have specific objectives. These are stated as training objectives, but a programme coordinator is more concerned with anticipated changes in performance than with whether the training objectives have been met. This being the case, the practice in staff development programme is that the objectives are stated in terms of *change in performance.* You should not, however, ignore the learning aspects, as without this the performance cannot be expected to change much. Various methods for identifying training needs are:

● task group;

● consultation of experts, clients and target audiences;

● quantitative analysis of knowledge/skill area;

● monitoring and analysis of demand for existing courses; and

● studies of employees to identify current anticipated training needs.

As a coordinator of a staff development programme you may be required to collect base-line data. This data will help you plan the training programme as well as show how performance has improved after the training programme. If you do not have the information it is impossible to compose? performance after the training experience. Qualitative data usually takes the form of narrative reports, journals or other verbal assessments. It is possible for the institution where the staff is employed to give you more information than you need or to give it in a form that is readily comprehensive or usable. The institution in this way can prepare a qualitative report before the training and after the training.

There are a few criteria which are useful for evaluating a staff development programme.

1) What information is essential to know about performance evaluation?

   This deals with transferring the new knowledge from the learning situation to work situations. You will want to know through a systematic evaluation, whether the trainees' performance has changed. You may need to have some assessment: how much did performance change? Too often a course coordinator feels that once the employee has returned to work from the training programme, it is difficult to assess his/her performance in the actual work situation. So the trainer/organizer of the training programme needs to know enough about the change in performance to determine the relative success of the programme with the help of *follow-up* activities.

2) Was the cost of the programme worth the results?

   To answer this question you and the institution must first know what the total cost of the programme is. You can count the rejected materials and wasted time or the need for additional services of experts or resource persons and other associated staff calls, etc. Assessing costs becomes difficult when we are dealing with performances and training output.

   At the end of a staff development programme you will have to decide whether providing training will cost more than the benefits you can derive from it. If you did not make that decision before providing the training programme, it should be done afterwards and used as a basis for future training programmes and decision-making.

3) What kind of data should be collected?

   The two categories of data are classified as quantitative data, things that can be counted or measured, and qualitative data, where counting is not possible but observation can be effective. That is, after a training programme an individual can he observed to determine if his/her performance has improved or is up to the set standard.

4) How much change can we expect in a training programme?

   For example, if a job requires delivering of course materials, no amount of training pertaining to writing course materials will be able to bring about the desired change. Your expectations have to be realistic.

Evaluation of staff development involves:

- training needs analysis;

- prioritisation of training needs;

- continuous assessment of training programmes; and

- follow-up training programme to see the effectiveness/quality of a programme.

We should note here that evaluation of staff development programmes ranges from the use of financial measures to subjective measures of change seen in the behaviour of participants after training. For this, several measures can be used:

- financial management;

- information provided to participants (on content, formal material provided, etc.);

- observation of the training activities;

- using questionnaires (open and closed type) to get feedback; and

- follow up.

Many research studies have focused on the need for an explicit policy by the institution about staff development for distance education (Parer, Croker and Shaw 1988; Benson 1990). Such a policy emphasises effective teaching and learning at a distance, the preparation for the production of study materials, support services and promotion rewards for those who are successful in distance education. Few institutions all over the world have such an explicit policy. (We have discussed at length evaluation of staff development for distance education in MDE-419.)

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**Check Your Progress 4**

*Notes :* a) *Space is given below for your answer.*
b) *Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.*

List the four criteria useful for evaluating a staff development programme.

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## 4.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have discussed how to evaluate a few key areas in distance education systems which are interdependent. We have presented to you, the way to assess student performance which occupies a significant role in an evaluation system. As you know, quality control in distance education frequently centres upon the review, evaluation and redesign of learning materials. We have discussed course evaluation with reference to developmental testing, formative and summative evaluation. We have focused on how to evaluate the electronic materials with the help of test tools. Besides this, we have touched upon the evaluation of student support services and staff development programmes.

## 4.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Check Your Progress 1**

Assessment of student performance is operated through assignments. The students work on assignments and prepare assignment-responses. These assignment-responses are commented upon and also graded with a view to helping the students improve their performance. The grades scored in assignment-responses, constitute a component of the overall score a student makes in a course. This component is called continuous assessment.

**Check Your Progress 2**

i)  Flexibility             ii)  Simplicity

iii) User control           iv)  Stimulating and motivating.

v)  Time

**Check Your Progress 3**

Evaluating tutoring and counselling sessions involves understanding the nature
of communication between academic counsellors and students through letters,
over the telephone or in face to face situations, (the quality of their comments on
assignment-responses.)

**Check Your Progress 4**

i)  Information essential to know about performance of the participants in a staff
    development programme

ii)  Cost of the programme

iii)  Data for need assessment

iv)  Change we expect in a programme.

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