

A Comparative Study on the Status and Efficacy of Counselling Services in Three Open and Distance Learning Universities

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Abstract

Counselling Services play a critical role in enhancing learner engagement, persistence, and overall educational outcomes in Open and Distance Learning (ODL), where learners often experience academic and psychological isolation due to the limited face-to-face contact between teachers and learners. In this context, counselling support provided by the ODL institution helps learners in overcoming academic difficulties encountered during their course of study. This study examines the status and efficacy of counselling services in three Open and Distance Learning (ODL) universities—Uttarakhand Open University (UOU), Vardhman Mahaveer Open University (VMOU), and Uttar Pradesh Rajarshi Tandon Open University (UPRTOU). The study gauges the perception of sample learners with the counselling services offered by the UOU, VMOU and UPRTOU on four key dimensions: competency of academic counsellors, facilitation of understanding of study materials, effectiveness of counselling sessions, and regularity of counselling services. A descriptive survey method was adopted, and data were collected from a sample of 399 learners (133 per university) via an online questionnaire. The analysis was carried out using descriptive statistics, including percentages, mean, and standard deviation. Overall, the findings indicate that learners generally perceive counselling services as effective across all three universities. However, variations in learners' responses are evident across the universities. Learners from VMOU provided the most favourable and consistent response, and VMOU consistently scored higher than UPRTOU and UOU across all four aspects of counselling. Learners of UOU and UPRTOU also provided positive responses, however, with greater variation, particularly with regard to the regularity of the counselling service. These results highlight the potential areas where UOU and UPRTOU may benefit from focused improvements, particularly in strengthening the regularity of the counselling service.

Keywords: ODL, Learner Support Services, Counselling, Academic Counsellors

1. Introduction

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has emerged as a significant mode of delivering higher education, especially for learners who are unable to access conventional systems. In the ODL system, learner support services play a crucial role in ensuring academic success and retention. Among these services, counselling is one of the most important components, as it provides distance learners with opportunities to connect with the institution through academic counsellors. Academic counselling creates an interface between counsellors and learners, where counsellors interact with learners through face-to-face contact

programmes, teleconferencing, computer conferencing, radio talks, webinars, audio programmes, video programmes, e-mail, chat sessions, dynamic websites, etc. Academic counsellors support learners in overcoming difficulties encountered during the course of study, help with assignment-related queries, handle subject-related problems, overcome course-related doubts and confusion, and render academic and other related services and assistance, such as field experience and laboratories for experimental work and enhance their learning experience (Toms & Nilofer, 2020). Since ODL learners often study in isolation, effective counselling services help bridge the gap between learners and institutions. According to the DEB Regulation 2009, the need to provide effective counselling support for ODL learners is essential as the SLM may not be enough for them. They may need guidance, advice, and information from time to time during various stages of study. Despite its importance, the quality and effectiveness of counselling services may vary across institutions. Therefore, it becomes essential to examine learners' perceptions of the counselling services provided by their university. The present study attempts to analyse the status and efficacy of counselling in three ODL universities- UOU, VMOU, and UPRTOU based on learners' perceptions.

2. Review of Literature

In Open and Distance Learning (ODL), Learners' Support Services (LSS) are integral to the ODL system, and effective learning support is crucial for learners' success in distance education environments (Satyanarayana, n.d.).

Mishra (2014) emphasised that in order to prevent attrition and retain the ODL learners in the ODL mode, it is important for the ODL institutions to provide good student support services to their learners.

Kabate, M. (2016), in a study titled "Counselling Services for Students' Sustainability in Open and Distance Learning System: A case of ILALA Regional Centre of the Open University of Tanzania", reported that counselling provides students with better self-understanding and direction. It retains students in the system of education. However, the study found that the counselling services provided by the university were of poor quality, as the staff were not well-trained in providing counselling services to students. The study recommended that more emphasis be given to staff orientation and training courses related to ODL systems and counselling practices.

Wells (2021) investigated the impact and efficacy of technology-based counselling offered by the University of South Africa, an ODL institution. Findings indicated that e- counselling has positive practical implications in terms of accessibility and efficiency, and can be an impactful and convenient adjunct to traditional face-to- face counselling interventions, particularly for ODL students who may be in full-time employment and belong to remote and rural areas.

