

LONGMAN OPEN LEARNING

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**Evaluating Open  
and  
Distance Learning**

by Mary Thorpe

**2nd Edition**

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# 5 Counselling and learner progress

**Main themes:** *What is counselling and its role in open learning? Core counselling functions. Issues in counselling evaluation: what is the need for counselling? How should it be provided? How much is it used, by whom? What are its outcomes? A framework for the evaluation of counselling. Examples of evaluation of the provider perspective and of the user perspective.*

## Counselling and its role

It is more difficult in this chapter to be confident of identifying a core of common concerns because the extent to which learners are explicitly 'advised' or 'counselled' in open learning schemes varies widely. 'Counselling' is particularly difficult because there is, if anything, even less agreement about what it is than is the case with tuition. Very few open learning systems employ staff with the title of counsellor, and perhaps a number assume that any 'counselling' needs of learners will be handled by tutors. The list of tutor roles provided by Clark et al, for example, includes quite a few that would be seen as educational counselling by the Open University:

- 'developing study skills in people who left school early'
- 'being prepared to make some kind of constructive response when a student comes out with a personal problem over the phone'
- 'helping students with study methods at (a) start of course and (b) near exams.'

Clarke, Costello and Wright (1985)

Similarly, those that do use the counsellor title include different functions within the role, and mean different things in practice. The Mathematics Workshop at Bradford and Ilkley Community College for example, assigned learners to a mathemat-

ics 'counsellor', who undoubtedly counsels but whose core role in practice also includes tuition, as it has been defined in chapter 4.

Differences in terminology of these kinds mean that the evaluator needs to read this chapter together with the preceding one and to identify which topics are more relevant to the system being evaluated, whatever the occupational titles in use.

Irrespective of these differences in terminology, the position taken by many in education and training, is that 'counselling' has an essential role to play in facilitating learning.

*'Counselling is not some kind of arcane pursuit but something that good educators do almost instinctively. Counselling, therefore, is relevant not just to formal educational guidance, counselling and information services, but to teaching and learning more generally.'*

Woolfe (1988) p. 6

Counselling is presented by the Unit for the Development of Adult Continuing Education, as one of the seven activities comprising 'guidance', the purpose of which is 'to help people make wise and well informed choices' (UDACE 1986). The seven activities are as follows:

*Informing*—providing information about learning opportunities and related support facilities, without any opportunity to discuss the relative merits of different options.

*Advising*—helping clients to interpret information and choose the most appropriate option.

*Counselling*—working with clients to help them to discover, clarify, assess and understand their learning needs and the various ways of meeting them.

*Assessing*—helping clients, by formal or informal means, to obtain an adequate understanding of their personal, educational and vocational development, in order to enable them to make sound judgements about the appropriateness of particular learning opportunities.

*Enabling*—supporting the client in dealing with providing agencies, or in meeting the demands of particular courses.

*Advocating*—negotiating directly with institutions or agencies on behalf of individuals or groups of clients.

*Feeding back*—gathering and collating information on unmet, or

inappropriately met, learning needs and encouraging providers to respond to these.

UDACE 1986)

Woolfe however sees counselling as an interactive framework through which many of the activities of guidance are carried out—informing, giving advice or assessment. He asserts that 'Counselling, as a philosophy is relevant ... to almost any situation in which one person seeks to help another. Indeed, people who have never read a book about counselling are using the principles or counselling simply by being good listeners or accepting people for what they are.'

The British Association for Counselling has defined the area in a way which makes clear the relevance of counselling to a wide range of functions and roles, and its applicability to many of the practitioners in open learning, whatever their title—tutor, manager, receptionist, trainer and so on.

*'People become engaged in counselling when a person, occupying regularly or temporarily the role of counsellor, offers .... time, attention and respect to another person or persons temporarily in the role of client.'*

*'The task of counselling is to give the client an opportunity to explore, discover and clarify ways of living more resourcefully and toward greater well being.'*

British Association for Counselling (1985)

In the context of open learning, it is possible to be more explicit about the areas in which counselling has a role to play. They can be defined in relation to the stages through which a user of open learning progresses. Although the nature of the stages differs according to different systems, and may not be so clearly demarcated in the experience of the learner, it is possible to outline a common pattern:

<i>Stage</i>	:	<i>May involve for the user:</i>
Pre-course	:	Enquiry, self-evaluation, vocational guidance, course choice Registration/Enrolment
Course study	:	Learning to learn, study skills, self-evaluation, coping with pressure
Post course	:	Review of progress, course choice/other options, vocational guidance

Each of these stages is characterised by different demands on

the individual but counselling involves a number of characteristic functions which apply to a greater or lesser extent across all the stages. These are:

- listening
- reassuring
- clarifying the individual's needs and feelings
- suggesting questions and ideas the individual might use in evaluating themselves
- providing information about available systems, courses and qualifications and occupations
- referral to other specialist staff where necessary
- identifying options available to the learner
- facilitating the choice of one or more goals by the learner
- giving advice on ways of meeting/achieving the goals identified
- helping the individual decide on a course of action to meet a particular goal
- analysing problems the individual experiences in trying to achieve the goal
- reviewing progress toward goals and setting new priorities.

The quality of the counselling will take on a different emphasis with different individuals at different stages. At the enquirer stage it may often be the information giving and clarifying functions which are most demanded. Some form of pre-course advice is offered by most open learning providers, even where any other form of counselling is absent. There is a recognition of the importance of this stage and the key role of the receptionist or administrator who may be the first contact for the would-be-learner.

Once the learner has begun course work, the counselling function may become the tutor's responsibility, with no clear dividing line in practice between where counselling begins and tuition ends. The Open University emphasises this integrated role in using the title 'tutor-counsellor' for its foundation course support staff. It places great emphasis on the facilitation of learning and study skills as central to educational counselling.

On completion of a course of study, counselling also has a role to play in helping learners assess their course experience and decide whether or not further study is desirable. Throughout the process as a whole, counselling is required to help the enquirer or learner to evaluate themselves; to review what they have achieved and to decide where they want to move on to. Counselling is crucial for the kind of self evaluation introduced in chapter 3. Athabasca University refers to this as 'orientation': enabling individuals to find

out information about themselves as well as information about the institution.

From this very schematic account of counselling it is clear that there is an intended association between the counselling function and the academic progress and decision making of individual learners. It is for this reason that issues of learner progress and drop-out are included in this chapter, notwithstanding the fact that they are equally as relevant to the evaluation of materials and tuition. Indeed chapters 4 and 6 do contain insights into the influence of tuition and materials on learner progress. It is not implied that counsellors and counselling bear sole responsibility for whether learners stay in or drop out, and whether they achieve their learning goals.

