NALSAR University of Law Hyderabad

Digital Education Initiatives

1. Title of the Practice: Digital Education Initiatives

2. Objectives of the Practice

Since the NLUs were originally started as mono-disciplinary institutions with small student bodies, the academic content had a limited audience. The Faculty Members who were constantly updating their syllabus and experimenting with teaching techniques were largely doing so within the confines of their own institutions. However, over the last decade the growing use of the internet and improved mobile connectivity has opened the pathway for educational institutions to reach much larger audiences. For example, the UGC e-Pathashala project and the MOOCs under the SWAYAM programme reflect our Government's initiatives in this direction. At the level of a relatively small institutions such as NALSAR it was obvious that the academic content should be made available to external audiences. Hence, the NALSAR University of Law "YouTube Channel" was started in 2015. It acts as a repository for the content recorded from the various guest lectures, conferences, workshops and selected courses hosted by the institution. Over the last seven years this channel has become very popular especially among law students and practicing lawyers. Hence, specialist knowledge that was earlier available only to the University's full-time students is now available for free to the general public.

3. The Context

When NALSAR started uploading the academic content online, there were discussions about the criteria for selecting the content that should be made publicly available. For example, some Resource Persons may hesitate to express their views freely if they know that their content is open to public scrutiny which may sometimes be misinformed. Hence, the IT Department sought the consent of each speaker and the respective Faculty Advisor before uploading the content. NALSAR made investments in improving the digital infrastructure in the class rooms and conference venues so as to initially allow effective recording and later the hybrid delivery of classes. This early investment helped the University to negotiate the needs of online classes during the Covid-19 pandemic. Apart from the online classes for the regular courses, it is noteworthy that some of the guest lectures that were delivered during the pandemic attracted participation from hundreds of students. In many ways NALSAR anticipated the reality of digital education.

4. The Practice

As mentioned earlier, NALSAR started its digital education initiatives on its own. The investments that were made in the necessary infrastructure and the organizational costs for most of the programs were met by the University itself. For instance, more than 80% of the content that is presently available on the NALSAR YouTube Channel is derived from programs organized by the University.

NALSAR gave considerable autonomy to student groups such as NALSAR "Public Policy Group", "Nyaya Forum", "Constitutional Law Society", "Savitribai Phule Intersectional Study Circle", and the "Technology Law Forum" to invite speakers and host them on campus. This meant that the interests of our students were organically reflected in the content that was later made publicly available. The University learnt lessons from this organizational experience and then uploaded the content from international conferences on Law and Religion, Socio Economic Rights, International Law and domestic conferences on Constitutional Law. The institutional lessons were carried forward by organizing online workshops on Research Methodology where leading scholars interacted with our Ph.D. candidates. Later on, the University was nominated by MHRD to create a "law teachers refresher course" as part of the ARPIT programme. So far more than 3700 teachers have benefitted from this course. With the support of the Department of Legal Affairs, Ministry of Law & Justice, NALSAR created an "Online Course on the Indian Constitution", which was first launched in English in 2021. The English version has received more than 1,47,000 registrations. The Hindi version has also been prepared and will be made available in 2023. All of this content has been curated and made available to the general public.

The digital presence built up by NALSAR is the strongest among Indian Law Schools. While some of the videos are deepening the reach of the legal literacy programs, most of the content enables viewers to listen to the leading scholars and practitioners at their own convenience. It is hoped that this method of disseminating knowledge will also be a model for other law schools.

It is recognized that online education cannot completely replace the importance of physical education. However, given the highly selective character of the University, this was the most obvious method of reaching a larger audience. The intent was also to reach people outside the fraternity of the legal profession. To that extent we have a long way to go since most of our recorded content was delivered in the English language, which has limited reach in the Indian context. While some videos were prepared in Telugu and Hindi there is need to systematically produce content in the respective Indian languages so that the institutional YouTube Channel becomes reference point for a larger section of the population. That will allow NALSAR to better

pursue the statutory goal of improving public awareness about the working of the legal system.

5. Evidence of Success

Since 2015, the NALSAR University of Law "YouTube Channel" has made available more than 500 videos based on guest lectures, conferences, workshops and selected courses. The channel now has more than 53,000 subscribers and the content is cross referenced by leading lawyers and scholars as well. Some Universities have also used these recorded lectures as part of their course work. More significantly even students at NALSAR have benefitted from the recordings being made available to them.

This robust digital presence has also opened up real time opportunities for faculty members and students. For instance, content created by our faculty members when made available online often leads to them being invited for lectures and conferences at other institutions. The students involved in organizing these programs and curating the content gain valuable organizational experience and networking opportunities which often translate into internship opportunities and other avenues for collaboration.

The goal of this digital presence demonstrated our larger institutional role of promoting higher education, whereby the university reaches people who are perhaps unable to afford college education or could not get into the highly selective colleges, which offer them such exposure. By its digital education initiatives, NALSAR is serving the needs of people across different age groups who may be curious to learn about the chosen subjects. This supplements the distance education offerings which are now available in a hybrid form.

6. Problems Encountered and Resources Required

As soon as uploading of content for the public was started it was realized that the infrastructure to sustain the same would be needed. This process started with the procurement of digital cameras in 2015-16, and moved towards the full-scale upgradation of the class rooms by 2021-2022. This investment has now led to 15 venues (classrooms & conference venues put together) being ready for the delivery of hybrid instruction and recording of content. This has considerably decentralized the capacity for creating and curating content that is suitable for public consumption. Needless to say, with more content being generated, there is need to put in place a clear editorial policy on what content should be made available to external audiences. Many institutions often struggle to distinguish between academically useful and socially provocative content. There is need to develop guidelines for deciding what content meets the educational goals of the University.

7. Notes (Optional)

Going forward the University aims to further consolidate its digital presence. For example, one constructive suggestion is to create subject specific recordings which can serve both as instructional and reference material for teachers and researchers at other law colleges. Especially if the goal is to help institutions which have limited resources, the content should be so produced that it can be tailored to meet their requirements. Likewise, NALSAR can also gain academically from recorded content made available by other Universities and publicly funded platforms such as UGC e-Pathashala and SWAYAM.

Prof. (Dr.) K. Vidyullatha Reddy
Professor of Law & Registrar
NALSAR, UNIVERSITY OF LAW
"Justice City", Shameerpet,
Medchal-Malkajgiri District
Hyderabad-500 101, Telangana, India.