Transformational Leadership Roles of a Teaching-Learning Centre in a University of Higher Learning: The Rubrics of Eminence and Ranking

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Dear Editor,

This paper enlightens the role played by the Academic Staff College (ASC) in transforming a fast-growing academic institution into an Institution of Eminence (IOE). The concept of 'Training the Trainer' within an institution for more empowerment through implementation, visibility, and international ranking, is detailed here. The importance of creating an ASC within an institution during its inception to play a mentoring role in determining its history is discussed. The logistics of such a Centre working with the Science, Engineering, Technology, and Management (STEM) disciplines/schools to prepare and empower the faculty and staff towards higher knowledge levels and ranking are elaborated as a working model. As it is said, 'Experience is not what happens to you but what you do with what happens to you'. It is not just the workshops, Faculty Development Programmes (FDP), Seminars, Conferences, and other events that lead to a higher level of learning but the outcomes like curriculum development and improvement, research outputs through publications and patents that increase the visibility, public perception and ranking of an institution. So, the ASC at the Vellore Institute of Technology (VIT), Vellore, India, has developed a feedback and outcome-based model to facilitate, train and measure the impact of Outcome Based Education (OBE) on the stakeholders. The role of Human Resources (HR) and its strategic partnerships with the ASC

to amalgamate a holistic development of the individual and the institution is illustrated with some case studies. The paper summarises the success story of VIT University and the decisive role played by the ASC in achieving the status of an IOE among the 1000 odd Universities in the Country.

The VIT University was established with the aim of providing quality higher education on par with international standards (VIT University). It persistently seeks and adopts innovative methods to improve the quality of higher education on a sustainable and progressive basis. The campus has a cosmopolitan atmosphere with students from around the globe. The experienced and learned teachers strongly emphasise knowledge, application, and values to nurture the students. The global standards set at VIT in the field of teaching and research propel the stakeholders in their relentless pursuit of excellence. In fact, it has become a way of life for VIT. The highly motivated youngsters on the campus are a constant source of inspiration to enable them to reach greater heights in the frontiers of higher education and learning. Our major resources are our inner strength from within and the diversities augmented by Memoranda of Understanding with various international universities. They provide solutions leading to national priorities and the exchange of students and faculty for joint learning/ research projects for the mutual benefit of the concerned universities. Many of our students pursuing research projects in foreign universities breath high quality into their work and have made us proud. With a confident and progressive approach, we continue our march forward to take VIT to the elite bandwidth of QS 200 Universities and within.

VIT was founded in 1984 as a self-financing institution called the Vellore Engineering College and established under Section 3 of the University Grants Commission (UGC) Act, 1956. The Union Ministry of Human Resources Development conferred University status on Vellore Engineering College in 2001. The University is headed by its founder and Chancellor, Dr. G. Viswanathan, a former Parliamentarian and Minister in the Tamil Nadu Government. VIT University, Vellore, presently has a strength of about 2200 faculty members, 1300 staff members, and about 35000 students on Campus. VIT University is Ranked among the top 601-700 Universities in the world and one of the top 3 Institutions in India according to the Shanghai ARWU Ranking 2022. The NIRF Ranking, Govt. of India 2022 rates VIT as the 9th best University, the 10th best in research, and the 12th best engineering institution in India. The engineering and Technology subject areas of VIT are 346th best in the World and the 9th best in India as per QS World University Rankings 2022 by Subject. VIT University is a rarity in being accorded the NAAC Accreditation (National Accreditation and Assessment Council) with an A++ grade of 3.66/4 in the 4th cycle during 2022. It is also ranked within the Top 200 Universities in Asia according to the QS - Asia University Rankings 2022.

The Academic Staff College (ASC) or the Teaching Learning Centre (TLC) at the VIT University was started in 2004, three years after the Vellore Engineering College became a Deemed University under the UGC 1956 act 3. The roles and responsibilities are to train the trainer, empower the trainer, disseminate knowledge to the students through the trainer or the faculty and assist in inclusive growth. This, in turn, improves the teaching and learning outcomes and the ranking and accreditation outcomes of the Institution. The ASC, Vellore, works on the feedback from a coterie of 2200 faculty, 1300 staff members, experts, other organizations, and auditors for continual improvement and measurable outcomes from training the trainer. As George Orwell says in The Animal Farm, All animals are equal, but some

animals are more equal; the need for an ASC or a TLC is felt strongly and hence justified (Orwell, 2017) . Soon after its inception, the ASC followed the Mission 10X Training Module by WIPRO, India, 2010 (Mission 10X Training Module, by WIPRO, India, 2010).

