Publication

Protecting Academic Interest of Students During

COVID-19 Pandemic

Sharing Best Practices

Association of Indian Universities, New Delhi

ICFAI UNIVERSITY, JHARKHAND, RANCHI

Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, regular classes at the ICFAI University, Jharkhand had to be suspended since 3rd week of March 2020. Because of the lock-down restrictions and physical distancing norms, students could not move about freely. Added to this, as the number of COVID-19 positive cases have been rising, with no signs of abatement, future has been looking uncertain. Consequently, most of the students have been feeling uncertain about their future and have been feeling isolated, though they have been staying with their parents. Understanding the situation, ICFAI University Jharkhand formulated a multi-pronged strategy to address the underlying issues. Key objectives of the strategy are to ensure continuity of learning of the students and divert their attention from negative zone to a positive zone so that they are destressed.

Launch of *Swaadhyay*, Self-Learning Digital Learning Management System

On the day, the lock-down was announced, Vice Chancellor of the University had a brain storming session with the faculty team on the challenges faced and on how to continue studies of the students, who were in the midst of the semester. After considering various alternatives, it was decided to launch Digital Learning Management System (LMS) uniformly across all of its disciplines, Management, Engineering, IT and Law. Within 10 days of the lock-down, the University launched Online Digital Learning Management Platform, "SWAADHYAY" so that students can continue their studies, staying safely at home. The University quickly trained and motivated its faculty members to upload a variety of digital study materials, like PPTs, Videos, Video Lectures, Assignments, Quizzes, Case Studies etc for all the courses of the programs onto Swaadhyay, Students were happy to go through the study material, at their convenience.

On a survey of the students, it was noticed that 56% of the students accessed it through Smart Phones and the balance through Lap Tops and Desk Top computers, Analysis of the survey results showed that 83% of the students studied using Swaadhyay for 2-3 hours per day and 73% felt that it was very easy to use. While 53% of the students liked the PPTs, 33% liked the videos and video lectures by the teachers. When asked about the benefits derived from Swaadhyay, 35% mentioned convenience, whereas 27% liked the facility

to go through the study material repeatedly and the balance students liked the features of self-tests and additional study material like e-Books and articles. The biggest challenge faced by 66% of the students was issue with speed of internet. In a nutshell, it is the ease of use and the benefits that motivated the students to adopt the new learning platform, Swaddhyay.

Conduct of Online Classroom Sessions

The University also arranged interactive and engaging classes for 3 hours per day through video-conferencing. Prior to that, all the faculty members were trained on Digital Educational Technology Tools like Poll, Mentimeter (Polling), Quizziz (forQuizzing) and Testmoz (for creating interesting tests embedding images and videos and grade the students automatically) and Break-out groups (for conduct of group discussions). The University adopted Flipped-Class Room model, wherein students are expected to go through *Swaadhyay* Study material before attending online sessions, during which students actively participate in discussions and quizzes. The students were assessed through continuous evaluation, using formative and normative assessments. When a survey on pedagogical tools was conducted among the students, it was found that 90% of the students liked the Quizziz the most, as it was very interesting, followed by Mentimeter (55%) and Poll (25%), Class attendance varied from 72% to 85%. A few students residing in the rural areas faced challenges with regard to Internet bandwidth. For the benefit of the students, all the online classes were recorded and the videos were posted on *Swaadhyay* so that the students that missed the classes could go through them, at their convenience. Students that attended classes also accessed the online session videos as they helped in refreshing the learning during the classes.

Evaluation of Students and Declaration of Results

Evaluation of the final year students (graduating in 2020) was completed by 2nd week of June 2020 and results were declared by 30th June 2020 and provisional completion certificates were issued. It helped them to pursue their careers, in industry or higher studies. Online Examination was conducted for the intermediate students (other than final year students) and their results are expected to be declared by first week of Aug 2020.As their careers were not affected, stress levels of the students came down.

Campus Placements

The University arranged for campus placements by way of interviews through Video Conferencing. Besides, the University also persuaded the companies that offered placements prior to COVID-19 not to withdraw the campus placement offers given earlier.

