National School Business: Exam Logistics

Sandeep Makwana
Faculty Member, Shanti Business School, Ahmedabad

P Bala Bhaskaran
Director, Shanti Business School, Ahmedabad

Abstract
The case explores the challenges of managing centralized exams in a multi-campus educational institution without compromising on quality. It engages technological tools modestly and comes up with a solution that demands better orientation of people and fine tuning of organisational processes but offers tangible results in the bargain.

Key Words: Logistics. Academic Monitoring. Academic Management. Service Chain Management

Prologue

Col. Raj Reddy, Dean (Administration) of National School of Business was literally telephone-tied on that late October afternoon of 2008: he was making frantic phone-calls to various Campus Heads, several faculty members, the Chief Operating Officer of Global Logistics and several of its center managers to ensure that the new system of logistics that has been put in place to manage the exams happen strictly as per plan. He had engaged almost all his subordinates also on this project. He seems to have put at stake his personal reputation and credibility in achieving a remarkable turnaround in managing the examination system of National School of Business.

Background

National School of Business (NSB) was established in 1997 as private initiative of a management professional in bringing about qualitative changes in the management education of the country. Mahesh Patwardhan, a leading management consultant together with his close associates who were mostly educationists created a string of business schools with very high focus on quality of academic delivery, ethical dealings and on grooming the students to be leaders in their profession in thought and deed. They created the Bharatiya Education Trust at Pune and established a string of business schools located at Pune, Mumbai, Ahmedabad, Ranchi, Hyderabad and Bangalore. Though they started with shoe-string budget, their

intention caught the attention of aspiring students and they were able to create moderate to good quality of physical facilities and an array of well-qualified faculty members at each of the campuses. They associated with leading educational institutions in each of the cities to avail physical facilities on sharable basis but took extreme care in selecting, inducting and grooming the faculty. The faculty team was nurtured through a 100 day induction program initially and supplemented it by extensive faculty development programs during every time the student went on vacation. They also ensured that the students were selected through a rigorous process, gave them ample exposure to the industry through industry visits, frequent interactions and prolonged internships. The curriculum was benchmarked with the leading institutions in the country and it was delivered with rigorous process mapping and audit. These initiatives and the strict monitoring by Mahesh Patwardhan saw that NSB gained in brand image in the shortest span of time as a leading initiative in management education. Each of the six campuses was registered with AICTE[1]as an autonomous institution, competent to grant the diploma of PGDM. However Patwardhan insisted that management of all the campuses should be monitored and controlled jointly; the curriculum should be identical; the evaluation and certification process should be joint and uniform under the overall umbrella of the board of governors of which Mahesh Patwardhan was the chairperson. Each campus was headed by Dean whose

responsibilities included all academic activities and the modest administrative activities required to manage the campus and its personnel. The system tried to maintain student-faculty ratio of 15; this was not always achieved due to non-availability of the faculty resources of the requisite quality. Each campus had a small administrative team to help the Dean manage the campus besides the academic team. The Dean was very often referred to as the Campus Head in view of the nature of the responsibilities.

The Deans reported to the Director (Academic) who was based at the Central Office at Pune as overall in charge of all academic activities. The administrative and logistic support required to manage the entire system consisting of the campuses and the Central Office was provided by a team headed by Dean (Administration) based at the Central Office. In terms of status and position Dean (Administration) ranked at par with the campus heads. Over the years Dean Council has been evolved consisting of all the Deans and Director(Academic) which met once every alternate month, on pre-decided dates with elaborate agenda and deliberated and decided on all policy and operational matters of academic and administration. Mahesh Patwardhan, the Chairperson of NSB invariably chaired these meeting and guided the deliberations.

Whenever the campus heads came to Pune to attend the Dean Council Meetings (DCM), which generally lasted for the full day, each campus head also had to attend a Campus Review Meeting (CRM) pertaining to his/her campus. The CRM used to be chaired by Mahesh Patwardhan with Director (Academic), Dean (Administration) and the concerned campus head as members. CRM lasted for about two hours for each campus and was organized either the day before or the day after the DCM. It was through these meetings that the entire academic system was managed, monitored and controlled. With fair amount of planning of these meetings the system did make steady and significant progress in the pursuit of its objectives.