Musika and Bukaliya (2015), in their study titled "The Effectiveness of Counselling on Students' Learning Motivation in Open and Distance Education" at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), examined whether counsellors possessed the right skills and techniques to address learners' problems. The researchers opined that if students do not receive effective counselling, they may not learn well, leading to low motivation to learn and ultimately more dropouts and suspensions of studies. For effective counselling, a counsellor must be approachable, competent in relationship-building, empathetic, warm, have positive regard, be genuine, accept, be respectful, be trusting, and have a good demeanour. Results further showed that strong family support, honesty, voluntariness, openness, resistance, motivation, assumptions about the counsellor, and acceptance of responsibility were some of the student variables important to effective counselling outcomes. The study recommended that ZOU must employ ICT to make counselling more

effective, increase the number of counsellors/advisors in accordance with the number of learners, and provide continuous professional training to counsellors.

Toms and Nilofer (2020) analysed feedback from 25 learners who attended admission counselling sessions organised by SSC and assessed the effectiveness of these sessions. Learner feedback indicated that the sessions were helpful and recommended that such sessions be conducted at regular intervals, preferably once in every admission cycle. The study also suggested that the university should regularly update its website in the interest of prospective learners.

Fatma (2022) conducted a study on examining the effectiveness of counselling and instructional delivery in distance and open learning systems. The study highlighted that counselling plays a crucial role in motivating learners and overcoming challenges like isolation and limited interaction. The findings of the study showed that counsellor qualities such as communication, empathy, and relationship-building significantly influence learner success in distance education. The study emphasised that ICT can be a potential change-maker in improving the effectiveness of counselling. However, issues such as inadequate support services and limited resources still affect its effectiveness.

More recent studies have indicated that while ODL institutions have expanded access to education, challenges remain in ensuring the effectiveness and regularity of counselling services, particularly in geographically dispersed regions. However, no comprehensive or comparative study has examined learners' perceptions of counselling services across various State Open Universities. The present study is expected to fill this gap by examining and comparing the status and efficacy of counselling services in UOU, VMOU, and UPRTOU based on learners' perceptions.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To assess the status and efficacy of counselling services in three Open and Distance Learning (ODL) universities based on learners' perceptions.
2. To suggest measures for improving counselling services in the selected Open and Distance Learning (ODL) universities.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The study adopts a descriptive survey design to examine learners' perceptions of counselling services.

4.2 Selection of The Study Area

Due to time and resource constraints, it was not possible to cover all learners enrolled at the various regional centres of the three selected open universities. The study was conducted on a sample drawn from learners enrolled in the Regional Centres of UOU (Haldwani), VMOU (Jaipur), and UPRTOU (Prayagraj) in the July session 2021-22.

4.3 Sample

The sample for the research was drawn from the total number of learners enrolled in three State Open Universities (in selected Regional Centres) for the session July 2021-22. The total number of learners enrolled at selected regional centres was (UOU – 16,098, UPRTOU-81,268, VMOU-14,510).

4.4 Sample size

The sample size was calculated using Taro Yamane's method at a 95% confidence level and a 0.05 margin of error, yielding a sample size of 399. To ensure representativeness, the sample of 399 was divided equally among three selected open universities, with 133 learners selected from each university.

4.5 Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling (non-probability) technique, also known as judgmental sampling technique, was adopted in this research, where the sample was drawn from that part of the population which was useful for the purpose of research.

4.6 Tool for Data Collection

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), neutral (3), agree (4) and strongly agree (5). The questionnaire was designed using a Google online form and sent to the respondents via electronic mail.

4.7 Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including mean, range and standard deviation, to examine patterns and variations in learners' perceptions across the selected universities. The tables and charts are presented for visual presentation of data. The Data analysis and interpretation are presented in further detail.

4.8 Tests for Reliability and Validity

4.8.1 Reliability

For ensuring the reliability and internal consistency of the research tool, Cronbach's Alpha and the Test-Retest method were used. A pilot study was conducted by administering the questionnaire to 49 learners of UOU using an online questionnaire created through Google Forms. The questionnaire was administered twice after a gap of three weeks, and the data were analysed using SPSS. The test results of test 1 and test 2 were compared by applying Pearson's coefficient of correlation. The value of Pearson's coefficient of correlation between Test 1 and Test 2 was 0.72181862, which indicates the presence of high degree of correlation between both tests.

