Higher Learning Program at IHSAN Home School

Individual Response

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Introduction

It is estimated that only 20% of the nearly 200 million workers that will enter India's

workforce during the next 10 years will be skilled workers. Creative means to allow for an

educated and skilled Indian society are necessary. The IHSAN primary and secondary school has

been working to educate children in rural India for nearly 20 years, with a philosophy of

expanding the limits of each child's perception and allowing him or her to imagine and prepare

for possibilities beyond their immediate poor surroundings and laborer families. This paper

outlines the plans for IHSAN's higher learning program (HLP), and the learner support structure

for it.

Goals of Proposed Support System

IHSAN plans more than 200 primary and secondary schools in rural India during the next

5 to 7 years, serving approximately 500,000 students when expansion is completed. In order for

this impressive goal to be realized, IHSAN with assistance from India's MARS foundation plans

to implement a new 5-year distance education (DE) HLP designed to train university students to

become teachers that embody IHSAN's philosophy. The majority of those teachers will have the

option to teach at IHSAN's face-to-face schools upon graduation. The overarching goal of this

paper is provide the overall plan for HLP's learner support structure including administrative and

IT support; distance education, culture and gender, faculty and tutor support; quality assurance

and research; and cost recovery among others.

Elements of the Learner Support System

IHSAN's higher learning program is targeted to any student throughout India and other

English-speaking countries that has finished secondary education and wishes to study for 5 years,

including 1 practical year of teaching at a primary or secondary school nearby, to obtain a

university degree in technical or vocational teaching. This is not an easy task for several reasons. Culturally, Indian students may be less willing to question information they receive from their teachers which may not be conducive to constructivist learning, but also more willing to work in groups instead of studying individually which is beneficial for DE (Spronk, 2004). Design of courses and practices of the faculty encourage dialogue and community-building both as a means of enhancing and supporting learning, and to reduce the loneliness of the distance learner. A larger portion of students in the program may be women as they will be studying to become primary and secondary teachers, and while each student will be given a laptop to support their school work, their age and home responsibilities, levels of technical savvy, and how those factors may influence their studies are unknown (Von Prummer, 2004). All systems at HLP will be designed to be as transparent and easy to use as possible.

Computer-mediated DE may be new to almost all candidates and they may not realize the difficulties involved with such a learning environment. Therefore, the learner support system includes IT helpdesk, as well as written materials and video and if needed counselors via email or telephone that will explain the challenges of distance learning to prospective students and more importantly to their families and persons in their immediate circle. It is essential that all involved understand requirements of DE including a quiet place to study, computer dedicated to student's work, periods of reduced availability due to group projects and exams, and so on. Additional services include digital library access, electronic registration, and electronic social network and contact information for teachers, advisors, and other learners in order to provide learning and research resources and allow socialization and community building. Self-help tutorials and virtual scavenger hunt activities will encourage each student to fully explore and appreciate all support options that are available and how to utilize them.

The combination of computer-based services that are available all of the time, with personalized activities, and the availability of one-on-one "help desk" style support services and social networking with other learners and mentors bring forth learner-content, learner-teacher and learner-learner interactions into student support service and reduce the feelings of being lost which may improve retention and reduce drop-out (Hulsmann, 2004). HLP students must be informed of these services early on so there is reduced chance of becoming discouraged or feeling disconnected. Brindley (1995) explains that students that are prevented from dropping out of a class or program early on, have reduced chances of dropping out at later points. Early, proactive, and systematic method to encourage learners to understand their support services may also serve to reduce the number of emails or calls to counselors and advisors with routine questions, thereby reducing the workload on those support staff.

HLP plans to promote and support community building and maintenance as an active learner support strategy, with involvement from experienced teachers, more senior students and additional tutors, and all learners. Conrad (2005) states that community is important to the success of online learners, with community defined as a "general sense of connection, belonging, and comfort that develops over time among members of a group who share purpose or commitment to a common goal" (p. 2). Conrad recommends that this sense of community can develop among online learners through "regular participation, shared problem solving, personal contact, providing feedback, clear expression, frequent visits to the learning portal website, investing time, being open and cheerful, sharing learner background, freely exchanging thoughts and ideas, developing trust, supporting others, exhibiting consideration and honesty, and encouraging the participation of others through supportive dialogue" (p.8). More senior learners will naturally assist with community building and coaching, alongside program teachers.

Organization Staffing and Resources of Learner Support

Learners that are new to distance education or come from disadvantaged backgrounds will need more support for the actual act of learning (considered by most outside of North America to be a learner support need), and sometimes even from senior staff (Guri-Rosenblit, 2004). This and other areas of support are necessary for the confidence, proper education, and success of HLP learners. A multi-dimensional approach that is designed to use the best resources available will be utilized. To the extent possible student services will be computerized and automated, and students will be trained to use all electronic and web-based resources available to them.

Staffing is also an essential component. Job descriptions for all personnel will be prepared, and periodically updated by a small working group composed of representatives and managers at HLP and external experts. Induction and training for staff will communicate the values and mission of the institution as well as describe tasks that need to be performed, and to prepare staff for performing them (Tait, 2004). Mentoring is necessary and encouraged, but may not be as practical early on. Instead, communication mapping (2004) will receive special emphasis so that collective wisdom that has been accumulated at IHSAN and augmented by external consultants can be utilized and harnessed effectively both on an as-needed basis and through formalized periodic training.

