



**COUNSELLING AND FAMILY THERAPY THROUGH OPEN AND  
DISTANCE LEARNING: SKILL DEVELOPMENT AND QUALITY  
ASSURANCE IN TRAINING OF PROFESSIONALS  
– THE INDIAN EXPERIENCE**

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**Abstract**

*The fast-changing scenario of modern India poses many challenges to be met by the family members as a unit and the professionals working for the promotion of family well-being. The family is the basic unit of the society. The inter-relatedness of the individual, the family and the social context is now being increasingly recognized and emphasized. In response to this recognition, counselling and family therapy has emerged, worldwide, as a new area that adopts a holistic perspective and seeks to improve the psychological well-being of the person by addressing not just him or her individually, but also the significant others in the immediate social milieu.*

*An innovative professional degree programme for training of professionals in the area of counselling and family therapy is thus a need of the hour. This need has been addressed by the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in India by developing and launching Master of Science in Counselling and Family Therapy M.Sc.(CFT) and Post Graduate Diploma in Counselling and Family Therapy*

(PGDCFT). These programmes of study are modular in nature and have been developed with open learning paradigm and are delivered through the open and distance learning and technology mediated methodology with judicious blending. This paper discusses at length the processes involved in development and quality assurance for these programmes and lays emphasis on how these programmes promote skill-set development for these professional cadres. Rigorous efforts have been made to keep up quality assurance of the said programmes. The paper concludes by highlighting crucial aspects of preparation of course content and course material — print, audio and video, along with a discussion on the built-in provisions for experiential learning emphasizing on skill development.

**Keywords:** Counselling, Family Therapy, skill development, quality assurance, Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), experiential learning, use of print material, self-learning material, audio-video material, health, human development.

## Introduction

Human Development is concerned with the healthy development of individuals, taking into cognizance their milieu. According to the World Health Organization (1948) health has been defined as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”. While mental health disorders do not contribute significantly to mortality, they have a serious bearing on the quality of life of the affected persons and their families. The need for education and training in order to have adequate human resources at the field level to provide the required preventive, promotive and rehabilitative services is now being increasingly recognized.

As is true of most Asian countries, India, in the present era of rapid social change, is a society in transition; and consequently, in a state of flux. In socio-psychological terms, one finds that while on one hand, the traditional support groups are crumbling and disappearing, on the other, professional support is yet to gain ground in India. It

is being increasingly acknowledged the world over that one needs to take a holistic view of human development, concerned with the healthy development of individuals, taking into cognizance their milieu. In the Indian context, the felt need for external support has resulted in tremendous demands for the same, but the ground reality is that there is a paucity of requisite expertise and inadequacy of resource persons in this field. Taking cognizance of this vital societal need, and noting the veritable absence of a Degree programme of study in this field being offered by any higher educational institution in the country, the Indira Gandhi National Open University launched a one-year postgraduate diploma, Post Graduate Diploma in Counselling and Family Therapy (PGDCFT) and a two-year Master's degree programme in Counselling and Family Therapy (M.Sc. (CFT)). The authors have been the faculty members associated with these programmes right from proposing and inception of the same as Programme Coordinators. It is with reference to these programmes of study that we, shall be sharing with you, in this paper, the Indian experience of ensuring quality in the endeavour and to develop the requisite knowledge, understanding, and skill-set for Counselling and Family Therapy professionals through open and distance learning (ODL).

### **The University and the Endeavour**

Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) has emerged as one of the mega universities of the world. The open and distance learning approach used for education, empowered with technology-mediated learning has grown in times in both quality and quantity. Higher education through open and distance learning mode has reached newer frontiers, encompassing even scientific and professional domains that were not thought to be amenable to this mode of teaching, and IGNOU has been playing a pioneering role in the field. "The Indira Gandhi National Open University in over two decades has become both a national treasure and an international icon as the largest unitary university in the world. Through its scale, scope and use of technology, it is an inspiration to educators everywhere" (Daniel,

Kanwar, Uvalic-Trumbic, & Varoglu, 2006, p. 3). With a mandate that includes the twin objectives of widening access to higher education to all segments of the society and providing continual professional development and training, the Indira Gandhi National Open University in India, with international recognition and presence, strives to provide seamless access to sustainable and learner-centric quality education, skill upgradation and training to all by using innovative technologies and methodologies and ensuring convergence of existing systems for large-scale human resource development, required for promoting integrated national development and global understanding. The focus of the university is on need-based programmes and on reaching the unreached (IGNOU, 2017).