The Exam System
NSB adopted an evaluation system which envisaged 50% weight to continuous evaluation and 50% weight to the semester-end exams. This was the pattern in most of the courses offered under the semester system while there were exceptions in courses which focused on practical skills like computing skills, language proficiency, communication skills, negotiation skills etc. The semester-end exams were common to all the campuses; the system ensured that answer papers were

evaluated after shuffling them around the different campuses. NSB had adopted the relative grading system; the process of grading was done at the Central Office under the supervision of Director (Academic).

The Central Office at Pune headed by Dean (Administration) managed the overall examination system. The Campus Heads appointed an Exam Coordinator at each campus from among the faculty members available there. Every teaching faculty was expected to generate a Question paper for the semester-end exam in his/her subject and forward to the Central Office 40 days prior to the date of exam. This would ensure that the Central Office would have a bank of question papers in each subject on offer. The Central Office would engage a small team of faculty members in each subject to review the question papers received. The purpose of the review was to ensure that the question paper maintained the expected quality level and the review team would select the paper to be administered by either by choosing one from among the bank of papers or by mixing and matching a set of those. The Central Office would organise to print the requisite quantity of question-papers and dispatch the exam material to all campuses. The campuses would conduct the exams as per schedule given by the Central Office; after the exam, the answer papers would be packed and sent to different campuses as per instructions from the Central Office for evaluation.

The PGDM program was a two-year program divided into four semesters. There were between 150 and 300 students in each campus in each batch. In the academic year 2008-9, all answer papers of Pune campus were sent to Mumbai campus for evaluation; Papers from Mumbai campus were sent to Ahmedabad Campus for evaluation; papers from Ahmedabad campus went to Delhi; papers from Delhi campus went to Ranchi campus and so on in a circular manner. This was the practice evolved over the years; each year the destinations were altered to avoid predictability of the process. Each campus on receipt of the answer-papers managed to evaluate them in reasonable time and returned them to the original campus while sending a marks-list to the Central Office. It was expected that a faculty member can easily correct 50 answer-papers on a day; in practice this target was easily achieved. Normally the entire exam process used to be completed in a week from Monday through Saturday. Local couriers were engaged by the Campus Heads for dispatch of the answer papers. The Central Office was keen that within 15 days of completion of the exams the evaluation should be completed, the marks should be

tabulated, graded and ready for announcement of the results. In practice this target was never achieved. The process of evaluation and compilation of marks was taking almost four weeks; grading used to take another ten days leading to a total time span 6 to 7 weeks (after the exams) for the results to be ready. The Chairperson Mahesh Patwardhan was extremely unhappy of this situation. Prof. Vinay Srivastav, Director (Academics) felt that post-exam activities were taking too much managerial attention and time; he said that the entire system was moving from exam to exam at the cost of pursuing creative academic activities.

In search of better management of Exams

Col. Raj Reddy was asked by the Chairperson to study the situation and come up with effective solutions to bring down the time lag between exams and results. His initial study revealed the reasons for the delay. Very often the couriers were not prompt in picking up the packets from the campuses. Sometimes the packets were not ready when the pick-up person came to collect the packages. Definitely there were instances of lack of coordination between the campus and the courier. Generally the couriers delivered within 24 hours. The time taken by the faculty members to evaluate the papers varied tremendously. The number of students at each campus varied; as a result the ratio of papers to be evaluated at a campus to the number of faculty available at the campus for that subject varied from campus to campus. This resulted in the evaluation load on the faculty not being uniform across the campuses. Besides there was no system of monitoring the daily evaluations; Parkinson's Law was perhaps becoming relevant[2]. Col. Reddy also realised that it was necessary to stipulate that evaluation of answer-papers was the top priority job at that point of time. This had not happened.

Col. Reddy met many Campus Heads individually and in groups to explore their suggestions to speed up the process. He talked to many younger faculty members hoping that they would be more open to new ideas. He also initiated discussions with courier/logistic firms to explore how the situation could be improved. One of the findings was about the attitude of the faculty members. Faculty members were very sensitive in nature. They would not like to be pushed around; they would like to work at their speed. NSB, for good or bad, had adopted a predominantly process driven approach. Faculty members who had migrated from traditional university system were not comfortable with this. The traditional system was less process driven, less time-bound and less result oriented. This was the fundamental difference that Mahesh Patwardhan and his team

were trying to create. Col. Reddy realised that he had to create systems that were focused but at the same time they should not rub the feathers in the wrong direction.