Supervision and appraisal will enhance quality assurance and will be integral to the leadership and management of HLP learner support staff. Feedback is constructive and as frequent as possible and it is also important that the managers have a reflective leadership style that actively finds and corrects areas of deficiency and encourages a learning culture among all staff (Larsson and Vinberg, 2010). This, in addition to continued enhanced communication will

increase camaraderie and trust and allow problems to rise to the surface quickly and be resolved.

Lastly, all decisions that are made regarding operations will be catalogued over time so that

newer personnel that may be added to HLP or replace those that leave can continue to understand

which decisions were made and why (Tait, 2004).

Centralized counseling, advising, and mentoring is available should students need

personalized help. This dedicated group can assist students with their needs which they could not

resolve with resources on the HLP website including IT, counseling about available courses and

their timing including the syllabi for all courses, research and library services, registration,

financial aid options, and general career and practical work-year placement. Some of the staff

and supervisors will routinely work with senior staff and management, core and adjunct faculty,

and select students to share problems within this system and work on solutions and

enhancements. The learner support staff is eligible to attend HLP as students so that they may

personally understand how students feel and internalize learners' problems. Role-playing

exercises are otherwise part of training and support staff are evaluated not only based on

feedback students provide regarding service, but on their attendance and performance during

training sessions. Staff also have responsibility for actively communicating specific needs for

updating informational and organizational content that is available to students on HLP website,

as an additional layer of quality assurance (Van Voorhis and Falkner, 2004).

Another area that is essential to proper learning and all of its facets including cognitive

and affective support, proper constructivist learning, and motivation and inspiration that can

maintain a learner's enthusiasm both in school and beyond, is the faculty and teaching staff. For

cost-saving, flexibility and ability to make changes quickly and to incorporate appropriate

national and international perspectives, the majority of faculty and tutors will be adjunct. They

may work part-time from their respective locations in India or abroad so long as they are fluent

in English and possess adequate expertise and experience to be able to perform curriculum

development as needed and teach HLP curriculum and support learning via computer-mediated

system(s). Tipple (2010) explains that more than 50% of teaching staff at degree granting

institutions are now adjunct, who earn a fraction of what tenured faculty earn, and describe the

joy of teaching, personal satisfaction, and flexible work schedule as the top three reasons they

teach.

IHSAN's humanistic mission and goals for helping disadvantaged children may attract

faculty and supporters with adequate skills who may wish to work for discounted rates or even

donate their time. Cost recovery practices will also be implemented during course design and

course content development by incorporating reusable learning objects, and not only updating

each module over time but imagining new ways that modules can be used for different purposes

with appropriate tweaks as needed (Hulsmann, 2004). The minds at IHSAN HLP will perform

continuing research and recommend books, series of articles, and other resources that are

economical but informative and should be included in student curriculum. Imagination and

dedication of staff, connections with larger schools and the content they may share, and renting

content from large databases instead of buying them, will make up for IHSAN's constrained

budgets. The large Indian-American community in the United States, many of who are

successful may also be available for intellectual and monetary support.

Adjunct faculty will need to receive their own support since they often feel marginalized

or isolated and lack recognition or inclusion in university policies, issues and course

development, or do not have adequate distance education training (Tipple, 2010). IHSAN plans

to attract, recruit, interview, and hire qualified persons to form its adjunct (and full-time) faculty

and teachers; provide orientation and initial training, orientation handbook, integration into the university, mentoring as possible, assessment and development of these valuable human resources; and provide growth path and broadening of roles and responsibilities, and a hand in university policy development in coordination with selected students. Similar routine support that is available to students will also be available to faculty including social networks and community building that allow organization and conduct of research or other special projects.

Faculty and teachers must feel comfortable teaching via the computer and will need good summarizing, threading, and coaching skills in the constructivist environment (Salmon, 2004). Although the plan is to hire personnel that possess those skills to the extent possible, otherwise qualified or useful faculty and tutors will receive a multi-week course to learn the required skills via structured training. IHSAN realizes that like its students, faculty with potential should be supported in order to achieve competency. Lastly, although faculty may provide some one-on-one learner support (emailing students that have not checked in for class or for a particular assignment for example), the intention is that those remaining learner needs and questions will not be administrative or routine issues which are best handled elsewhere.

<div align="center">Evaluation, Quality Assurance, and Conclusion</div>

Methods and plans for performance assessment have been outlined elsewhere in this paper to some extent. Anderson (2004) describes developmental or design-based research as a way of gathering qualitative and quantitative data, utilizing and studying those data to design new or updated ways of conducting learner support or other educational activities, evaluating the impact of practices via formative and summative assessments, and continuing the process over again. IHSAN HLP intends to collect data as much as possible via its automated and its human support structures. Planned data dictionaries and data collection structures will be discussed with

core and adjunct staff for their comments and as invitation for research projects. Leadership,

faculty, administration, and to some extent students who are interested, are expected to and

encouraged to follow the latest research in the field of distance education administration and

learner support to otherwise recommend best practices within the HLP context. Web 2.0

technologies and connections with outside experts, targeted literature search findings,

publications in appropriate journals, and attendance at relevant professional organization

conferences to sharing knowledge gained from the outside with IHSAN HLP colleagues, may all

serve to enhance leaner support operations and better methods of quality assurance.

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