### **Reaching New Horizons: Training Counselling and Family Therapy Professionals through ODL**

The Master's degree programme in Counselling and Family Therapy and the Post Graduate Diploma in Counselling and Family Therapy are aimed at developing professionals in this vital field, which is gaining greater salience in the present times both from social and employment perspectives. The contemporary social scenario has resulted in an increased need and demand for professional support in terms of counselling and family therapy, which is being increasingly recognized as an effective approach both for promoting positives like strengthening family ties and increasing resilience of individuals in vulnerable situations as well as for addressing negative aspects such as socio-psychological problems, declining mental health, and psychosomatic disorders that are being increasingly witnessed in recent times. As a result, there is a tremendous felt need for education and training in this area. The rise in issues and disturbing phenomena presently observed in the schools requires a joint intervention from both teachers and parents which is only possible with the help of a competent counsellor and family therapist. The increased divorce rates, and marital discord in the present times, evident in both nuclear families as well as joint or extended families; ramification of the same on children, youth and elders in the

family also require the intervention of a counsellor and family therapist. With easy availability of alcohol, nicotine and other drugs, high academic pressure, dysfunctional family, and other such factors, in contemporary times one sees an increase in substance use and its harmful effects on the substance user as well as his or her family members have been observed and, thus, need for counsellor and family therapist. Increased mental health issues and problems like heightened aggression on the one hand and depression on the other, among teenagers and youth in particular are becoming a serious cause for concern. Intervention of a counsellor and family therapist has been found to be effective in such cases.

This felt need for counsellors and family therapist was addressed by the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in India by developing and launching Master of Science in Counselling and Family Therapy M.Sc. (CFT) and Post Graduate Diploma in Counselling and Family Therapy (PGDCFT), which have been developed with open learning paradigm and are delivered through the open and distance learning and technology mediated methodology with judicious blending. These programmes have been developed as modular programmes. By developing the requisite knowledge, understanding, attitudes and skills in the area of Counselling and Family Therapy, these unique programme of study offered by IGNOU aim at training professional cadres in the field.

### **Issues and Concerns in the Development of Professional Programme in Counselling and Family Therapy**

The Master's Degree Programme in Counselling and Family Therapy [M.Sc. (CFT)], that has provision of an exit point for learners (after one year) in the form of the Post Graduate Diploma in Counselling and Family Therapy (PGDCFT), is a unique and innovative programme of study. Conversely, a student who has completed PGDCFT can join the second year of M.Sc. (CFT). It aims to provide professional training at the post graduate level in Counselling and Family Therapy. The programme is multi-disciplinary in nature. It draws from disciplines such as

human development and family studies; child development; psychology; psychiatry; sociology; anthropology; social work and so on.

A remarkable feature of this programme of study in the field of Counselling and Family Therapy is its focus on the applied aspect and the thrust on opportunities for hands-on experience for the learners. This programme lays due emphasis on learning and practicing the skills required by a counsellor and family therapist in a rigorous manner. Keeping in view that IGNOU is an open and distance learning university, attention was given to the minutest detail during the design and development of the programme with clear focus on developing skills and competencies among the learners along with knowledge and analytical thinking. Every theory course has its practical counterpart; which is compulsory. In fact, almost half the credits in the Master's Degree Programme M.Sc. (CFT) are ear-marked for application-oriented learning opportunities. The focus is on applied aspects and experiential learning. Indigenously prepared, multi-media, self-instructional study materials are provided to each learner. The course material package of M.Sc. (CFT) includes the print materials supported with audio and video programmes.

Some of the other salient features of the Master's programme in Counselling and Family Therapy are:

- In the second year of the Master's Programme, the learner has the option to be trained in Marital and Family Therapy and Counselling; Child and Adolescent Counselling and Family Therapy; and Substance Abuse Counselling and Family Therapy.
- Every student of M.Sc. (CFT) acquires extensive, and intensive, hands-on experience in the field setting under the supervision of an expert during the supervised practicums, internship and dissertation components of the programme.

The programme structure for Master's programme in Counselling and Family Therapy in the first year and for Post Graduate Diploma in Counselling and Family

Therapy includes theory and practicum courses like Human Development and Family Relationships, Mental Health and Disorders, Counselling and Family Therapy: Basic Concepts and Theoretical Perspectives, Counselling and Family Therapy: Applied Aspects, Counselling & Family Therapy: Research Methods & Statistics, and practical on Reflective Journal. In the second year of Master's programme in Counselling and Family Therapy, theory and practicum courses are on Applied Social Psychology; and, Counselling & Family Therapy: Applications & Interventions. Apart from these compulsory courses the student has to choose any one of the theory course and its corresponding practicum, these are Marital and Family Therapy & Counselling; or, Child and Adolescent Counselling and Family Therapy; or, Substance Abuse Counselling and Family Therapy. Further, the student is required to do Internship as a compulsory course and submit a Dissertation for successful completion of the programme (IGNOU, 2017).

### **Aspects of Quality Assurance**

In the context of open and distance learning (ODL), quality is a construal that is difficult to define. As the stakeholders, purposes, applications and modes become diversified, the definitions, dimensions, and thrust areas of quality also tend to vary correspondingly (e.g., Jung, 2007; Jung & Latchem, 2007). Distance learning is seen as a sub-set of distributed learning, focusing on students who may be separated in space and time from their peers and instructors (Stella & Gnanam, 2004). Consequently, the mechanisms applied in conventional universities cannot simply be extrapolated. Given that ODL institutions operate on the premise of open access, the nature of the contacts between the learners and the teachers is significantly different from that in face-to-face teaching institutions (Koul, 2006).

