Best Practices

Best Practice I: Shifting Academic and Research Activities to Blended Mode Combining Offline and Online Methods

Context: The COVID19 pandemic that closed down educational institutions in March 2020 forced a radical rethink on curriculum delivery and continuation of academic and research activities at a time when in-person classes and interaction was impossible. Birpara College quickly adapted to the situation and shifted its entire academic and research activities to online mode in preparation for a blended education system in future.

Practice: Right after the government lockdown orders, the college encouraged the faculty to set up whatsapp groups for students of all courses for sharing information, e-learning content, questions for internal assessment, etc. After that, online classes were started using different online platforms. An e-learning section was added to the android application of Birpara College to store and disseminate digital resources among the students. Later, through a combination of the website and the app, question papers of university exams were distributed among students and their answer scripts were collected online. Along with curriculum delivery, different units of Birpara College organised a number of online events during the pandemic, including two international webinars and ten episodes of a weekly lecture series. Events with the students in mind included online interactive sessions on mental health, students' webinars, and online workshops on topics from the syllabus as well as innovative practices and how to prepare for competitive examinations. Organising such diverse events also gave the college the opportunity to collaborate with various people and organisations from across geographies. The resource persons included academics, psychiatrists, psychologists, entrepreneurs, and captains of industry. The collaborating organisations included colleges in south Bengal (Acharya Sukumar Sen Mahavidyalay, Purba Bardhaman) and north Bengal (Cooch Behar College, Salesian College, Siliguri College of Commerce, etc.); digital units of educational institutions such as Educational and Cultural Station, Belur; industry bodies such as the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India (ICAI); and private companies such as Byju's.

Evidence of Success: Whatsapp groups for different courses have become de rigueur. The number of users of the Birpara College app has grown steadily. Academic activities continued even when the college was requisitioned as a COVID-19 quarantine centre in mid-2020. Both internal and university examinations have been conducted online. Attendance in the online events was high. Birpara College became known for organising innovative online programmes in collaboration with various organisations.

Problems Encountered and Resources Required: Network issues, particularly among students living in remote areas, is a major problem. In future, the college must invest in ICT-

enabled classrooms and equipment so that faculty members can take online classes from college and also record their lectures. The college also needs to increase the capacity of its wireless network.

Best Practice II: Expanding the Choice of Programme for Students in Both Regular and ODL Modes

Context: The college caters to a region where a lot of the students belong to disadvantaged sections of the society and reside in remote areas. Many of them are first-time college-goers. The student community is multi-cultural and multi-lingual. Under the circumstances, it is a priority for the college to ensure the students have a variety of affordable options when it comes to choice of programmes, mode of learning, and medium of learning.

Practice: The Birpara College offers regular undergraduate programmes in three streams, BA, BSc and BCom under the University of North Bengal (NBU). It offers Honours programmes in eight subjects: Accountancy, Bengali, English, Geography, History, Nepali, Political Science, and Sociology. In addition, the college now operates study centres of Netaji Subhas Open University (NSOU) and Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) offering different programmes in ODL mode. The NSOU study centre also offers post-graduate courses. The students under NBU can write their examinations in Bengali, English and Nepali. NSOU offers Bengali and English as medium of instruction, while IGNOU offers Hindi and English. Thus, together the different programmes under different universities cater to the needs of students from various linguistic backgrounds.

Evidence of Success: Student enrolment has not decreased even in the midst of the pandemic despite offline classes remaining suspended. Enrolment in ODL courses under the study centres of NSOU and IGNOU is on the rise.

Problems Encountered and Resources Required: The college will have space crunch when regular courses begin, especially until construction of new classrooms is completed. More academic counsellors need to be appointed for the ODL courses.