Col. Reddy got an important insight when he got a mail from a faculty member, Dr Ajay Ghosh who was based at the Hyderabad Campus. Dr Ghosh wrote that Central Office needed to do fair amount of planning before the commencement of the exams. He observed that the packets of answer-papers reached the office of the campus heads where they were expected to be evaluated well in time. More often than not the packets waited there for days to be allocated to faculty members for evaluation. The reasons were either the campus head was busy elsewhere or the relevant faculty member was busy elsewhere. After the exams there would invariably be an academic break and many faculty members took leave for personal work. If the allocation of the evaluation work is made in advance, the faculty could plan his/her activities and the evaluation work in advance. Since there were limited number of faculty members in each subject in each campus, Dr Ghosh wanted Central Office to plan the allocation of the evaluation work well in advance. In a discussion with Prof Vinay Srivastav, Col. Reddy realised that the shuffling of answer-papers among the campuses resulted in unequal and disproportionate evaluation work load on the faculty. Prior planning could bring about balanced evaluation load on the faculty members.

Dr Rahul Rajaraman, a faculty member from Bangalore campus suggested that paying nominal compensation for evaluation of the answer-papers would prompt faculty members to complete the task on time. Col. Reddy discussed this matter with Prof Vinay Srivastava. Prof Srivastava was not in favour of giving compensation for correcting the papers. This matter was presented before the DCM also. Prof Srivastav argued that evaluation of students was part and parcel of the teaching assignment. Teaching a course to a set of students implied completing the evaluation of the students in that course also. The question of additional compensation could be considered only if the faculty member was required to evaluate more answer-papers than the number of students he/she had taught. This argument was well received and accepted by the DCM. Prof Sarivastava explained that normally a faculty member had teaching load of 9 credits[2] in a semester; this meant he /she was teaching 3 courses of 3 credits each at a time. Since the class size was standardized to 60 students a faculty member had maximum of 180 students at a time. Based on this argument DCM decided that a faculty member should not be asked to

evaluate more than 180 answer-papers at a time.

Col. Reddy realized that the number of faculty available for evaluation of answer-papers in a given course was limited in every campus. So it was necessary to map the faculty available for evaluation of answer-papers in each course well ahead of the exam schedule, take their confirmation of availability for evaluation and ensure that not more than 180 answer-papers reached them immediately on completion of the exam. On an average a faculty could correct 50 answer-papers a day the each faculty member should be given about 5 days to complete the task of evaluation. This should be monitored and arrangements should be made to collect back the evaluated answer-papers promptly. To smoothen the movement of the answer-papers back and forth, Col. Reddy initiated dialogues with some of the leading courier companies. He got concurrence from the DCM that one courier company with national presence should be engaged by the Central Office for the entire operations rather than each campus head engaging local couriers at the local level. Eventually, after considerable dialogues and negotiations, Global Logistics was chosen as official courier of NSB.

A New System
After extensive discussions with the campus heads and the representatives of official courier, Col. Reddy had firmed a proposal to manage the logistics connected with the examinations of NSB. The salient features of the proposal envisaged the following:

- The faculty members available to evaluate each course were limited. They were identified well ahead of the exams and their availability was ascertained. The Central Office made elaborate plans for allotment of the evaluation work among the concerned faculty members. The plan included which faculty will get how much answer-papers, from which campus on which date etc.
- Central office prepared arrangements to track the movement of answer-papers right through the evaluation process with targeted dates and actual dates.
- The logistics partner, the official courier company agreed to pick up the each packet of the answer-papers from the campus of origin to the evaluator and back in due course with absolute integrity and tracking facility at every stage.