### **Issues in counselling evaluation**

Counselling, like tuition, is a process, but differs from tuition in being person centred rather than course centred. This itself contributes one of the key issues in evaluating counselling, which is to ascertain the nature and the scale of need for counselling among enquirers and learners. Counselling, even more than tuition, can only be offered, not delivered; it depends upon a positive action by the learner in taking up the offer and using it. However, counselling shares with tuition other important characteristics, which is that it requires resources of various kinds, and can be organised and offered in different ways. Practitioners therefore turn to evaluation 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.

Other major themes follow on having provided counselling, in whatever form. There is first of all the issue of use; how much is counselling used and by how many learners/enquirers? Is it possible to distinguish different categories of user in relation to the frequency and nature of use of counselling? Evaluation in these areas might enable the service to be more accurately targeted, rather than provided in an identical fashion to all users. Associated with this is the means used to provide counselling, and there are issues here of staffing and communication. Should tutors also offer counselling or should there be a separate counsellor? Can part-time staff counsel as well as full-time staff and, if so, what training do they need? Is it possible to counsel 'at a distance', using telephone or written communication or both? Do these different ways of providing counselling affect its outcomes, and if so, in what ways?

Finally, there is the complex area of evaluating the outcomes of counselling. Does counselling appear to have any effect on

<i>The perspective of:</i>	<i>Focusing on:</i>	<i>Typical questions:</i>
THE USER (Enquirer, applicant, learner, client)	BEHAVIOUR:	How many enquirers subsequently enrol? How often do learners contact the counsellor? What proportion of learners drop out? What is the pattern of dropout during the year (or course duration). Do learners submit assignments more regularly? Get better grades? and so on . . .
	PERCEPTIONS:	Did enquirers get the information they needed, when they needed it? Was the counsellor sympathetic and helpful? Were decisions affected by the counselling process? Has counselling helped with study skills? How accessible is the counsellor? and so on . . .
THE PROVIDER	BEHAVIOUR:	What proportion of enquiries receive written information on courses, or an interview with a tutor/counsellor? Are enquirers automatically followed up? What proportion of applicants are offered an advisory counselling session? Do all tutors/counsellors follow up learners who do not submit the first assignment? Is the counsellor given information about the learner's academic progress? Are learners who have been out of touch for 2/3 weeks automatically followed up? and so on . . .
	PERCEPTIONS:	What are the advisory and counselling needs of enquirers/applicants/learners? How do these needs change at different stages of study? Are some learners more 'at risk' of drop out than others? Is the present provision of counselling adequate? and so on . . .

**Figure 5.1** A summary of the means commonly used in evaluating counselling

performance indicators, for example? Are learners less likely to drop out? More likely to submit assignments? Less likely to fail the examination? Irrespective of these measures, are there other identifiable outcomes; more satisfaction among users of counselling, than non-users? Greater inclination to recommend the provider to friends? Increased take up of other opportunities for learning, subsequently? Practitioners may find themselves having to justify the allocation of resources and therefore will need

evidence of the kind of outcomes counselling might be expected to produce.

Some of these themes are developed further in the examples of counselling evaluation used in the rest of this chapter. These demonstrate a diversity of approaches, but it is possible to identify a framework underlying this diversity. Figure 5.1 suggests that the two major perspectives are that of the user, on one hand, and on the other, the provider. Within each perspective, it is possible to focus on evidence concerning behaviour, or perceptions, or both. The rest of this chapter 'opens out' each of these perspectives in turn, and looks at examples of the ways in which they can be explored.

### Provider perspective

Although some consider that the 'acid test' of counselling (or tuition for that matter) is user behaviour, performance indicators on output (number of student-initiated contacts with a counsellor, drop-out rate, attendance at examinations etc.) need to be interpreted in the light of what was offered. We need to know what the inputs into the system were before we can make sense of what users chose to do. I shall therefore take the provider perspective first, looking at behaviour, and then perceptions.

### Behaviour

The evaluation of provider behaviour is concerned with two questions: 'What is meant to happen? and 'what does (or did) happen?' The first question may be easily answered where very little advice or counselling is available, but in more complex systems the answer may be far from clear. Where there is virtually no counselling, the answer to what is meant to happen may be straightforward: 'all enquirers and their enquiry are logged, and one follow-up letter is mailed to all who have not applied for courses within an appropriate time-scale,' for example. In more complex systems it may be much more difficult to be so specific because what is meant to happen has been described in terms of *general goals* rather than *expected actions*. It may be one of the tasks of evaluation to operationalise these general goals, to restate them in terms of a set of *expected practices*, which can be compared with what does happen in practice.

An open learning system may declare that counselling is available through the tutor, throughout the course study period, but how is this meant to occur? Is there an opening session where the role of counselling is explained to learners? Is the tutor asked

to organise workshop sessions dealing only with counselling matters? Can learners make an appointment to see the tutor individually? Should the tutor give his or her home telephone number and encourage contact out of working hours? Are learners allocated to a tutor specifically for counselling purposes? Data on how much a system is used is pretty meaningless until we can answer questions like these, and this is likely to require both desk research to check official records and briefing documents and interviews of the staff doing the counselling.

Staff contracts may contain statements about tasks, or, equally relevant, omit any mention of tasks, sticking to general role statements; similarly committee papers and briefing documents. Where there is little available policy, or significant local interpretation of policy, interviews with the relevant staff will be needed to establish their view of what is meant to happen. It may be impossible to pin this down very tightly where evaluation is being used to firm up ideas about what would be the most appropriate system—'when we see what's happening we'll decide what model of counselling to introduce'. This is legitimate but should alert the evaluator to pursue a descriptive analysis rather than one testing the effectiveness of a specific model: 'Is there a model and who should define it? rather than 'Is this model efficient and effective?'

Whatever the status of policy and intentions, 'what actually happens?' is the next question, and the one likely to form the most substantial part of the evaluation. The key question here is 'what does staff member X actually do?' and the answer may involve one or more of the following: analysing records, interviews, or questionnaires.

*Routine records*

Centralised procedures, as when a receptionist fills in an enquirer's log, or mails a batch of letters, are relatively easy to check. It becomes much more difficult when actions are meant to be taken by a dispersed body of staff, working sometimes from their homes. Such staff can be provided with a proforma for recording their contact with learners, and these can be analysed to build up a picture of what actually happens. The Open University provides its tutor-counsellors with a form on which assignments and all other contact with students can be entered and reviewed at a glance for the year. An extract for illustration is shown in figure 5.2.