On applying the test, the Cronbach's alpha value was 0.96, reflecting excellent internal consistency of the questionnaire.

4.8.2 Validity

For checking the content validity of the questionnaire, printed copies of the questionnaire were distributed to the professor, assistant professor of the UOU. After receiving the copies of the questionnaire back, suggestions from the experts were incorporated into the questionnaire to ensure the face validity of the questionnaire.

5. Perception of learners with the Counselling service offered by UOU, VMOU and UPRTOU

The following section attempts to gauge the perception of sample learners with the counselling services offered by the UOU, VMOU and UPRTOU on various parameters, including competency of academic counsellors, facilitation of Understanding of Study Materials, effectiveness of counselling sessions and regularity of counselling service.

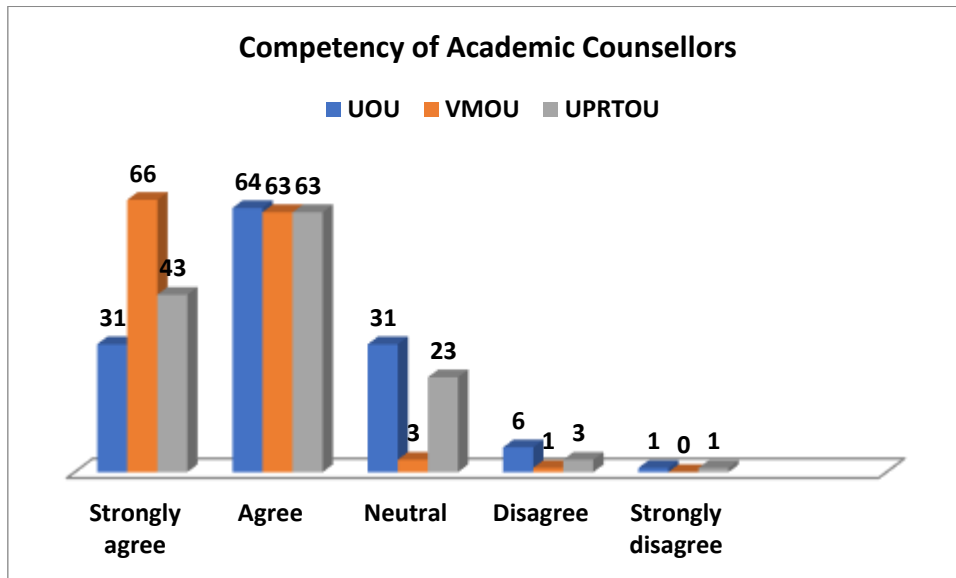
5.1 Respondent's Responses Regarding Competency of Academic Counsellors

According to Table No. 5.52, at UOU, 71.44% of learners agreed that the academic counsellors are qualified and well-prepared for conducting the counselling sessions at the LSC, 23.30% of learners were neutral, and 5.26% disagreed with the statement. At VMOU, the majority of the learners, *i.e.* 96.99% of learners, agreed, 2.26% were neutral, and only 0.75% disagreed with the statement. At UPRTOU, 79.70% of learners agreed, 17.29% were neutral, and only 3.01% disagreed regarding the availability of qualified academic counsellors.

Table No. 1 Competency of Academic Counsellors

Response	UOU (Freq.)	UOU (%)	VMOU (Freq.)	VMOU (%)	UPRTOU (Freq.)	UPRTOU (%)
Strongly Agree	31	23.32	66	49.62	43	32.33
Agree	64	48.12	63	47.37	63	47.37
Neutral	31	23.30	3	2.26	23	17.29
Disagree	6	4.51	1	0.75	3	2.26
Strongly Disagree	1	0.75	0	0.00	1	0.75
Total	133	100	133	100	133	100