Virtual Internships

In the normal course, as a part of the program structure, students of all programs and batches are required to undergo Internships in Industry so as to acquire hands-on skills. As it is not possible to visit organisations physically, the University organised Online Internships in Industry in Management, IT and Law Programs, whereas Engineering students had to take up in-house projects. Reputed companies like Larsen & Toubro, Sterlite Industries, Shriram Finance group and a number of practicing advocates and Law firms offered Online Internships to the students. Prior to allocation of the projects, students were imparted Digital Skills (like conduct of online surveys, online tools for analysis, conduct of meetings using Video Conferencing etc). Ms Shobhana Samarth, MBA students of the University received the award for the 'Best Virtual Internship in India' from Shriram Life Insurance Company.

Utilisation of Time by the Students

ICFAI University also encouraged the students to utilise the time to pursue MOOC Courses in the areas of their interest. A number of students participated in various Quiz programs and received awards. The University has also taken the initiative to organize Online Panel discussions, as a part of Charcha Manchseries, to update the students on the recent developments in technology, industry and society. In the last two months, six webinars were conducted with global industry experts on topics like Employment Opportunities in COVID-19 times, Digital Transformation of Business, Cyber Security, Artificial Intelligence, Legal Protection during COVID-19, Developments in Mining Industry etc. A number of students and faculty members ,not only from the University but also other Institutions across India, participated actively in them.

De-stressing the Students

Due to the prolonged physical distancing restrictions, students are unable to socialise physically and some of them have been feeling isolated. Besides,

as number of cases have been on the rise continuously, students are feeling uncertain about the future. In order to destress the students, the University adopted a number of measures. "Express Yourself " competition was held wherein students sent sketches, cartoons, poems etc. Select entries were posted on Social Media. A Virtual Music competition was conducted ,which received excellent response , Faculty members of the University have been in continuous contact with the students and counselled the students appropriately. Vice-Chancellor of the University interacted with the students through Video Conferencing and addressed them through You Tube .

Social Outreach Activities

The University has also undertaken a number Social-Outreach activities to help the underprivileged sections of the society , who lost their livelihood during the crisis . The University ,under the leadership of Vice Chancellor, launched "*Bhojan Patra*" ,scheme wherein Food Kits (Rice, Pulses, Oil, Sugar, Salt, Spices etc.) along with soap & masks were distributed to the needy families in 16 villages in the neighbourhood the University. The villagers were also educated on Spatial Distancing Measures, Sanitisation and Hygiene. These activities received good press coverage from the leading news papers and enhanced the image of the University.Details of the activities taken up the University are posted on its website (www.iujharkhand.edu.in) and Face Book page (icfaijharkhand).This has motivated the students and gave them a sense of pride.

Going Forward

As the COVID-19 times tend to get extended , the University is smartly adapting itself to the New Normal , by digital transformation of its operations , including admissions and academic delivery during 2020-21 academic year. Research Aptitude Test for admission to PhD Program (part-time) in Management was conducted online ,wherein candidates could take the test online from home but with remote proctoring, driven by Artificial Intelligence. Personal Interviews were conducted using Video Conferencing. Selected students joined the Course Work-I online *Swaadhay*-II classes, which commenced in Second week of July 2020. The University plans to start academic year from 2nd week of August 2020 for senior students and early September 2020 for newly admitted students.Academic sessions will be conducted using flipped-classroom model using *Swaadhyay*-II, which incorporates Outcomes

Based education. In order to enable the Engineering and IT students to conduct Laboratory Experiments from home, the university tied up with IIT, Delhi for Virtual Labs and trained its faculty members on the same . Faculty members of the University are allowed to work- from- home. A COVID-19 cell was constituted to take all requisite steps to ensure hygiene in the campus and redress the grievances of the students and staff , if any. All efforts are being made to conduct academics and other operations of the University in the New Normal Environment , without compromising on quality .

Conclusion

While COVID-19 has wrought unprecedented damage to day-to-day life and livelihood, it is possible to contain the damage by formulating an appropriate strategies and implement the same , by effective communication and motivation of all the stakeholders - students , faculty members and staff. Besides, it presents an excellent opportunity for digital transformation of an Institution, which can bring in substantial tangible and intangible benefits , in the immediate as well as distant future.

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Call for Papers for December Issue of IUJ Journal of Management

(Volume 8, No.2, December issue 2020)

Extended Last Date of Submission: - September, 25th September 2020