CHAPTER 5

ACADEMIC COUNSELLING FOR OUM LEARNERS

Academic counselling refers to the process of providing support and assistance to learners to help them overcome real and/or perceived barriers to learning so that they are able to achieve their learning goals. One of the distinguishing characteristics about OUM is that its learners are mostly working adults who are distance learners. Distance learners differ considerably from learners in conventional universities since their learning environments and their modes of learning are very different. These differences have important implications for your role as an OUM tutor and counsellor. This chapter is intended to clarify your role as an OUM academic counsellor. You will also get a better understanding of the skills and strategies pertinent to academic counselling. Developing these skills and strategies will help you to provide effective academic counselling to your learners.

OBJECTIVES

After you have read this chapter, you should be able to:

- identify those learner problems that should be addressed by an academic counsellor;
- practice the skills and strategies that experienced academic counsellors use;
- state the strengths and shortcomings of online academic counselling;
- list the characteristics of adult learners that result in learning difficulties and require the intervention of an academic counsellor;
• utilise specific strategies to enhance the effectiveness of online counselling; and
• offer guidance and advice to learners that is intended to help them overcome specific learning problems.

5.1 ACADEMIC COUNSELLING AND YOU

The roles of academic tutor and counsellor are intricately intertwined at OUM. Unlike conventional universities, OUM learners are dispersed all over the country. Being distance learners, they have limited opportunities to meet with their tutors and peers. You are their contact with OUM. You are also the individual that they will turn to and rely on for assistance in addressing challenges and problems related to their learning. Thus, besides ensuring that the subject content is taught effectively, you are also expected to provide direction and guidance to your learners so that they become successful distance learners.

From the outset of this chapter, it is important that you are aware of the distinction between counselling or therapy for emotional problems, and academic counselling. Your role in the OUM context is that of an academic counsellor. When your learners encounter problems related to their learning, it is your responsibility to offer guidance and advice to individuals, or groups of learners, which will assist them in overcoming these problems. Counselling for serious emotional or psychological problems is better left to trained counsellors or therapists.

5.2 MOTIVATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE ACADEMIC COUNSELLING

In order for you to fulfill your role as an OUM tutor effectively, it is important that you recognize the link
between counselling and motivation. An essential part of your role as an OUM tutor is to offer guidance and advice that will enable the learners to overcome problems related to their learning. By doing so, you will help to maintain the learners’ motivation at a high level. The necessity to sustain the learner’s motivation is especially important in the OUM context because these learners are mostly working adults. They have only finite time and energy to bring to bear on their learning tasks. They have to fit learning into life’s ‘margins’, and friends, family, job, sports, and normal life, all compete with education for a slice of their time and energy. The guidance that you offer is essential to assist the learner to cope with these competing demands.

Experts suggest that motivation can be posited as comprising three aspects: a sense of volition, an expectancy for success, and a sense of valuing learning. In other words, the learner must want to learn; have the expectation that he can master the learning material; and, believe that the learning will benefit him in some way, such as raising self-esteem, or assisting in career development.

The effective counsellor offers guidance and advice that addresses these different aspects. The counselling provided by the tutor equips the learner with effective strategies that enable the learner to cope with instructional demands. This creates an expectation for success as well as a willingness to engage in the difficult and challenging task of learning. Effective counselling thus sustains the learner’s motivation to learn.

In the subsequent sections, the strategies that the tutor can deploy to offer effective counselling are discussed.
The first step towards becoming an effective counsellor is to embrace your role as a counsellor. Research has shown that to a very large extent, the counsellor’s ability to provide effective counselling depends on the counsellor’s personal qualities. Three critical counsellor behaviours have been identified: (1) enthusiasm, (2) confidence, and (3) belief in the learner’s ability to act on the advice and guidance that is offered. It is important for you to understand and accept that your role as an OUM tutor is not limited merely to delivering course content effectively. Integral to your role as tutor is the task of providing support, guidance and assistance to help OUM learners overcome real and/or perceived barriers that hinder them from achieving their learning goals. You have to show your learners that you are ready and eager to assist them. You have to let the learners know that you are aware of their learning difficulties and that you believe that they are capable of overcoming these obstacles.
It is equally important that you inspire confidence and a belief in your learners that you are able to help them overcome their problems and difficulties. You can do this by developing the skills and strategies that experienced counsellors use. The basic counselling skills are discussed below.

5.2.1 Attending Behaviours

Skilled counsellors know that it is important to show that you are attending or paying attention to the learner. Skilled counsellors are able to convey this through their nonverbal behaviours. In counselling, the nonverbal behaviours of counsellors are referred to as physical attending behaviours.

