

STUDENTS SUPPORT SERVICES : A STUDY OF DEPARTMENT OF DISTANCE EDUCATION, PUNJABI UNIVERSITY, PATIALA

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Abstract : The Department of Distance Education, Punjabi University, Patiala is one of the pioneer and oldest institution imparting education through the mode of distance education to the students who are unable to seek education through regular mode. About fifty four multi- faculty programmes with inter-disciplinary approach to approximately eighteen thousand students had been offered. There had been many activities floated by the department to provide opportunities to the students to express themselves. But due to paucity of funds and other constraints , it had not been possible to extend such facilities to all the students but efforts are being made for improvement in delivering such services to maximum possible number of students.

Keywords : Distance Education, Distance Learners, SIM

Education through distance mode provides an opportunity to those students who are unable to attain education through formal mode. The Department of Distance Education, Punjabi University, Patiala has been one of the such oldest and pioneer institutes providing an opportunity to a large number of students to attain higher education along with their professional life or being at home. It came into existence in March 1968 as the Directorate of Correspondence Courses and was the second institute of its kind in the country. Starting with undergraduate and post-graduate courses in traditional disciplines, the Department had ventured into many job oriented courses to upgrade skill and knowledge of the both young and old learners residing at distant places.

Department had been offering 54 multi-faculty inter-disciplinary courses. All Certificates, Diplomas, Under Graduate courses (except BBA and BCA) and M.A. courses (except English, Hindi & Women Studies) had been offered in both English as well as punjabi medium. This Department was the first in India which started regional language 'Punjabi' as medium of instruction and examination. Student enrolment in the Department had been varying between eighteen to twenty thousand for the past five years i.e. from 2012 to 2017, out of which 70% to 80% students had opted for Punjabi as their medium of instruction and had received their study material in punjabi Medium.

Department has its own library with a spacious reading hall and more than 75,364 books and journals on different subjects. Some online journals have also been made accessible to the students. During Personal Contact Programmes (PCP), to facilitate the students to get the books issued, decision to keep library open on weekends and other holidays. The facility of getting books issued through post had also been initiated. 6 regional library centres have also been established to help the students get the text books issued nearest to their residing areas.

The Department had been updating the printed course material from time to time to improve its quality and outlook. To make it self-explanatory, the study material had been written in Self Instructional Mode (SIM). Printed lessons had been supplemented with audio-video lessons. These could be borrowed by the students from the Department Library. Department had been making efforts to reduce the distance between the teacher and the learner through extensive use of Information technologies. The department had initiated the preparation of E-Contents also on few selected topics.

With the assistance from DEC, the Department had networked through LAN. Internet access and down linking facilities had been made accessible since the session 2006-07. Internet Accessibility through Wi-Fi had also been provided. The Department also has its own website (www.dccpbi.com) which has been providing vital information to the students regarding admission dates, examination dates, PCP schedules etc.

Consultancy regarding admission to various courses had been provided through radio broadcasts. The students can consult the teachers individually during personal contact programmes or on any working day to get their academic problems solved and can also contact through telephone. Live Phone-in-Counselling programmes had been organised in two parts for providing information as well as providing solution to their specific queries and problems. Programmes aiming at providing general information about admission process, availability of courses

are normally delivered during the months of July and August and the programmes aiming at solving subject specific queries are delivered during the rest of the months. Hostel facility had also been extended so as to provide safe, secure and economical accommodation during PCPs.

As per the govt. rules and regulations, fee concessions and scholarships in special cases and Student Aid Fund for poor students had also been introduced.

For the benefit of the students, the Department had introduced a single-window system where all information related to the admission, courses, examination etc. is provided. The introduction of this system had made the admission procedure hassle free as the entire information is being made available to them at the Enquiry and Information Centre located at the main gate of the University.