The New Education Policy and the Best Practice of ASC

About 150 developmental programmes are conducted on average each year by the ASC in multiple disciplines. The Distance Learning and the VIT On-line Learning Centres are spin-offs from the ASC over the years since its inception. The Academic Staff College (ASC) is dedicated towards creating a culture of academic excellence through faculty development activities for all our schools and centres at VIT, Vellore. The ASC collaborates with all the Schools, Centres and Sections of the university and coordinates towards achieving its purpose. The New Faculty Orientation Programme (FOP) is its flagship event conducted after the induction of every batch to enlighten and groom the new faculty according to the vision plan of VIT as they join its family. The regular faculty development programs are conducted in half-day to 5-day formats to cater to the different needs of our faculty across domains and disciplines throughout the year. The Faculty development programs are designed to ensure the all-around development and well-being of our faculty members, which would percolate down to the students during their pedagogical sessions. We also network with international resource persons and universities as well as industry experts and invite the best resource persons to our university for continual improvement. We empower our faculty to stay updated with the latest developments in teaching, research, and technology and thus enable world-class learning outcomes for our faculty, staff, and students. We enthusiastically seek to achieve our Honourable Chancellor's vision of guiding VIT to reach the elite bracket of the top 200 Institutions of the world through empowerment and implementation.

The implementation of the National Education Policy in 2020 paved the way for facilitating the avenues for digital learning and inclusive growth in the Knowledge sector, as shown in Figure 1. Sustainability of the 'digital first' method in a pandemic and post-pandemic environment was experimented with at VIT, University. The Faculty Development Programs at ASC went fully online during the pandemic year 2020-21 (The UN Sustainable Goals, 2020; The New National Education Policy, 2020).

Figure 1
The New Indian National Education Policy and its Objectives
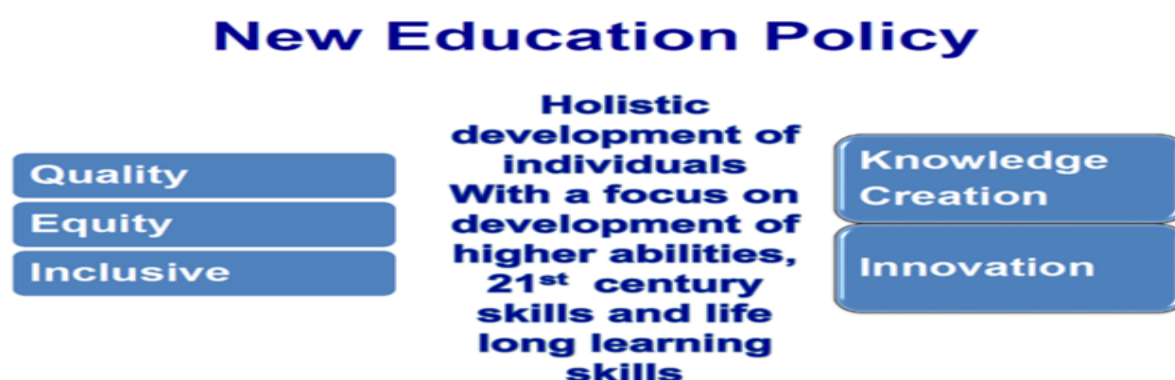
To accomplish this, a fully integrated online FDP system was created in coordination with the Software Development Cell and Computer and Technical Support Services. The scheme of this is initiative, as shown in Figure 2, which is considered the best practice of the ASC. Several new initiatives and challenges were taken up during this tragic year which bred a digital transformation in teaching and learning. Through an action research approach, we conducted dialogues with stakeholders of the University to identify the bottlenecks and to transform the ASC's vision plan and implementation methodologies to suit the needs during the pandemic. The inputs were utilized to improve content, delivery, and execution of faculty development programmes across domains of teaching-learning, research, health and well-being, new technologies, industry, IPR, and innovation. The use of Augmented Reality and Smart Boards for recording live sessions was also practiced.

Figure 2

Technology-enabled FDPs- The best practice of ASC

The ASC During the Pandemic and the New Normal

All faculty members of the campus were trained in the methods of online teaching, evaluation, assessment, and conduct of exams. The ASC also conducted special programmes to help faculty to make online classes more interesting, effective, and interactive, as well as to safeguard themselves from cyber attacks while conducting online sessions. The ASC also achieved more than 16000 faculty registrations for the FDPs during 2020-21 by increasing the relevance of FDPs through improvement in content, process innovation, and digital transformation using effective tools. This aspect of initiatives in transformative leadership and empowerment was gratefully appreciated by academia and the publishing world (Padmanabhan, 2022).