Although data from this form has occasionally been used for evaluation by full-time staff of the University, its primary function is as an aid to the part-time staff of the University, to help them review the progress of the group of learners for whom they are responsible in that year and to initiate counselling interventions when necessary. It draws attention to the three points during the year when the

RECORD OF CONTACTS MADE

CODE								Indicate by circling that adequate contact has been made with each student at the listed 'critical' points			
		1	2	3	4	5	6	INITIAL CONTACT	REGISTRATION FOR FUTURE COURSES	YEAR END	
LETTER SENT.....	L										
LETTER RECEIVED.....	L										
TELEPHONE BY TUTOR/COUNSELLOR...	T										
		WEEK BEGINNING									
TELEPHONE FROM STUDENT.....	T										
PERSONAL VISIT.....	P										
STUDY CENTRE CONTACT.....	S										
STUDENTS											
	A							A			
	B							B			
	C							C			
	D							D			
	E							E			

Extract Adapted from form (PT4) Part-Time Staff record for assignments marked and contacts made, The Open University, Milton Keynes

**Figure 5.2** A sample proforma for monitoring learner contact

University expects tutor-counsellors to initiate contact with their students—initial contact, registration for future courses and year end. Where staff know that data of this kind will be used for evaluation, routine records can be called in for analysis or reviewed with counsellors themselves, if that is more constructive (and less threatening) in the circumstances.

Log and diary exercises are a similar form of regular reporting but allow for open-ended and varied responses. They may be necessary if so little is known about the kind of contact to expect that a pre-coded form of the kind shown in figure 5.2 would not be workable. A log can provide much more detailed information about the content of contact, and can be used to develop case-studies of the counsellor role for staff development as well as for evaluation. It is quite demanding on the log keeper though, and not often used for that reason.

*Interviews*

Interviews have been used characteristically to elicit perceptions about learners' counselling needs, and it would be a missed

opportunity to use an interview only to establish factual detail about what a counsellor did and when. Nonetheless an interview can be used to get this information if the counsellor has kept some form of continuing record of his or her actions. Where only a small number of staff are involved, it may be an economical way of collecting quantitative and qualitative data at the same time, the one helping to make sense of the other.

During the 1970s, a number of evaluations based on interviewing were undertaken by Open University tutorial and counselling staff to explore the amount and kind of counselling received by students on post-foundation courses (Fotheringham, 1976 and Simpson, 1977). As counsellors themselves, both evaluators knew what being a counsellor entailed, and therefore what questions to ask their colleagues which would reveal what they did and their approach to the job. Studies of this kind, however informal, have helped the University develop a much more detailed grasp of what the counsellor ought to be doing at different stages, and what the demands from students are likely to be.

One study in particular contributed a very useful distinction to the debate, in identifying contrasting approaches to counselling for students studying post-foundation courses: the 'General Practitioners' versus 'the Interventionist' type of counsellor. (Simpson, 1976) The GP makes an initial contact and thereafter operates a 'surgery', i.e. waits for the student to make contact and then handles the problem. The Interventionist initiates more than just the first contact, following up evidence of missed assignments, fail grades or problems with course choice. Simpson notes that 'the distinction is quite clear from an examination of student records', and provides figures of the number of contacts per student initiated by the counsellor-GP counsellors average one contact in each of the first two months of the year and 'Interventionists' two to three contacts per student per month.

### Questionnaires

A survey is not likely to produce a comprehensive picture of what the counsellor has done, as is possible through the analysis of a continuous record of action. It can be used however to gain a snapshot of what happens, particularly if the amount of counselling work is not large and therefore the demands on memory not unreasonable. The type of questions that might be developed to provide an overview of the amount and type of contact are shown in figure 5.3.

Questionnaires can also be used effectively to canvas general views about counselling and more examples are given in the next section on perceptions of the providers.

The type of questions that might be used:

1. How many learners are allocated to you?
2. How often have you been in contact with each of them during the course?

Number of learners	Number of contacts			
	0	1-2	3-4	5 or more

3. How many learners have needed your help in each of these areas?

	No of learners
Course choice	
Study skills	
Getting behind with course work	
Problems in understanding the course	
Feedback on assignments	
Exam preparation	
Domestic/work commitments	
Other (please explain)	

**Figure 5.3** Gaining an impression of counsellor/learner contact

### Perceptions

The perceptions staff have about the value of counselling to learners clearly affect the action they take. In systems which rely at least somewhat on the judgement of counsellors themselves, it is particularly important to elicit their views. Semi-structured interviews can generate very detailed information on counsellor perceptions and these can also contribute usefully to the design of questionnaires, if a larger sample is necessary.

The kinds of questions which might be incorporated into an interview schedule will obviously depend on the subject matter of the evaluation. The list of questions in figure 5.4 illustrates just one example of an approach towards eliciting counsellor perceptions—in this case about the value of early contact with applicants, those who are potentially learners but have not yet enrolled or started course work. Naturally the counsellor's response would prompt the interviewer to ask follow-up questions, and the order of questions would reflect the sequence of topics as they arose during the interview—not necessarily therefore the order shown here.



- (a) Do applicants seem surprised to be contacted by someone from . . . . ? (the college or other institution)
- (b) Do you feel they welcome such contact or feel it's unnecessary? (Does it matter whether contact is by letter, phone or face to face?)
- (c) Do you generally describe your role as counsellor? If so, what phrases or terms do you use?
- (d) What topics come up most often in these counselling sessions?
- (e) Is it useful to contact *all* applicants? (How would you decide which people to contact?)
- (f) Do you feel there are drawbacks in providing early contact?
- (g) Do you feel there are benefits? (More information about course, method of study, review of reasons for study, etc.)
- (h) What are you trying to achieve as a counsellor?

**Figure 5.4 Sample question forming part of an interview schedule with counsellors**

Another technique which can be used to explore counsellor perceptions of their role and the ways in which they carry it out, is to use critical incidents; a scenario of a not untypical counselling event is described briefly, and the counsellor asked what they would do in a similar situation. Scenarios might consist of examples like these:

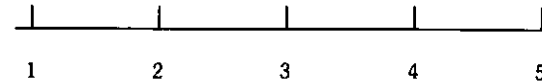
the learner who

- 1. phones up during the first week of a course and says they want to drop out
- 2. never asks for clarification/advice in workshop sessions and gets low assignment grades.
- 3. attends workshop sessions sporadically and has submitted only two out of five assignments.