When communicating with the learner, a skilled counsellor does the following:

(i) the counsellor maintains eye contact to indicate that he is attending or paying attention to what the learner is saying. Nodding, encouraging verbalisations, not moving around, and not being distracted are all ways of indicating to the learner that he has the counsellor’s full, undivided attention; and

(ii) the counsellor adopts an open posture. He avoids crossing his arms and legs because doing this conveys a sense of a lack of involvement. Instead the counsellor faces the learner squarely. Doing this indicates that the counsellor is involved in the discussion and the learner feels that he is being attended to. The counsellor may also lean slightly forward to indicate interest and involvement.

The concept of physical attending may seem basic, but in light of research findings that about 80 percent of
communication takes place non-verbally, it can be very effective. When counselling students, physical attending gives the learner the feeling that the counsellor is interested in, and cares about, his problems.

5.2.2 Effective Communication Skills

The skilled counsellor is also an effective communicator. One of the challenges in counselling is to get the learner to talk about his problems or difficulties. The skilled counsellor makes effective use of questions to obtain the information that enables him to understand the learner’s problems. Instead of asking questions to which the learner might respond with a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’, the skilled counsellor makes use of open-ended questions. These questions require that the learner give extended answers and open the door to a discussion of feelings as well as facts.

Open-ended questions are useful for:

(i) **beginning an interview**

What would you like to talk about today?  
How have things been since the last time we talked together?

(ii) **getting the learner to elaborate on a point**

Can you tell me more about that?  
How did you feel when that happened?
(iii) eliciting examples of specific behaviour so that the counsellor is better able to understand what the learner is describing

Will you give me a specific example?
What do you do when you get “depressed”?
What do you mean when you say that you are unable to learn?

(iv) focusing the learner’s attention on his feelings

What are you feeling as you are telling me this?
How did you feel when you got the results of your test?

5.2.3 Listening

The skilled counsellor realises that it is not sufficient to get the learner to talk. It is as important to listen to what the learner says. In counselling, the concept of listening refers to the process by which the counsellor tunes in to the learner’s message and responds accurately to the meaning behind the words of the learner.

The skilled counsellor does this by attending to the content of the learner’s message. He listens carefully for, not only what the learner says, but also the words, expressions and patterns the learner is using, which may give him a deeper insight. To be an effective counsellor, you must develop your ability to remember what was said, as well as to clarify what was said and find out what was not said.
5.2.4 Empathising

Skilled counsellors are able to empathise with their learners. This is ability that the skilled counsellor has of perceiving the learner’s experience and then to communicate that perception back to the learner to clarify and amplify the learner’s own experience and meaning.

Three skills are associated with the communication of empathy: a) nonverbal and verbal attending; b) paraphrasing the content of the learner’s message; and, c) reflecting the learner’s feelings and implicit messages. A fuller discussion of each of these skills follows:

(i) **attending** involves those behaviours by which the counsellor indicates that he is paying full attention, in an accepting and supportive way, to the learner. This skill is discussed in detail earlier in this section.

(ii) **paraphrasing** requires the counsellor to selectively focus on the cognitive part of the learner’s message. The learner’s key words and ideas are communicated back to the learner in a rephrased and shortened form.

There are four steps in effective paraphrasing:

(a) **listen and recall** the learner’s entire message to ensure that you have not omitted any significant parts;

(b) **identify the content** of the message by deciding what event, situation, idea, or person the learner is talking about;

(c) **rephrase**, as concisely as possible, the key words and ideas the learner has used to communicate his concerns; and

(d) **perception check** by asking questions such as "It sounds like...;" "Let me see if I understand this,
...”. These questions allow the learner to agree or disagree with the accuracy of your paraphrasing.

(e) **reflecting feelings** is the skill by which the counsellor reflects back to the learner what the latter has been communicating verbally and nonverbally. The counsellor does this both directly through words and nonverbal behaviours as well as through reasonable inferences about what the learner might be experiencing emotionally. As a counsellor, it is important that you choose carefully the words that you use to communicate these feelings back to the learner. The skill lies in choosing words that convey the same or similar meanings to those communicated by the learner without sounding as if you are merely parroting him.

5.3 **ONLINE ACADEMIC COUNSELLING: THE E-COUNSELLOR**

The fact that the learners at OUM are distance learners has two important implications for the provision of counselling services. First, the very nature of the OUM instructional model – distance learning – means that a considerable proportion of the difficulties and challenges that OUM learners encounter, and which require counselling, are related to academic issues. These academic issues may, however, be intertwined with the personal and professional life of the learner. For instance, a learner may encounter difficulties in completing course assignments because of the demands of his job. Second, the limited number of opportunities for face-to-face interaction between tutor and learners means that, more often than not, counselling pertaining to these academic issues by the OUM tutor has to be conducted online.
Online academic counselling is therefore a distinguishing feature of counselling in the OUM context. Internet counselling, sometimes also referred to as e-counselling, is the application of counselling principles through the Internet. In OUM, there are two available modes of providing counselling through the OUM website on the Internet. OUM tutor-counsellors can communicate with their learners by using either the Online Forum or the E-mail facility. However, it should be noted that both of these modes are asynchronous, that is, communication is not in real time because there is a delay between posting a query and obtaining a reply to that posting.