The spectrum of quality in ODL is wide indeed; from socio-economic benefits deemed vital by Governments (Aslam, 2006) through management of courses and pass-out rates that are of particular concern to institutions (Jung, 2005), to the nature and extent of learning (Sherry, 2003) – to name a few indices as exemplars.



The Master's degree programme in Counselling and Family Therapy (M.Sc. CFT) and Post Graduate Diploma in Counselling and Family Therapy (PGDCFT) were developed, and are being implemented, in accordance with the extensive quality assurance mechanisms at IGNOU. The programme structure was approved, after close scrutiny, by the statutory bodies of the University; including the Academic Council and the Planning Board. The syllabus and course content were evolved over a series of meetings of eminent experts in the field; drawn from premier institutions across the country. Given the multi-disciplinary and professional nature of the programme of study, the course writing team too was hand-picked, with individuals specializing in the specific areas invited to write on the specific topics. The course writers and editors were sensitized and oriented to writing as per the ODL methodology, so that the units are self-explanatory, self-contained, interactive and interest generating and applied in nature. The course material is multi-media for greater efficacy and higher understanding. Eminent experts from renowned institutions in the country were involved in designing of the curriculum, writing and editing of the printed course material, and content presentation of the audio and video programmes. Subject experts were involved for writing and editing keeping in view their areas of specializations.

### **Development of Skills and Competencies**

The theory content of the programme of study is contained in the self-instructional study materials provided to the learners. To facilitate discussions and removal of doubts, the academic counselling sessions are organized at the Learner Support Centres (LSCs), to which the learners are attached. Attending these sessions is however optional for the learners. The Learner Support Centres (LSCs) are identified after ensuring that they have an adequate number of academic counsellors with the requisite qualifications and experience to provide the required support to the learners. For each practical course, there is a comprehensive Manual for Supervised Practicum, detailing exactly what the learner needs to do, and how. The practical



work, which is compulsory, is required to be carried out by the learner under the guidance and supervision of the academic counsellor to whom the learner is assigned for the purpose by the Learner Support Centres. Academic counselling sessions for the practical courses are individualized, and are compulsory.

At the LSC, the assignments; that are compulsory and comprise continuous assessment of the theory courses, and the practical work of the learners, is evaluated. Each theory course has one compulsory assignment. This evaluation contributes to the final scores of the learner. This assessment is validated at another level of evaluation *viz.* the term end examination of the theory courses.

The supervised practicum has been planned for each theory course so as to develop the requisite skill-set pertaining to the knowledge domain of that specific theory course. Supervised practicum provides a learning environment to the learners to translate into practice in the real-life settings, the knowledge they had gained through the theory blocks. The academic counsellor assigned to each student assesses and evaluates the supervised practicum work of the learners (internal evaluation) and the external evaluation of the Supervised Practicum File of each practical course is carried out by an expert from a panel appointed by IGNOU for the purpose. In all the practicals, the students evaluate each practical through reflections and highlight their difficulties and how their performance in that particular practical could have been improved. One of the courses; the Reflective Journal provides learners an opportunity to re-learn as well as evaluate themselves by reflecting upon their own thoughts and life processes.

All Master's students have to undergo internship, a compulsory component. Internship provides learners an opportunity to learn skills and develop competencies, applying theory into practice under the guidance of the supervisor. The internship is evaluated by the academic counsellor/supervisor attached to the student and then the internship file submitted by the learner is evaluated externally by an expert from a panel appointed by IGNOU.

In the second year of the Master's degree programme, all students have to do dissertation. Dissertation has been planned as a compulsory component so as to develop research ethics, critical thinking, and skills in use of analytical approaches for counselling and family therapy research. The learner has to develop and prepare a research proposal (synopsis) and get it approved from the supervisor/guide. After approval of the proposal the learner carries out the research work under the overall supervision and guidance of the supervisor/guide. After internal evaluation, the dissertation is externally evaluated followed by a viva-voce.

Passing in each component separately is essential to obtain the Post Graduate Diploma or the Master's degree in counselling and family therapy. The student has to pass in both assignment and term-end examination to successfully complete each theory paper. For successful completion of each practical course, the student has to pass in both internal evaluation carried out by the academic counsellor/supervisor and external evaluation done by an expert from a panel appointed by IGNOU. For Internship also, the student has to pass in both internal evaluation carried out by the academic counsellor/supervisor and external evaluation done by an expert from a panel appointed by IGNOU. Students have to carry out specific activities for each practical course and internship as specified in the supervised practicum manuals and internship manual. For Dissertation component, the student has to pass in both internal evaluation carried out by the guide/supervisor; external evaluation done by an expert from a panel appointed by IGNOU and pass the viva-voce.

### **Conclusion**

With the help of the unique and innovative programmes of study at IGNOU to provide professional training at the post-graduate level in Counselling and Family Therapy, the paper has sought to highlight the various aspects, measures and mechanisms that help in delivery of need-based programmes across geographical boundaries, while sustaining quality and also developing requisite knowledge along

with providing opportunity and developing essential skills and competencies to embark into this professional cadre.

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