- The logistic partner with the help of the Dean (Administration) created a 6-digit coding system. The first digit indicated the campus of origin. The second digit indicated the day of exam (Monday=1, Tuesday = 2.......Saturday=6). The third digit indicated whether exam was held in the morning or afternoon (1 for Morning session, 2 for afternoon session). The fourth and fifth digits together indicated the name of the course. The sixth digit indicated the packet number within the given course.
- Based on the prior planning made by the Central Office, the Branch office of the logistics partner (official Courier) located in the city where each campus was located, would get an instruction sheet every day. This instruction sheet would indicate the code numbers of the packets that will be made available to the courier on that day in the morning and afternoon sessions of exams. It would also list the addresses where each packet (identified by the code number) needed to be delivered. The courier will generate the address slips and paste on the respective packets as per the code numbers.
- The designated representative of the official courier would visit the campus at 12.30 pm to collect the packets of the morning exams and at 5.30 pm to collect the packets of the afternoon exams.
- Each evaluator would get the packets assigned to him/her within 24 hours of completion of the exams. Each packet was designed to carry 60 or less number of answer-papers. No evaluator would get more than 180 answer-papers (3 packets) for evaluation. Each evaluator is given five days time to complete the evaluation. Each evaluator is given the phone number of the official courier; the evaluator is expected to call the official courier if evaluation is completed before five days. In any case the official courier had been mandated to check with the evaluator from fourth day onwards. There were reward points for early completion and penalty points for delayed completion.

- Each packet would be collected by the official courier and dispatched to original campus from where it had come from. The instruction to the official courier would have the return address of each packet vis-à-vis its code number.
- Each evaluator was mandated to enter the marks

obtained in a standard datasheet along with the evaluation process. He/she was expected to print a hard copy of the mark-sheet, sign it and dispatch it along with the respective packet. A soft copy was expected to be mailed to the Central office simultaneously.

- Each campus was mandated to show the evaluated answer-papers to the students with a view to ensure transparency. Central Office on receipt of the soft copies of the mark-sheets would consolidate the marks in each course and would carry out the relative grading process. This would be followed by printing of the grade cards.

Epilogue

The new system outlined above was rehearsed and tested in a small scale at the Central Office prior to implementation. Then Col. Reddy initiated the communication exercise to implement the system. He communicated a broad structure of the system to everybody. But he made sure that each level was communicated only those details that it needed to implement the system. The successful execution of the system required clear understanding of the steps involved at various stages and proactive actions by the entire team located at multiple locations. Needless to say the new system was expected to significantly reduce the time-span between the exams and the announcement of the results. It was also expected to reduce the hiccups, minimize the tensions and bring about an overall streamlining of the processes. But all that depended on how smoothly the system was implemented. This was the prime cause of the anxiety and tension that Col. Raj Reddy displayed on that late afternoon of October 2008.

End Notes:

Disclaimer: The case has been written by Prof Sandeep Makwana and Prof P Bala Bhaskaran purely for the purpose class-room discussion. It was not intended to comment favorably or unfavorably about the management of an administrative situation. Names of persons, organizations and places have been changed to camouflage the identity of the real personalities involved.

1. All India Council of Technical Education (AICTE) is a statutory body created by Govt. of India under the AICTE Act to establish, monitor and regulate private initiatives of technical education. Management education has been clubbed along with technical education. Management Institutions set up under the approval of AICTE were entitled to award Post Graduate Diploma in Management (PGDM) which was considered equivalent to the MBA degree awarded by the Universities in India.

2. Credits are the units of measurement of academic inputs. Generally 1 credit is equivalent to 15 hours of class-room instruction. When we say a course has 3 credits it means that the course envisages 45 hours of class-room instruction spread over the academic term say semester.

Prof. Sandeep Makwana, Faculty Member, Shanti Business School, Ahmedabad
Post-graduate in management from Bhavnagar University, has 15 years of teaching management at postgraduate level. Areas of interest include marketing management, B2B Marketing, Supply Chain Management, Distribution and Logistics.

Dr. P Bala Bhaskaran, Director, Shanti Business School, Ahmedabad
Came to academia after 18 years of corporate experience. Was instrumental in building up Icfai Business School, Ahmedabad ab initio into a prominent management school in 15 years. Has many papers and cases published in refereed journals. His paper, Innovating for Competitiveness, won the best paper award at Nirma National conference in 2001; another paper, Affirmative Action – an Alternate Approach, won the best paper award at Bharatidasan Institute of Management International Conference in 2010. Areas of interest include entrepreneurship, finance, innovation, incubation, business & technology strategy, knowledge management etc. Is mentor to some entrepreneurs, non-executive director on some companies and member of academic boards of some Universities/Institutions. At present he is Director, Shanti Business School, Ahmedabad.