Counsellors can be asked during interview what action if any they would take in each of these instances (or comparable situations), and their reasoning explored. This can also be done in a group setting and, if so, provides a useful opportunity for staff development as well.

Although questionnaires cannot give as rounded a picture of the counsellor's orientation and behaviour, they can be used to gauge the strength of particular attitudes and might be useful where a large number of staff is involved and the issues are very

Respondents were asked to use a rating system of 1 to 5, as follows



Applies where there is an integrated tutor-counsellor role

Applies where there is a separate tutor and counsellor

	% with score 1	Overall mean
1. Weak students could be identified earlier in the year	(40)	2.0
2. Overall the system served foundation-course students better	(40)	2.1
3. You had <i>more</i> discretion over when and what to do for foundation course students	(34)	2.2
4. You felt <i>less</i> isolated because of the nature of the system	(33)	2.2
5. You found it <i>easier</i> to make contact with your foundation course students at the study centre	(27)	2.3
6. Your foundation course students discussed their grades with you <i>more</i> readily	(19)	2.6
7. The peaks in your workload were <i>easier</i> to cope with	(5)	3.4

n = 1566

extract from Field (1979) table 4

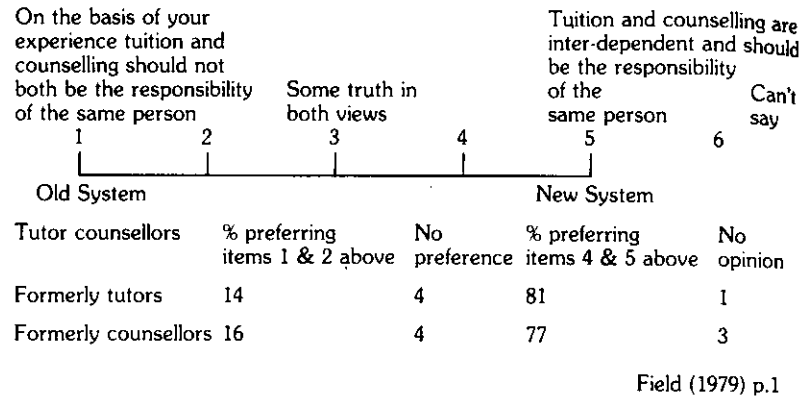
**Table 5.1 A selection of attitude ratings indicating preference for the joint tutor-counsellor role**

specific. This was the case when the Open University changed its support system from a separate tutor and counsellor to the integrated tutor-counsellor role for foundation students, with a separate tutor and counsellor for post-foundation students. Although an extensive programme of interviews was undertaken to evaluate the changes between old and new system, there was also a survey of all those who become tutor-counsellors as a result of the change. It was possible to ask respondents whether or not they had a preference for either the old or the new system in relation to their effect on a number of factors, such as the counsellor's ability to identify weak students, make contact with students regularly, counsellor workload and contact with other staff. Tutor-counsellor responses to a selection of these items is shown in table 5.1. All except the last two items in table 5.1 were seen to describe the new system rather than the old and, as table 5.2 shows, most part-time

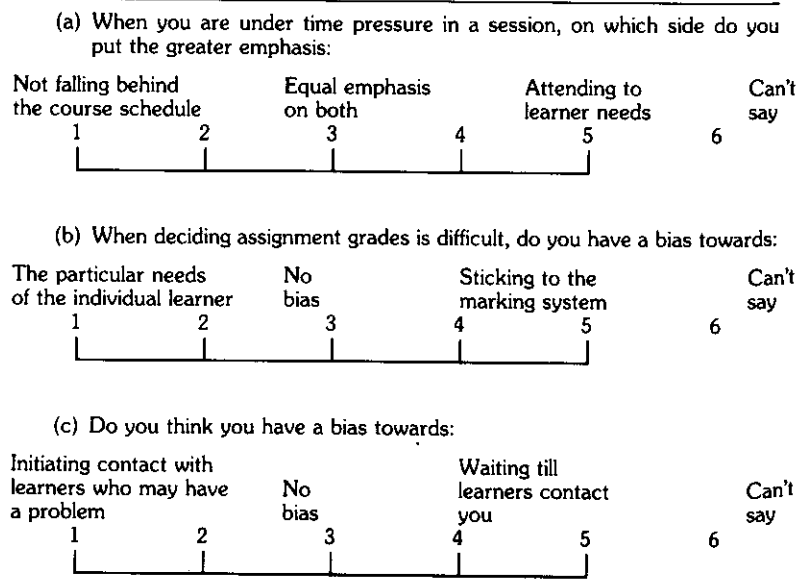
staff preferred the new tutor-counsellor role, where the functions of tuition and counselling are integrated.

The questioning approaches used to generate tables 5.1 and 5.2 could be applied to different issues or to attitudes which are relevant across different systems, as in figure 5.5

Respondents were asked:



**Table 5.2 Preference for the integration of tuition and counselling**



**Figure 5.5 Attitude ratings for counselling**

**The perspective of the user—enquirer, applicant, learner or client**

*Behaviour*

Often one of the most important tasks of evaluation is to find out how often counselling is used, and by which students. A questionnaire can be used to provide an impression or estimate of usage, and indications of the degree of user satisfaction. Table 5.3 shows

	USE %	SATISFACTION %	HELPFULNESS	STUDENTS FINDING ACCESS TOO DIFFICULT %
FOUNDATION LEVEL COURSES	36	87	3.62	4
POST FOUNDATION LEVEL COURSES	16	87	3.5	7
ASSOCIATE STUDENT COURSES	22	85	3.48	5

Source: Grundin, H.U. (1980)

**Table 5.3 Student use and appreciation of counselling**

	CORRESPONDENCE TEXTS	SET BOOKS	TV BROADCASTS	RADIO	CORRESPONDENCE CASSETTES RECORDS	COUNSELLING	FACE-TO-FACE TUTORIALS	TELEPHONE TUTORIALS
USE %	98	90	77	63	63	90	17	59
SATISFACTION %	87	81	73	71	80	83	87	74
HELPFULNESS (1-5 Scale)	4.67	4.11	3.55	3.42	3.56	3.76	3.54	3.85

Satisfaction index: Grand Mean for all courses and all (14) components = 80%  
 Helpfulness Index: Grand Mean for all courses and all (14) components = 3.80  
 Source: Grundin, H.U. (1980)

**Table 5.4 Student use and helpfulness ratings for major course components**

the results of a 1979 Open University survey of a large sample of students studying a total of 91 undergraduate courses. This suggests that counselling is used by about one in three undergraduate foundation level students, by one in six post-foundation students and by one in five associate students (those not registered for a degree, studying courses one-off). There is a high level of satisfaction with the service, and when levels of satisfaction and helpfulness across all course components are compared (table 5.4), it is clear that level of satisfaction equals that of correspondence texts, and though the helpfulness rating is lower than the mean for all course components, it is similar to that for television broadcasts.