Chart No. 1



5.2 Respondent’s Responses regarding facilitation of Understanding of Study Materials

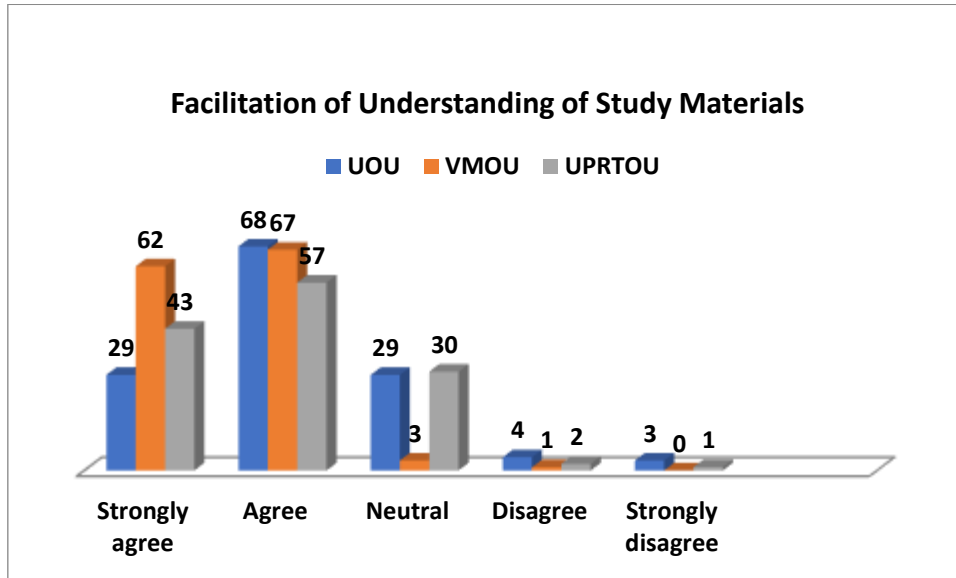
According to Table No. 5.53, at UOU, 72.94% of learners agreed that the academic counselling provided at the LSC facilitated understanding of the study material, 21.80% were neutral, and 5.27% disagreed with the statement. At VMOU, 97% of learners agreed that the academic counselling provided at the LSC facilitated the understanding of the study material, 2.26% were neutral, and only 0.75% disagreed with the statement. At UPRTOU, 75.19% of learners agreed, 2.25% disagreed, and 22.56% were neutral to the statement.

Table No. 2 Facilitation of Understanding of Study Materials

Response	UOU (Freq.)	UOU (%)	VMOU (Freq.)	VMOU (%)	UPRTOU (Freq.)	UPRTOU (%)
Strongly Agree	29	21.80	62	46.62	43	32.33
Agree	68	51.14	67	50.38	57	42.86
Neutral	29	21.80	3	2.26	30	22.56
Disagree	4	3.00	1	0.75	2	1.50

Strongly Disagree	3	2.26	0	0.00	1	0.75
Total	133	100	133	100	133	100

Chart No. 2



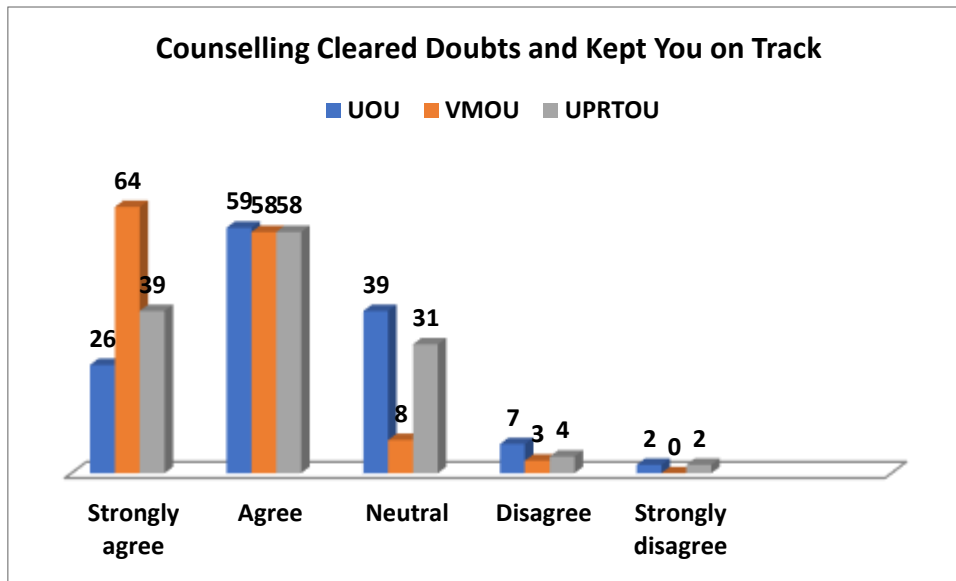
5.3 Respondent’s Responses regarding Effectiveness of Counselling in Doubt Clearance