Apart from academic activities, students had been encouraged to participate in various extension activities also like NSS, Youth Welfare Activities, Adult Education Counselling Programmes etc. Special and extension lectures had been organised. Though the students are not required to attend the classes regularly yet various activities had been initiated by the Department to provide them the opportunities to express themselves. Students can send their creative writings in English, Punjabi and Hindi through a magazine entitled Gyan-Doot. They are also inspired to do some original thinking on the subjects of national and international interest by participating in essay, drawing and photography competition. It had been proposed to organise Prize Distribution Function for the meritorious students. To remain in touch with old students the Departmental Alumni Association has also been formed since 2006. Placement cell had been proposed to assist the young aspirants in seeking appropriate jobs after successful completion of their courses.

1.0 Limitations

It had been a herculean task to successfully run the department due to unmanageable strength of students particularly after the introduction of semester system. Financial constraints, administrative hurdles, stiff attitudinal problems, lack of willingness for cooperation and coordination among the members of faculty and administrative staff on one hand and lack of enthusiasm among the recipients/ students on the other hand had further aggravated the problem.

Space for proper display of books in the Library had reached its zenith and had led to stalling of the purchase of new books., lapse of grants and denial of the right of the student to have access to latest and current information. Moreover, the facility of issuing the books through post also has certain inherent difficulties as students often fail to return the books in time thus denying the right of reading those books by others. There is also the fear of loss of books during the transactions.

Internal assessment had become compulsory with the introduction of the semester system but huge number of students had caused delay in preparing the results. Many students are willing to attend the classes during the PCPs and other events but the limited hostel space becomes a deterrent, particularly for the female students . Such a situation compels them to spend huge expenses on boarding and lodging outside the campus.

Due to shortage of staff , it becomes difficult to perform all these diverse functions with in the given time frame. ICT can't be termed as panacea of all the problems as its advent has brought plethora of problems . Computerization of data needs expertise and is also a time consuming and expensive process. The existing staff lacks the technical knowhow and also has adorned stiff attitude towards such initiatives thus, stalling the whole process. It has resulted into chaos and confusion and has led to huge financial losses . Infrastructural development and changes are to be made like spacious computer labs, providing computers to all the faculty members, administrative and technical staff members, networking of the computers, purchasing softwares etc. It also demands change oriented attitude among the staff members accompanied with appropriate training programmes so as to develop e- environment.

2.0 Suggestions

Many remedial and reformative measures are being taken to improve the teaching and learning process. To promote the usage of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) among distance learners, it is suggested that a credit-free paper providing in basic Information Technology (IT) be introduced as it will enable them to learn basic IT skills like working on word processors, browsing the world wide web etc. which will be not only helpful for academic purposes but are quite necessary for distance learners in their present jobs or preparing them for the future adequately. It will also facilitate timely transmission of requisite information to them, getting their general as well as specific queries solved, counseling about various placement opportunities and regular updation of data with regard to alumni. But overreliance on e - techniques should also be discouraged and the habit of reading the books, journals in the printed form must also be encouraged. Printed lessons need to be supplemented with audio-video lessons and e-content programmes, thus suggested to

establish such laboratory which could facilitate preparation of such cds and programmes. Capacity building of the faculty as well as administrative staff through organising of the seminars, conferences and workshops, giving training with regard to latest educational technologies. Devising methods which will help the department to reduce the gap between the learners and the teachers. Single window system within the Department itself can be introduced catering to the post admission services for the benefit of the students.

3.0 Conclusion

For the overall development of the students and greater usage of library documents, participation in the extra-curricular activities, there is a need for creating conducive environment for enabling the sharing of knowledge through optimum utilization of institutional resources. The limitations can be overcome by framing well-coordinated plans and their proper implementation through time management and willing participation of both the disseminators and the recipients. The process may seem to be slow in the beginning but will certainly bear fruits in the longer run.

4.0 References

www.dcepbi.com

Notes

The content of the paper has been based on the personal experience and observation of the author.