Tutors should also be aware of the privacy issues related to these two modes of communication. It should be noted that postings on the Online Forum can be accessed by all the members of a particular tutorial group. Thus, while the Online Forum is suited to offering guidance and advice to a group of learners who share a common problem, it is not suited to the discussion of issues that a learner might want to keep confidential. The e-mail facility is thus probably more suitable for offering counselling to OUM learners on an individual basis.

You should also note that in online counselling, the face-to-face interaction that is such an important part of conventional counselling is lacking. You will recall that in the section on “Strategies for effective counselling”, the importance of nonverbal behaviours in communication was emphasised. In online counselling, these nonverbal behaviours are lacking for both counsellor as well as learner.

It is obvious then that there are shortcomings attendant to online counselling. These shortcomings are not sufficiently serious to hinder the counsellor from providing online academic counselling to his learners. However, the shortcomings are serious enough that you should not attempt to provide online counselling or therapy to learners for their emotional problems. As was
mentioned earlier, counselling and therapy for serious emotional and psychological problems is better left to trained professionals.

5.4 ACADEMIC COUNSELLING AND THE ADULT LEARNER

At OUM, the role of academic tutor and counsellor are intricately intertwined. Besides ensuring that the subject content is taught effectively, you are also expected to provide direction and guidance to your learners so that they become successful distance learners. Many of the challenges and difficulties encountered by the distance learners at OUM are due to the fact that they are working adults. To offer effective academic counselling, it is necessary that you develop an understanding of the characteristics that distinguish the adult learners at OUM, and how these may sometimes cause learning difficulties.

(i) Unlike younger learners, adult learners tend to be more self-directed in their lives. Adult learners need to have a sense that they are in control over their learning. It is a good idea to include adult learners in the planning of their educational efforts.
However, their responsibilities towards their jobs and their families can restrict their freedom to act. This is where you have an important counselling role. You have to be there for your adult learners with advice and guidance when their learning is adversely affected by the pressures of coping with work and family.

(ii) A related point is that, in contrast to youths, the learner role is secondary for adult learners. Adults fulfil multiple roles which inevitably create conflicting and competing demands on the adult learner. Their multiple roles leave adult learners with far less time and energy to read, study, or learn as compared to youths. As a counsellor cum tutor, it is important that you inform learners of test dates and course assignment deadlines far ahead of time. You also have to accept that jobs and families can create obstacles for the learner, and be willing to extend deadlines for assignments. You have to accept that the learners may not see their educational efforts as necessarily the highest priority in their lives. Often times, learners will be preoccupied with other roles and responsibilities.

(iii) As an OUM tutor, you have to understand and accept that for most adult learners, learning must fit into life’s ‘margins’. We all face the reality that there are limits on our energy and time. Learning also takes time and energy. With all of their other responsibilities, adult learners have to carve out some margin in their lives to allow learning to occur. As an OUM tutor, you can assist your learners in the process of priority setting. You can do this by providing guidance to help your learners to be realistic about the demands of learning and provide time management and study suggestions.
(iv) Adult learners often lack confidence in their ability to learn. Often, many adult learners have had somewhat negative learning experiences in their traditional schooling. Thus, when they embark on a formal educational programme such as the one at OUM, they may feel inadequate. Other adult learners, who may have done well in their earlier schooling, still lack confidence for further schooling efforts due to what they perceive as rusty study skills, poor reading skills, test anxiety, or other such learning barriers. One of your responsibilities as an OUM tutor and counsellor is to make use of learning strategies that build confidence in your adult learners. It will often be necessary for you to teach the learners better study skills and ways of improving reading comprehension. Fostering a collaborative environment in the classroom rather than a competitive one can also assist in alleviating anxiety among your adult learners.

(v) The process of learning necessitates that we make changes in our attitudes and actions. Adult learners, however, often tend to be wary of change. Their life experiences have taught them that change is not always for the better and that many of the outcomes of change are unpredictable. In your role as a tutor and counsellor, you can help your learners to become more accepting of change if you explain the "why" of changes and not just the "how".

(vi) Adult learners often have to compensate for the effects of aging on their ability to learn. Aging brings with it a number of physical complications that can impact on adult learning efforts. The percentage of such complications increases with age. As adults age, vision and hearing, for instance, can create barriers in educational programs. Conversely, however, although the speed of learning tends to decrease with age, the depth of learning tends to increase. In other words, adults
tend to learn less rapidly with age, but what they learn is learned at a deeper and more integrative level. Awareness that learner difficulties in learning may result from these factors will allow you to offer the appropriate advice when your learners encounter such difficulties.