According to Table No. 5.54, at UOU, 63.91% of learners agreed that the counselling sessions organised at the LSC helped them to clear doubts and keep them on track, 29.32% were neutral, and 6.77% disagreed with the statement. At VMOU, 91.73% of learners agreed that the counselling sessions organised at the LSC helped them to clear doubts and keep them on track, 6.02% were neutral, and only 2.26% disagreed with the statement. Similarly, at UPRTOU, 72.18% of learners agreed, 23.31% were neutral, and 4.51% disagreed that counselling sessions were helpful.

Table No. 3 Effectiveness of Counselling in Doubt Clearance

Response	UOU (Freq.)	UOU (%)	VMOU (Freq.)	VMOU (%)	UPRTOU (Freq.)	UPRTOU (%)
Strongly Agree	26	19.55	64	48.12	39	28.57
Agree	59	44.36	58	43.61	58	43.61
Neutral	39	29.32	8	6.02	31	23.31
Disagree	7	5.27	3	2.26	4	3.01
Strongly Disagree	2	1.50	0	0.00	2	1.50
Total	133	100	133	100	133	100

Chart No.3



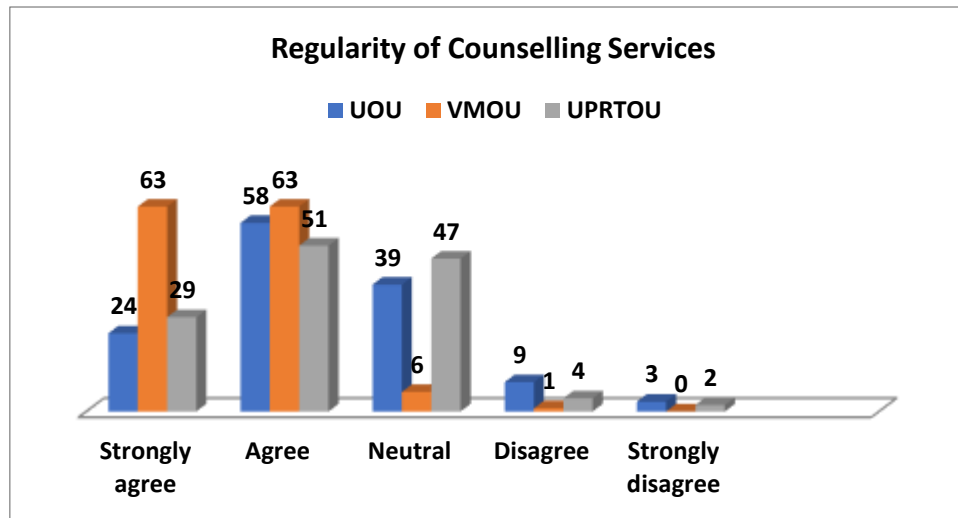
5.4 Respondent’s Responses regarding Regularity of Counselling Services

According to Table No. 5.55, at UOU, 61.66% of learners agreed that Counselling sessions are organized at LSC on regular interval, 29.32% were neutral and 9.02% disagreed with the statement. At VMOU, 94.74% of learners agreed that counselling sessions are organized at LSC on regular interval, 4.51% were neutral and only 0.75% disagreed with the statement. Similarly, at UPRTOU, 60.15% of learners agreed, 35.34% were neutral and 4.51% disagreed that that counselling sessions are organized at LSC on regular interval.

Table No. 4 Regularity of Counselling Services

Response	UOU (Freq.)	UOU (%)	VMOU (Freq.)	VMOU (%)	UPRTOU (Freq.)	UPRTOU (%)
Strongly Agree	24	18.04	63	47.37	29	21.80
Agree	58	43.62	63	47.37	51	38.35
Neutral	39	29.32	6	4.51	47	35.34
Disagree	9	6.77	1	0.75	4	3.01
Strongly Disagree	3	2.25	0	0.00	2	1.50
Total	133	100	133	100	133	100

Chart No.4



6. Values of the relevant Descriptive Statistics regarding the counselling service

This section presents the descriptive statistics of sample 399 learners (133 each from UOU, VMOU and UPRTOU) focusing on their perceptions about the regularity and effectiveness of counselling service offered by the university. The data was analysed using mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum scores. Further, the analysis was carried out by using similar methods to those employed by Pande and Mythili (2021), who investigated similar variables in an ODL context. The steps are as follows:

A mean score less than 3 indicates that, on average, learners tend to disagree or strongly disagree with the given statement.

