Higher Learning Program at IHSAN Home School

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Introduction

The purpose of the case study is to consider the context, relevant factors and resources, and to identify the learners, challenges, and opportunities of implementing a new distance education and determinations of an appropriate learner support system to put in place. IHSAN Home School (IHSAN), located in India, has been a unique school dedicated to the enhancement of children's education for 20 years. The aim of the school is to add a higher education program, the Student-Teacher Program (STP), which will be offered via distance learning.

Context and Relevant Factors

IHSAN will continue its focus on providing excellent education to learners by offering the STP via distance learning. The primary language of the school is English with the native language, Tamil, being second. Funding for the STP learners will be available through loans, scholarships, work-study, and self-pay options. Due to the nature of the intense educational structure it is important that IHSAN offer continuing students multiple scholarships to offset the mounting costs of higher education, as this can be a deterrent for learners. Due to the courses being offered worldwide, IHSAN and the STP must give consideration to the cultural aspect of India. The STP will provide not only a superior education but also a diverse education, which can be achieved by acknowledging other cultures. Therefore, the focus on the Indian culture needs to shift slightly so as to incorporate all cultures.

At this time, competition from other education institutions is not a prominent factor. On global level the STP may have some difficulty in competing with other higher education institutions based on academic variety. However, IHSAN and the STP offer its learners a diverse cultural learning experience whether attending face-to-face or distance.

Educational Provider

The founder of IHSAN embodies an environment where students are not spoon-fed information but made capable to experience life in its full depth and dimension. IHSAN envisions a holistic approach to living that does not closely follow materialistic ways of thinking. The STP at IHSAN is a five-year program focused on providing All Indian Council for Technical Education (AICTE) accredited degrees in Vocational Education and Technical Education. It prepares learners to become teachers by gaining expertise in their subject of interest and gaining practical leadership and organizational experience. This program intends to provide online courses for students who have successfully completed their primary and secondary schools that wish to become teachers and aid in improving the educational systems in India as well as other countries. IHSAN is located in Coimbatore, Southern India; it encompasses learners and faculty from all around the world, with the majority being Indian. Since this is a new program, initially the number of learners to be enrolled is 500. The facilitators of this program will be volunteers and specialists, and the teaching method will follow constructivist and autonomous learning.

Resources

IHSAN received a grant from the MARS Foundation in India to provide material needs and monetary resources for the STP for the 2011 – 2016 school years. The grant will provide 2500 WIFI-enabled laptop computers and a budget of 68,000,000 Indian Rupees (INR) (about $1,500,000). An estimated 60% of the budget will be spent on course overhead, including management and administrative support; enhancing existing IT infrastructure; course development, including the purchase of a web-based learning management system; maintenance costs; and annual presentation costs (costs of teaching the program), including faculty who will work solely with the learners in the STP. The remaining 40% has been allocated to develop and

provide student support to IHSAN's new distance learners. In keeping with IHSAN's non-profit mission, while funded by the MARS grant, the STP costs to learners will be relatively low at 27,000 INR (about $600) per semester, per full-time student. Before the expiration of the MARS grant, IHSAN plans to evaluate the STP and sources of future funding.

Learners

The primary learners will be between the ages of 16-21. It is expected that 85% of initial enrollees will successfully complete their studies and graduate in the STP. Upon graduation, IHSAN will provide learners with career placement opportunities with IHSAN being the first option. While employment will not be guaranteed, if a learner wishes to teach at IHSAN upon completion of the STP, 90% of learners are accommodated.

Integrating learners into a face-to-face environment upon completion of the STP will be relatively seamless as learners are required to obtain a one year teaching residency in their last year of study, giving them real-life teaching experience before being completely transitioned from a distance learning environment to a face-to-face environment.

Learners will collaborate with one another in an effort to help each other grow. The overall goal of the STP is to develop learners into professional educators by enhancing their skills and abilities ("Goals", 2003). Learners will understand instructional design and development, employ various teaching methodologies, and be able to self-reflect in an effort to stimulate professional growth ("Goals", 2003).

Challenges

The existing primary and secondary face-to-face portion, of which rich learner support and constructivist teaching has been established, needs to be translated into the STP. Learners will have an essential role in openly describing their support needs in this new program prior to,

during, and after being in the program. New and existing faculty, both full-time and adjunct, will need to be supported for their own work, and properly utilized to enhance learner support.

Administrators will need to consider different learning methods for the now distant student population, IT support, learner support management, understanding and implementation of best practices, training of staff, quality assurance, and there may be as of yet unidentified issues to be realized as the program matures. All involved in teaching and learning must know what the required learning skills, information literacy skills, community-building and communication skills, leadership skills, and teaching skills should be. Adequate implementation of proper learner support areas, systems, models, and practices may benefit from consultation with international and national government, business, and distance education leaders, administrators, educators, and learners; as well as attendance at relevant conferences to exchange knowledge and information to continually enhance and maintain learner support.

Opportunities

Learners will have the opportunity for a well-rounded higher education learning experience via distance education. Overcoming challenges are opportunities for personal and professional growth and increased financial security for learners. In addition, IHSAN has the opportunity to form a consortium with other Higher Learning Programs (HLP). Consortiums may share accreditation, modular learning objects, portable expertise and support, cost and resource sharing, and guest faculty; or allow leveraging of power and scalability to negotiate lower purchase costs or more favorable terms when partnering with the private sector.

Conclusion

IHSAN Home School is in a great position to implement the STP higher education program via distance learning. The immediate challenge IHSAN faces is establishing an

effective learner support system that will enable its learners to successfully complete the STP. With careful planning and consultation, an effective learner support system can be established for the STP. In addition, this provides IHSAN with the opportunity to collaborate with other higher education/learning programs, which will strengthen the school as a whole. IHSAN's STP will benefit the school, culture of India, and provide a diverse learning experience for its learners.

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