However, a more accurate and reliable measure of counselling can be derived from the kind of record keeping (see figure 5.2) and reporting by the provider described above. This can be used to calculate the percentage of a particular cohort which is 'reached' by an advisory or counselling service. Judgement as to whether this represents a satisfactory result will depend on a host of local factors, including other performance indicators. Suppose for example that, out of 500 enquirers, 100 finally register on a variety of learning programmes—a 20 per cent 'conversion rate'. Routine records are analysed and show that the great majority of enquirers used the telephone and received only preliminary information (from a receptionist) and a prospectus through the post. Most of those who did drop in to the centre or workshop however, had a chat with an advisor/counsellor and many subsequently enrolled. In the context of this kind of scenario, it may look desirable to include more self counselling information in the prospectus, and to encourage enquirers to come in to the centre for advice and counselling, with a view to increasing the number who enrol. If in the event let us say that 350 enquirers were more effectively advised and the total enrolling increased to 200, we may feel that the experiment 'worked', assuming of course that:

1. the cost of providing advice/counselling was not greater than the fee income;
2. course provision remained more or less the same;
3. those who enrolled were satisfied with their course and progress; and
4. there was no very obvious change in the characteristics of enquirers.

Although this example is deliberately simplified, it does illustrate some important considerations in the evaluation of counselling. First of all it is very difficult to find a direct measure of the effect of counselling and so we are often forced to rely on indicators of the *possible* effects of counselling *in combination with a*

*number of other factors*, such as the effects of tuition, learner characteristics, economic or social changes in the catchment area.

Second, counselling is about the client's needs, and if these, when fully appreciated, suggest that enrolling for a particular course would be undesirable, then success ought to be defined by the non-enrolment of the enquirer, or perhaps even by their enrolment for a different course in a different institution. The criteria for judging the success or effectiveness of counselling are difficult to operationalise, though it is possible to pin down some of the general goals by describing events or indicators which would be some evidence of goal achievement. Take the goal of providing an effective advisory service; it might be possible to specify a definition not so much of the ideal we aim for in being effective but of *the minimum condition we would expect to see fulfilled* by a service which was effective. This might be phrased rather like a behavioural objective, as follows:

'At enrolment all learners will know how many hours of study their course is expected to take on average, how it will be assessed and when they can contact tutorial and counselling staff.'

Similarly it might be possible to convert a statement like this:

'the role of advisory counselling is to set up a good working relationship with the learner.'

into a statement about expected outcomes:

'the majority of learners will contact their counsellor at least once and most learner/counsellor contacts after the second assignment will be initiated by the learners.'

The second statement has defined 'a good working relationship' as one where the learner feels able to contact the counsellor when necessary, and assumes that this is likely to happen on at least one occasion, for most learners.

Although these definitions of what we might reasonably expect counselling to achieve make no mention of other issues which should also be explored, such as how satisfied learners are with the counselling they receive, they do offer a number of benchmarks of performance which can be observed and probably quantified in some way. We can find out how many who enrol know the key items of information we have specified; we can monitor learner/counsellor contact and check out what proportion is initiated by the learner. This does not tell the whole story by any means, but it does provide some general measures of what is happening against which to provide more qualitative judgements by individuals.

In 1978-79 a number of Open University regions used a form similar to that in figure 5.6, for recording all contacts between counsellors and applicants. Counsellors completed one form for each applicant and these provided a 'case record' of the individual and any action taken by the counsellor. The forms thus had two

(1) Name of Counsellor (block capitals) \_\_\_\_\_ Staff Number \_\_\_\_\_

(2)

1	2	3	4	5
User Name	Serial No.	Course(s) Applied for	Date of Contact	Length of Contact

(6) Please describe the advice you offered the user, or other relevant comments.

(3) Form of Contact (please tick)

Letter sent.....  Telephone from Applicant.....

Letter received.....  Personal visit.....

Telephone by Counsellor.....  Study Centre/Workshop contact.....

(4) Type of Contact (please tick)

Individual.....  Group

(5) Topics covered during the session (please tick)

1. Educational preparedness for course(s) to be undertaken

2. Appropriateness of course for user aspirations

3. Referral to specialist course adviser

4. Preparatory study

5. Home study conditions and time available for study

6. Other factors affecting study disadvantage/ disabled

7. Guidance Services available e.g. frequency of tutorials, workshops, tutor contact etc.

8. Finance

9. Referral to other agencies/ vocational guidance

(7) Record of contacts made after the initial meeting

Date	Form	Duration	Please comment on purpose and content of contact

Figure 5.6 Counselling contact record form

purposes; to provide applicant records for the regional centre, and data about the use made of the counselling service offered. An analysis of the forms from five counsellors covering 136 applicants in one region provided a useful overview of the applicant counselling service. Sixty-eight per cent of applicants had had at least one contact with a counsellor during the advisory period, most lasting for 20 minutes or less; 28 per cent had had two or more contacts, and of these 28 per cent, three-quarters were initiated by the applicant. Three-quarters of all contacts were counsellor-initiated, usually by telephone, and very few (7.3 per cent) of all applicants responded to the offers of counselling in the literature they received by making the first contact themselves. (Kelly 1979.)

Drop-out

Counselling is about helping the learner define and achieve his or her objectives. This often involves helping the learner resolve problems encountered before, during or at the end of study. Some problems are not resolved, or resolvable, and the learner decides to drop out. Drop-out does not *always* imply a negative situation of course. In open learning especially there are many who enrol for courses without a commitment from the beginning to complete the course as planned. They know they are free to stop when they choose, and a number do so for positive rather than negative reasons i.e. they have learned as much as they want to, or they do not want to be assessed, only to read course materials in their own time, or they have moved on to something else which interests them more.

Notwithstanding, drop-out is generally associated with problems the learner cannot resolve while continuing with the course, and this is where the link with advice and counselling occurs. Since counselling is one of the means (perhaps the key means) through which providers can help the learner resolve problems, evaluating drop-out provides a measure of the scale of difficulties learners are experiencing and the sorts of problems commonly experienced to which counselling ought to be addressed.