A mean score of exactly 3 suggests that, on average, respondents are neutral, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the statement.

A mean score greater than 3 indicates that, on average, respondents tend to agree or strongly agree with the statement.

Table No. 5 Descriptive Statistics about the counselling service

Statement	UOU	VMOU	UPRTOU
1. The academic counsellors are qualified and were well prepared for conducting the counselling sessions scheduled at LSC.			
N	133	133	133
Mean	3.89	4.46	4.08
SD	.841	.584	.808
Min	1	1	1
Max	5	5	5
2. The academic counselling provided at the LSC facilitated the understanding of the study material to you.			
N	133	133	133
Mean	3.87	4.43	4.05

SD	.865	.581	.824
Min	1	1	1
Max	5	5	5
3. The counselling sessions organized at the LSC helped you to clear doubts and keep you on track.			
N	133	133	133
Mean	3.75	4.38	3.95
SD	.883	.703	.882
Min	1	1	1
Max	5	5	5
4. Counselling sessions are organized at LSC at regular intervals.			
N	133	133	133
Mean	3.68	4.41	3.76
SD	.924	.617	.880
Min	1	1	1
Max	5	5	5

Data findings from Table No.5:

1. The mean and the standard deviation of the Competency of academic counsellors for conducting the counselling sessions scheduled at LSC were recorded as follows: UOU (Mean =3.89 and SD =.841), VMOU (Mean =4.46 and SD =.584) and UPRTOU (Mean = 4.05 and SD =.808). A mean value greater than 3 indicates that the maximum numbers of respondents’ responses are positive means agreed or strongly agreed that the academic counsellors are qualified and were well prepared for conducting the counselling sessions scheduled at LSC. The standard deviation values indicate that VMOU has more consistent responses, whereas UOU and UPRTOU show relatively greater variability, indicating some variation in learners’ experiences.
2. The mean and the standard deviation of respondents’ responses about the academic counselling provided at the LSC facilitated the understanding of the study material were recorded as follows: UOU (Mean =3.87 and SD = .865), VMOU (Mean =4.43 and SD =.581) and UPRTOU (Mean =4.05 and SD =.824). As the mean values are above 3, it shows that the majority of respondents’ responses are positive to the statement. The standard deviation values indicate that responses in VMOU are more consistent, whereas UOU and UPRTOU show greater dispersion, suggesting differences in learners’ experiences.
3. The mean scores and the standard deviation of the respondents’ feedback about counselling sessions organized at the LSC helped to clear doubts were as follows: UOU (Mean = 3.75 and SD =.883), VMOU (Mean =4.38 and SD =.703), and UPRTOU (Mean = 3.95 and SD =.882). The mean scores more than 3 suggest that the majority of respondents expressed positive responses means either agreed or strongly agreed that counselling sessions helped them to clear doubts and keep them on track. The standard deviation values indicate that VMOU has more consistent responses, while UOU and UPRTOU show slightly higher and almost similar standard deviation values, suggesting some differences in learners’ experiences.