5.5 EFFECTIVE E-COUNSELLING

The key to providing effective e-counselling is to create a safe learning environment in which your learners can ask questions, reveal their uncertainties, and explore new dimensions of their studies. You can work towards creating a supportive and nurturing environment such as this by: a) initiating and maintaining supportive contact with learners, and, (b) by facilitating learning as and when needed by your learners. Each of these two strategies is discussed in detail below.

(i) Initiating and maintaining contact

One of the key activities in your role as a tutor and a counsellor is to maintain contact with your learners. In a distance learning context such as OUM, contact between learner and counsellor significantly affects the learner’s perseverance in learning as well as his academic achievement.
As discussed earlier, there are two modes by which you can communicate with your learners through the OUM Website – the Online Forum and E-mail. Your first communication with your learners will probably be more in keeping with your role as tutor rather than counsellor. However, in this first communication, you may want to indicate to your learners that you are available to offer assistance and guidance if they should encounter problems related to their academic pursuits, such as coping with learning, maintaining study schedules, etc.

Having initiated contact with the learners, it is important that you maintain this contact. It is important for you to let your learners know that this initial contact is not a one-off event, but the start of an ongoing connection. If learners fail to respond to your communication, you have to find out why they did not respond.

Learners typically progress through a number of stages as they go through the course. Initially, they display a lot of enthusiasm but also some apprehension. Their anxiety increases as they start work on their first assignment. Anxiety levels may drop as the learners work on subsequent assignments but are likely to go up again as end-of-semester exams approach. Informing learners that you are aware of their concerns as they go through these stages reassures them. Offering appropriate guidance and advice allows learners to avoid problems related to learning before they occur.

(ii) Facilitating learning

Assisting your learners in dealing with obstacles to learning is an important responsibility in your role as an OUM counsellor. Obstacles to learning prevent the learner from focusing optimally on his learning and are often related to one or more of the following: course workload; assessment anxiety; and personal issues. Each of these is discussed below.
(a) Course workload

It has already been mentioned that OUM learners are mostly working adults. Many of these learners encounter difficulties in completing assignments in time and coping with the course workload. Their learning commitments have to be balanced with family or work commitments. When a learner reveals that he has a problem in learning, it is important that you identify if the source of the problem is course workload, job pressures, other commitments or lack of confidence about completing an assignment successfully.

If a learner has difficulty coping with the course workload, you can help by finding out if the learner is spending too much time on one section, or is having difficulty understanding one part. It is also helpful to reassure the learner that the workload can be made more manageable, and then to work out some strategies of doing this together with the learner.

In instances where the learner is lacking confidence, you can encourage him to tackle the problem learning task or assignment in manageable chunks. You can reassure the learner by referring to what he has already accomplished so far.

You can assist learners who have demanding job or family commitments by working out a more manageable learning schedule that will allow them to meet their current commitments. It is also important to get the learners to agree to a specific date by which they will catch up on their backlog of work.
(b) **Assessment anxiety**

Learners at OUM often experience assessment anxiety because many of them have been away from formal education for a long time. Often, these learners are under additional pressure because they want to achieve particular grades for reasons that the counsellor may not be aware. To assist the learner, you have to first determine why the learner wants to achieve a particular grade. It could be that the learner needs a certain grade level to go on to other courses, or it may be that the learner is used to obtaining high grades and is unhappy when he gets lower than expected grades on your course.

Knowing why the learner wants to achieve a particular grade will allow you to offer the appropriate advice and assistance that takes account of the learner’s priorities as well as what is feasible. Depending on the situation, you can work out strategies that the learner can deploy to strengthen his grades. In other circumstances, you may just have to get the learner to accept that the grades that he has obtained are acceptable.

(c) **Personal issues**

OUM’s distance learners are working adults who have developed a fine balance between their personal and academic lives. This balance is easily disrupted by unexpected events like illness, job commitments, transport problems or the demands of child or elder care. As a tutor and counsellor, you must be sensitive to these disruptions. Any changes in your learner’s pattern of communication with you, such as missed or cryptic contacts from a previously communicative learner, may indicate a problem that needs investigation. Queries to the learner, to find out
what the problem is, should express your concern and not make the learner feel guilty. When the learner responds, make it clear that you will try to help, and be positive and encouraging.

It is important to adopt a positive tone in all your communication with the learner. Conveying your concern for the learner and your willingness to help in finding solutions to his problems will assure him.

5.6 SUMMARY

At OUM, the roles of tutor and counsellor are intertwined and are probably more challenging than in other educational contexts. OUM’s adult learners also pose unique challenges to the counsellor. You can better prepare to meet these challenges by familiarising yourself with the resources that are available to help learners deal with specific problems, e.g. study skills courses, or time management resources. Equally important, you should be aware of the interventions that you are able to carry out and those that should be handled by others.