'Drop-out' may seem like a straightforward issue but needs careful definition and interpretation of the various measures in use, particularly the base used to calculate percentages. Some institutions provide data on the basis of those who complete the first assignment, presumably because (in distance learning institutions in particular) this indicates that the learner had effectively started the course. (See Woodley and Parlett, 1983, p. 3.) The measures used by the Open University are shown in table 5.3 which suggests the major stages or 'milestones' at which drop-out and course progress can be measured—payment of final registration fee

	TOTAL	NEW STUDENTS (%)	CONTINUING STUDENTS (%)
i Non-completion of final registration (Base all provisionally registered)	N/A	28	N/A
ii Withdrawal/Drop-out rate (Base = all finally registered)	24	17	27
iii Failure rate (Base = all who sat the exam)	6	6	7
iv Overall wastage rate (Base = all finally registered) includes failure rate and withdrawal	29	22	32

adapted from Woodley (1987) p.56

**Table 5.5 Open University undergraduate performance in 1982 (student based)**

(applicable only to new students who make two part payments), at examination and at the course result stage. (Course progress is also measurable at each assignment but some who do not complete a particular assignment *will* continue with the course, so drop-out and course progress measures are not synonymous.) Different systems produce different 'milestones' and this sometimes makes direct comparison of rates between institutions impossible.

One of the features which table 5.5 highlights and which *has* influenced the orientation of counselling at the Open University is the concentration of drop-out by new students in the February to April period. New undergraduate students can signal their decision not to continue the course by not paying the final registration fee. Although there is not a comparable quantitative measure for continuing students, tutors tend to expect the period up to and including the first assignment to be a sensitive time for drop-out for all students, a period during which students are to some extent trying out the course, and gauging their own likely performance.

This has led the University to emphasise the period up to and including the first assignment as a time during which many students might value counselling, *whether they stay in or drop out*. Part of the rationale for this emphasis relates to resource issues. Where counselling resources are limited, it makes sense to alert counsellors to the possibility that learners might be more at risk of dropping out, or being in difficulty, during particular periods. Equally important is that counsellors are aware of the factors which play a part in drop out, and the evaluations using interview and survey methods have identified time and again a list of factors

#### A COURSE FACTORS

- Examples:
- Course either too difficult or not sufficiently advanced
  - Content not as expected, uninteresting, etc.
  - Course overloaded - too much material to work through in the time allowed

#### B INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS

- Examples:
- Not enough tuition/counselling available
  - Problems with individual tutor
  - Poor administration - schedules disorganised, inadequate facilities, etc.

#### C LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

##### (i) Unforeseen changes

- Examples:
- Illness/accident
  - Job/responsibility changes
  - Unemployment

##### (i) General conditions

- Examples:
- Lack of encouragement from family/employer
  - Lack of money
  - Clash with other domestic/leisure/work commitments

#### D LEARNER'S APPROACH TO LEARNING

- Examples:
- Perceives self as 'not clever enough', 'too old to learn' etc.
  - Low level of skill in learning - difficulties with using texts, writing assignments, problem solving, etc.
  - Lacks confidence in own ability to learn, pass the examination, etc.

#### E MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS

- Examples:
- Course work associated with achieving a goal which is no longer desirable, or has been achieved another way
  - More appropriate learning opportunities offered elsewhere
  - Another goal takes priority, e.g. learner decides to spend more time on a hobby, trade union work, with family, etc.

adapted from Woodley (1987) p.61-62

#### Figure 5.7 Factors associated with learner drop-out

which, in aggregate, represent the reasons learners give for why they have dropped out (see figure 5.7).

Earlier research at the Open University also suggests that between two-thirds and three-quarters of all the reasons learners give for drop-out are related to work and domestic factors, most of the remainder relating to the course and associated study problems (Woodley, 1987). Although this might suggest that providers can do

little to ameliorate the circumstances which lead to drop-out, it would be misleading to jump to such a conclusion.

First, it is often difficult to get learners who have dropped out to reply to surveys, and response rates may be 50 per cent or lower. This means that results are vulnerable to bias because no information exists for a large proportion of the target group—perhaps many of those who did not respond felt a greater sense of failure, or were more disappointed with course work.

Second, (and related to the last point) learners may need to rationalise dropping out by finding 'reasons' which minimize their sense of failure and embarrassment. It may be much easier to say that 'work pressures' led to drop-out than that the course was more difficult than expected or that assignment grades were disappointing. Survey results alone may be misleading and should certainly be compared with data on the rates of dropout overall and within particular categories, defined by age, educational qualifications, level of study and so on.

When this was done at the Open University during the first five years of its operation, it was clear that the drop-out rate among new undergraduate students was highest among those with no, and with low, formal educational qualifications. Various positive discrimination approaches were tried, culminating in 1977 in a national scheme whereby all 13 regions allocated a significant proportion of their funds for use by tutor-counsellors on special sessions for their new foundation course students, especially in the period just before and at the start of course work. A special session was defined as any form of contact of at least half an hour, over and above the number of hours tuition allocated in advance for each course. Tutor-counsellors were allocated an initial two hours for special sessions, and more 'hours' were available on request. Earlier efforts had specified particular categories of student as 'at risk'—not only according to educational category, but to workload (i.e. attempting two foundation courses at once, rather than one), disability, inability to attend regular study centre sessions, and so on.

Evaluation of this approach identified a number of problems, chief among which were the difficulties for tutor-counsellors in applying these 'at risk' categories to their own students. Some of those falling within 'at risk' categories, were clearly successful students, and many of those who subsequently dropped out did not fall within the 'at risk' categories, and could not have been predicted beforehand. This experience led to an approach in 1977 based not on 'at risk' categories as identified by aggregate statistical data, but on the discretion of tutor-counsellors themselves. The goal was not limited to giving additional help to prevent drop-out, but to giving additional help for the progress of all new under-

STUDENTS BY COURSE	Pass 1*	Pass 4*	Fail	Drop-out	Total
<b>A100 Arts Foundation Course</b>					
Support students	1.6	68.5	16.2	13.7	100.0
Provisionally registered students minus support students	2.0	58.0	9.1	30.9	100.0
<b>D101 Social Science Foundation Course</b>					
Support students	4.3	62.2	15.8	17.7	100.0
Provisionally registered students minus support students	4.0	51.4	9.9	34.7	100.0
<b>M100 Maths Foundation Course</b>					
Support students	13.4	48.0	19.7	18.9	100.0
Provisionally registered students minus support students	12.4	36.6	9.7	41.2	100.0
<b>S100 Science Foundation Course</b>					
Support students	15.9	50.6	14.4	19.1	100.0
Provisionally registered students minus support students	15.5	31.6	10.3	42.6	100.0
<b>T100 Technology Foundation Course</b>					
Support students	2.4	60.6	17.3	19.7	100.0
Provisionally registered students minus support students	2.4	47.2	12.1	38.3	100.0

Source: Thorpe (1979)

\* Only 3 categories are used for foundation course result: Pass 1, Pass 4 or Fail

**Table 5.6 Support students compared with all over provisionally registered new undergraduates: by course result**

graduate students throughout their first year of study with the University. (Thorpe 1979.)

