Digital Inclusion Initiative by Alumni helps reach over 100 Laptops to College Students in Need

In November 2020, a group of the alumni body of Lady Shri Ram College (LSR), Delhi University, set up the Digital Inclusion (DI) initiative to tackle the problem of digital exclusion faced by some students in their *alma mater*. Due to the pandemic, only online classes were being held and those without a laptop were in danger of being excluded. The idea was to ensure that laptops reached as many students in need, as quickly as possible in time for the forthcoming exams.

In just ten days, over a 100 laptops were delivered with tech support to over a 100 different locations around the country. This included identifying eligible students, launching a funding drive and finally reaching the laptops in time for their exams scheduled the following week.

The DI initiative was launched by concerned alumni, current students and the college administration who recognised the many factors causing exclusion and wanted to try and close the gap. "It was a joint effort of our governing body, alumni and staff to help students in need," says Mr. Arun Bharat Ram, Chairman, Governing Body, LSR.

All DI core team members are former students of LSR with decades of experience in diverse sectors like banking, corporate business, law, development, healthcare and more. They brought their collective desire to change the status quo and their experience running large organisations, to make DI happen swiftly and efficiently.

"Despite lacking a formal communication platform, we were able to group ourselves informally to connect with all stakeholders," said Vinita Sethi, a core DI member working in IT and healthcare. As the college was unable to use its alumni account with the required speed, other channels had to be found. Former multinational banker and not for profit professional , Suki Iyer, a core DI team member explains: "We required a partner with statutory licenses for transparent funding; a team that could be responsive to tight deadlines; vendors of stellar reputation and ability; and access to supportive logistics."

Alum-led NGO Sampark joined as the implementation partner for receipt of funds and managing the procurement and delivery of the laptops. Smita Premchander, Founder of Sampark and adjunct faculty at IIM Ahmedabad, said she was happy to join in as so many students needed support. "We are a 30-year-old accredited NGO and have the team and systems in place to follow a rigorous and transparent system for the entire process."

The funding drive was hugely aided by the efforts of corporate lawyer Madhu Khatri and former CEO of Brittania, Vinita Bali who raised both individual and corporate funds and coordinated with other alumni.

Devika Kamboh, Founder & President of the Sohum Global Foundation, Inc. stepped in to provide a donation platform for foreign donors. "It was gratifying to witness the power of LSRians raising a significant amount in two weeks to meet the funding goal," she said.

The logistical challenge was to find vendors, fast track payments, manage costs and ensure deliveries within the short time frame. Due to Covid, devices were in short supply.

Communicating with students and advising them throughout was Shafigeh Lal, an experienced materials management and logistics professional who worked round the clock to ensure delivery happened in time for the exams, and yet, "it was important that students knew how to make a plan B in case of any delivery delays," she pointed out.

Dr. Suman Sharma, Principal LSR, said: "The college constituted a committee that worked to identify students in need of digital devices. The entire LSR community acknowledges and appreciates the contribution of all our alumni and stakeholders in providing help in these difficult times."

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