4. The mean scores and the standard deviation of the respondents' feedback about counselling sessions organized at LSC on a regular interval were as follows: UOU (Mean = 3.68 and SD =.924), VMOU (Mean =4.41 and SD =.617), and UPRTOU (Mean = 3.76 and SD =.880). Since all mean values are greater than 3, this suggests that the majority of respondents agree with the statement and that counselling sessions are conducted at regular intervals. The standard deviation values indicate that responses in VMOU are more consistent, while UOU and UPRTOU show comparatively greater variation, suggesting more diverse learner experiences.
5. The highest mean score of 4.46 was recorded for the statement related to the qualifications and preparedness of academic counsellors in conducting scheduled counselling sessions at the Learner Support Centres (LSCs) at VMOU, indicating that learners have high confidence in the professionalism and competence of their academic counsellors. In contrast, the lowest mean score was 3.68 for the statement related to counselling sessions organized at LSC on a regular interval at UOU, indicating an area where improvement can be made for enhancing consistency in scheduling and communication of these sessions.
6. The most significant variation in respondents' answers from the mean value was present in counselling sessions organized at LSC on a regular interval at UOU, suggesting a possible lack of uniformity in service delivery across different LSCs or communication gaps regarding counselling schedules. In contrast, the least variation was noted in the academic counselling provided at the LSC, which facilitated the understanding of the study material at VMOU, reflecting the effectiveness of its counselling sessions in supporting academic understanding.
7. At UOU, the average score ranged from 3.68 to 3.89, indicating a generally positive perception of the counselling service among learners. However, learner experiences are not consistently strong, suggesting that counselling services require strengthening, particularly in scheduling and consistency of learner support.
8. At VMOU, the average score ranged from 4.41 to 4.46 with less variability in responses across all four aspects of counselling, suggesting that the counselling services provided by the university are effectively meeting the needs of its learners.
9. At UPRTOU, the average score fell between 3.76- 4.08, indicating a generally positive view but with more variability, indicating that some improvements in the counselling services could enhance the overall experience for learners.
10. Among the three institutions, VMOU consistently records higher mean scores across all four aspects of counselling, indicating comparatively stronger counselling support services. Moreover, the lower standard deviation values further suggest that learner experiences at VMOU were highly consistent.
11. Overall, the result of the comparative study indicates that learners are comfortable with the current situation of counselling in their respective universities. However, there may still be room for improvement at UOU and UPRTOU, particularly in ensuring regularity and consistency of counselling sessions.

7. Results and Discussion

The findings of the study indicate that across all three universities, learners generally perceive counselling services as effective. However, variations in learners' responses are evident across the universities. VMOU consistently scored higher than UPRTOU and UOU across all four aspects of counselling (competency of academic counsellors, facilitation of Understanding of Study Materials, effectiveness of counselling

sessions and regularity of counselling service). This may be linked to better organisation, structured scheduling, and more consistent delivery of counselling sessions. Moreover, the lower variability in learners' responses at VMOU suggests a more uniform learner experience. UOU and UPRTOU also recorded mean scores above the neutral value of 3; however, with higher variability in learners' responses. This indicates that although counselling services are available, their delivery may not be uniformly effective across all Learner Support Centres. This variation highlights possible differences in implementation, coordination, or resource availability at the institutional level. Overall, the results suggest that while counselling services are functioning satisfactorily, there is scope for improving consistency and standardisation, particularly in UOU and UPRTOU.

8. Conclusion

The study concludes that learners across all three universities perceived the counselling services as effective. However, the consistency of learners' responses varied among the universities. Learners from VMOU provided the most favourable and consistent response. In contrast, learners of UOU and UPRTOU provided positive responses but with greater variation, particularly regarding the regularity of the counselling service. These results highlight the potential areas where UOU and UPRTOU may benefit from focused improvements, particularly in strengthening the regularity of the counselling service.

9. Recommendations

1. Improve the regularity of counselling services by standardising the scheduling of counselling sessions across all Learner Support Centres (LSC's) so that every learner gets access to counselling at regular and predictable times.
2. Communicate about the schedule of counselling sessions to learners well in advance through SMS, email, and LMS portals, so that they can plan their participation accordingly.
3. Utilise supplementary counselling resources such as video counselling, helplines, and radio sessions to connect with the maximum number of distance learners.
4. Conduct virtual orientation programs to familiarise learners with available support services and ensure smooth integration into ODL programs.
5. Collect regular feedback from learners after counselling sessions and use their feedback for continuous improvement and quality assurance.
6. Organise regular training and orientation programmes for academic counsellors to introduce them to the learner-centric teaching approaches in ODL.

10. Delimitation of The Study

The Open University fetch enrolment from thousands of learners pursuing diverse academic interests and covers the remotest areas of the state. Therefore, it was not practically possible to cover all the learners of the selected open universities. Hence, it was decided to delimit to three Regional Centres of the three selected SOUs for the study. These are;

1. Regional Centre, Haldwani of UOU, Haldwani.
2. Regional Centre, Prayagraj of (UPRTOU), Prayagraj.
3. Regional Centre, Jaipur of VMOU, Kota.

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