The results of this exercise were startling, although not easy to interpret. As table 5.6 shows, the drop-out rate over the whole of each foundation course was much lower among those students who had received special support; their drop-out rate was less than half that of all other provisionally registered students. The fall in drop-out is most marked however among the group with no or low formal qualifications (tables 5.7). The drop-out rate for students in this category who had not received special support, was 51.0 per cent whereas for those who had, drop-out was 17.6 per cent. Drop-outs rates for all other categories are similarly more than halved in most cases.

It would be mistaken however to conclude that special support is causing these dramatic reductions in drop-out. Three-quarters of the support students received one extra session, and fewer than 10 per cent participated in three or more sessions. This represented a very small proportion of the total 'input' of a tutor-counsellor's scheduled contact time of 40 hours in face to face tutorials, and correspondence teaching on eight assignments. It seems improbable that 'special support' alone could have drop-out rates. What can be concluded however is that support students have made an effective, early contact with their tutor-counsellor; we know that such contact has taken place because it was recorded as part of the evaluation. Although students who did not participate in special support could attend subsequent study centre sessions, we do not know whether they attended, and they include those new students who, every year, fail to contact their tutor-counsellor at all, and subsequently drop out. It seems likely therefore that the reduction in drop-out among support students reflect two factors; qualities in the student which prompt them to take up the offer of contact with their tutor-counsellor, and the effects of contact (face to face in most cases) with a tutor-counsellor early enough to forestall loss of confidence, and to establish a good working relationship for the rest of the year.

Although support students did include many students who were not in any case at risk of dropping out, it appears that tutor-counsellors were successful to some extent in discriminating in favour of students who were academically borderline. A much higher proportion of support students completed the assessment requirements for their courses, but a higher proportion of these failed their course, by comparison with all other provisionally registered undergraduates (Table 5.7).

The attempt to identify and give special help to particular individuals in a group is notoriously difficult; many tutor-counsellors in 1977 found that the most supportive and least threatening approach was not to single out individuals, but to include their needs in particular in sessions offered to all students in the group. Some of the problems and opportunities in operating a positive discrimination role are highlighted by these reports from four different tutor-counsellors.:

'I see the key times for support as—

1. initial weeks when student is either a) overawed by the calibre or some students in study centre sessions, or b) having difficulty in disciplining himself/herself to examining course material rigorously
2. the period between the first and second assignment, if there has been poor performance on the first.

Level of highest educational qualification	Support students			All provisionally registered minus support students		
	Provisional Registration	June 1977	% Drop-out	Provisional Registration	June 1977	% Drop-out
No formal	703	579	17.6	1189	583	51.0
CSE/RSA	236	196	16.9	455	238	47.7
1-4 'O' levels	498	422	15.3	1478	896	39.4
5+ 'O' levels	635	537	15.4	1674	1102	34.2
1 'A' level	266	214	19.5	739	507	31.4
2+ 'A' levels	600	527	12.2	1762	1238	29.7
ONC/OND	245	220	10.2	605	408	32.6
HNC/HND	424	370	12.7	1116	872	21.9
Teaching Certificate	1184	1073	9.4	3818	3014	21.1
University diploma	392	347	11.5	1251	949	24.1
University degree	148	134	9.5	582	463	20.4
Total	5331	4619	13.4	14669	10270	30.00
No information	136			173	67	

Source: Thorpe (1979)

**Table 5.7 Support students compared with all other provisionally registered new undergraduates: by level of highest educational qualifications and rate of drop-out.**

I would prefer to identify weakness within the context of the course and act accordingly. Any suggestion of 'general' weakness before the course begins could be demoralising to the insecure student.'

*Tutor-counsellor Report*

'As a result of being able to arrange a meeting before Christmas, I was able for the first time to meet all my students face-to-face. In previous years students have dropped out without my ever being able to make contact.

I do not think that this contact prevented drop-out, but I do now know why students dropped out. (One student's wife had 'turns' in January, another left the country for a year on business, another went into hospital.)

The problems which the drop-out students encountered seem to beset all students at one time or another, but whereas a student who has embarked on a course will attempt to cope with the crisis and carry on with the course, a student who is about to embark on the course will decide not to add to his/her troubles by taking on what is to him/her an unknown commitment in time and effort and will drop out.

The ability to give early tutorials was very useful for establishing self-help groups, and was also a good opportunity to familiarise maths foundation course students with the computing element of the course before they get embroiled in the maths proper.'

*Tutor-counsellor Report*

'Mr E's mathematics consist only of (very) basic arithmetic. He attended a group maths tutorial on Jan. 14th but found it a bit beyond him, so I gave him an individual tutorial on Jan. 28th.

He is going to need further individual help in the early months of the Technology Foundation course, so I should like to request authorisation for this. I think about four hours would be needed to get him to the level of the weakest of the other students, but even one or two would be very useful.'

*Tutor-counsellor Report*

'This student asked for a special session because he hadn't been able to attend the induction meeting. He was anxious for a face to face interview (I had offered to discuss matters on the phone). The interview was informal with me answering the student's questions and giving suggestions for background reading and discussion course content, especially the art, logic and philosophy. Before the interview I felt that this student didn't really need a session (special) but I now feel it was a good idea as he is going to have trouble getting to the centre regularly because of personal commitments. I don't envisage having to give him any special support sessions but do intend to keep in touch by telephone .....

It seems to me it isn't always the students who apparently need help who ask for it!'

*Tutor-counsellor Report*

### **Perceptions of counselling**

For some practitioners, what the user thinks about the counselling they receive may be more important than any other considerations, and the problem here may not be interpreting the users' response, so much as separating counselling out from all the other ways in

which the user has been affected by the institution. Learners do not always remember whether they were counselled before enrolling, or may not realise that they *have* been counselled: some of the best counselling is 'invisible' in this sense. A number of instances of this were found during an evaluation of counselling for Open University Associate Students, where some interviewees who said they had not received any counselling had definitely been interviewed by a counsellor during their application. They had either forgotten the interview or not perceived it at the time as a counselling session.

When interviewing users, the interviewer needs to be prepared with 'probing' questions which do not use the term 'counselling' or depend on a common interpretation of 'what counselling is', e.g. 'did you discuss your choice of course with *any* member of staff from the workshop?' 'Did you receive any other information or advice, whether from staff in the workshop or outside?' 'Would you have liked the opportunity to discuss your decision?' It may be most productive to avoid using the term 'counselling' at all, if there is reason to believe that interviewees are likely to associate it with personal crises like divorce and bereavement, or with people who cannot manage their own lives. Negative perceptions of this kind have certainly been found among applicants and students in the Open University (Kelly, 1978).

Before interviewing users, it is essential to decide on specific aspects of the user's behaviour or experience where one might expect counselling to have an effect or a role to play. These can be derived from statements of the kind discussed earlier, outlining the kinds of outcome we might reasonably expect counselling to have. These may legitimately refer to value judgements and feelings, as well as behaviour, since the interviews will be used to explore user perceptions. It might be possible to formulate a number of tentative hypotheses like the following:

- Learners who discuss their decision with a counsellor before enrolment:
  - (i) will feel satisfied with the information and advice they received before study
  - (ii) will feel better able to complete the assessment for the course
  - (iii) will have selected courses appropriate to their goals
  - (iv) would be prepared to recommend the course/the institution to other interested people.

These and other hypotheses can be used as the basis for questions in an interview schedule which moves from the more general opened question to the more specific. In this way the user's experience of counselling and their evaluation of it should develop



(Examples of questioning style, *not* including all elements that would be needed in a full questionnaire, analysed by computer)

(a) Were you aware that you could contact someone to discuss your decision and course choice before enrolling?

Yes .....  
No .....

(b) Did you actually receive any advice or counselling of this kind?

Yes .....  
No .....

If YES

- (1) Who initiated the contract?  
Myself .....  
Receptionist .....  
Counsellor .....  
Other (please specify) .....

(2) How did it help you?  
(ring all that apply)

- Clarification of my own needs and objectives
- More information on the course(s)/method of study . . . .
- More prepared for the realities (workload, attendance, etc.) . . .
- Advice on preparatory work . . . sources of financial help. occupational/career applications .....
- Non of these .....
- Other .....

(3) Did the help provided lead to any of these decisions?

- Do a different course?
- Do fewer courses?
- Do a course elsewhere?
- Enrol at later stage?
- Do some preparatory work?
- Discuss with employer?
- Apply for financial support?
- Other .....

If NO

- (1) Would you have welcomed such contact?  
Yes .....  
No .....  
Unsure .....

(2) How might it have helped you?  
(ring all that apply)

- Clarification of my own needs and objectives
- More information on the course(s)/method of study .....
- More prepared for the realities (workload, attendance, etc.) .....
- Advice on preparatory work . . . . sources of financial help. occupational/career applications .....
- None of these.....
- Other.....

(3) Might more help then have led to any of these decisions?

- Do a different course?
- Do fewer courses?
- Do a course elsewhere?
- Enrol at later stage?
- Do some preparatory work?
- Discuss with employer?
- Apply for financial support?
- Other.....

Adapted from the Open University questionnaire to Associate Students, 1979, Betty Swift.

**Figure 5.8 User perceptions of pre-course counselling**

bit by bit during the interview. This is likely to be a better approach than asking directly about how effective counselling has been, or whether the learner has had any problems, especially at the beginning of an interview.

Looking at each item below, to what extent does it apply to your work with x (a counsellor) on the course you have just completed? (Circle one of the numbers for each item.)

	Very much Applies		Neutral		Does not apply at all	Can't say
	1	2	3	4	5	6
I felt I was known to someone in the system and not just a name/number	1	2	3	4	5	6
I felt encouraged to keep studying	1	2	3	4	5	6
Without his/her help I would probably have dropped out	1	2	3	4	5	6
I felt there was someone I could turn to when problems arose	1	2	3	4	5	6
I felt he/she listened to my view on things	1	2	3	4	5	6

**Figure 5.9 Question probing learner perceptions of counselling**

The effectiveness of a counselling service can also be evaluated by a questionnaire to users, assuming that enough qualitative understanding exists to formulate questions and pre-code answers. Figure 5.8 shows the kind of questions which can be developed to explore user perceptions of pre-course counselling, whatever from that takes.

Questions in figure 5.8 explore a specific period during which counselling might occur, but questionnaires can also be used to explore the learner's general impressions and preferences concerning counselling, as the items in figure 5.9 indicate.

In concluding this section, it is worth emphasising that expressions of satisfaction/dissatisfaction among users of counselling may not be matched by a commensurate improvement of success in output measures like drop-out and course credit achievement. Counselling may contribute to the improvement of both the

efficiency and effectiveness of an institution by helping enquirers choose appropriate courses, improving learning skills, listening to problems, and so on. But so many other factors also influence drop-out and course progress that aggregate data on outcomes can rarely if ever be used to single out the effects of counselling specifically.

### **Conclusion**

It is particularly important to identify the goals of a counselling system at an early stage in its evaluation so that appropriate data can be identified and collected. It is difficult in systems where counselling has more than a merely instrumental function, to identify measurable outcomes of its effects. Counselling may be oriented towards helping the learner make more informed decisions, for example, and it is extremely difficult to find measures of goals of this kind, which are at all adequate or useful.

Whatever the goals of a counselling system, however, quantitative data are likely to be useful for a portrayal of what is happening overall; to provide evidence of how often counselling takes place, the inputs of different counsellors, user take up and problem areas covered. One of the most important tasks for evaluation is *to document the counselling process* and thus to help develop an understanding of what counselling is about, among practitioners generally. It is very often the case that only a minority of learners uses the counsellor frequently, in any one year or course period, and that the majority of learners use the counsellor only once or twice. It may be tempting for some therefore to see the counselling interaction as a minority concern for 'problem' learners, or a peripheral issue. Counselling is much less likely to be viewed in this light where there is an understanding of what the counselling process involves and of the significance of its outcomes for individual learners. This requires qualitative as well as quantitative data, and the preparation of case studies which provide insights into individual needs and experience.

### **Further reading**

Bailey, D. (1987) *Guidance in Open Learning: A Manual of Practice*. National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling, with the Manpower Services Commission.

Produced as part of the NICEC project on guidance in the Open Tech Programme, funded by MSC. Provides state-of-the-art

descriptions of open learning and guidance, with detailed examples of how schemes can provide information, advice, counselling, coaching, assessment, advocacy and feedback. There is also an excellent section on evaluation and development, which offers checklists of qualitative and quantitative measures of effective guidance, from which providers can select those which are appropriate.