The faculty feedback received for all our programmes was highly encouraging. The resource persons were invited from premium institutions, industry, and government from India and abroad, and it ensured that our faculty were in touch with the development around the world during the pandemic times. The ASC also launched a multi-disciplinary weekend dialogue series on October 4, 2020, for an all-round and holistic faculty development and successfully completed these dialogues over 30 weekends. Apart from FDPs, ASC also conducted an online Faculty Orientation Programme (FOP) for the first time in the history of VIT University for the new faculty who could only join online. The faculty members were trained in digital

empowerment. Due reference is made here to the National Digital Library of India (2020), started first by the IITKGP campus. During this year, the ASC invited many Resource persons from across the globe due to the forced transition to a fully online mode of delivery of FDP's. Experts from industry, government, and premium universities of National and International Repute delivered lectures and conducted training sessions at our ASC events. In addition, many of our VIT experts also delivered sessions across different formats and disciplines of FDPs. The details of their numbers are given below:

National = 160, International = 33, Industry = 45, Internal (VIT) = 64.

To set a faster momentum to the drive to lead with transformative skills, the ASC developed a Fully integrated online FDP system with the help of the software and hardware teams of VIT in the year 2021. In this system, a faculty was able to view the upcoming events along with brochures with the date and resource person details. Accordingly, faculty members could register for any FDP as per their interest with a single click in their VTOP employee login portal. The FDPs were scheduled online, and the link was shared through the system with the registered participants of specific FDPs. All information related to the FDP was shared through email or SMS with the concerned participants. After the event, the attendance was posted online, and a participation certificate was generated through the system after the faculty filled in a feedback form on the FDP and its outcomes.

The flow chart illustrating the decision process to conduct an FDP by the ASC with the approval of the concerned schools and domain experts is shown in Figure 3. In addition, an attempt was made to utilize the networks of all the faculty of VIT. The ASC had earlier created an FDP requisition form accessible to each faculty in their VTOP employee login portal. By filling up this form, the faculty was able to make suggestions online to the ASC and float an FDP with resource person information. The FDP approval process was also completed online at the ASC office through the same portal. After approval, an FDP brochure was also created online and made available to all faculty and staff for dissemination to all faculty through their VTOP login. In addition, The Director's office of the ASC sends invitation emails and reminders to encourage faculty to register and attend the FDPs. Faculty coordinator certificates and Resource person certificates (internal/external) are also generated and downloaded online for claims in the Annual Performance Evaluation for staff and faculty.

Figure 3

The Decision Process Flowchart for the Attainment of OBE at the Institutional Level
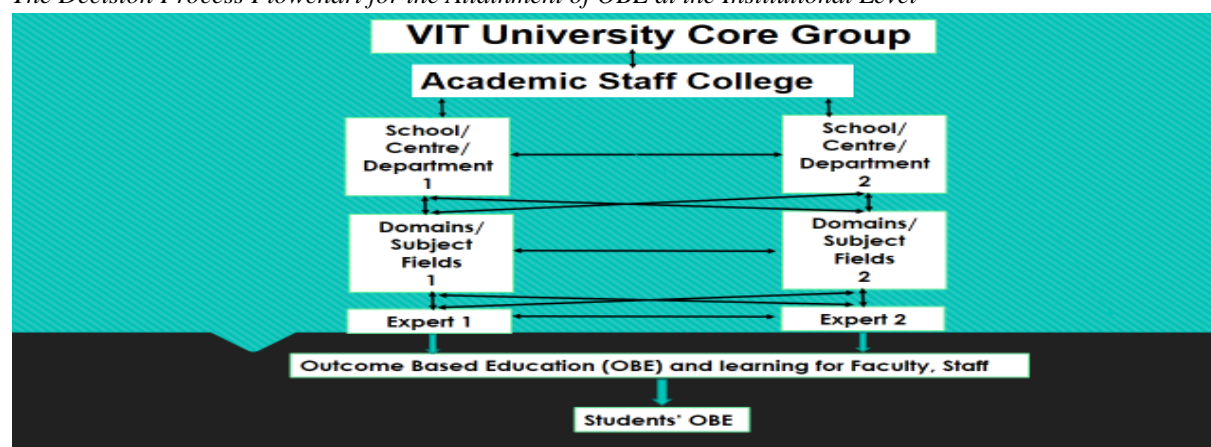
All the above initiatives helped ASC and the faculty to continuously participate in Faculty Development Activities during the pandemic lockdown period and created an excellent culture of digital learning and qualification. The Academic Staff College continued with Online programs during 2021-22 due to the Covid 2 and Covid 3 waves of the Pandemic. A total of 41 Faculty Development Programs were organized with a footfall of 2935 participants. The 2nd Online Faculty Orientation Program was successfully organized during the month of June – July 2021 for one month. Fifty seven New faculty members were trained in the various domains of teaching research structures and the history of VIT. Elaborate effort was made to complete the accreditation and the Institute of Eminence (IOE) documentation for 7 years from 2014 to 2021. The Multi Disciplinary Weekend Dialogues touched the 50 Number mark since its launch on October 4, 2020. The ASC did extensive networking to attract Resource Persons for various FDPs. The ASC specialized in the Universal Human Values programme of the AICTE (All India Council of Technical Education), and the Current Director successfully completed the AICTE-Mentor Orientation Training Program organized by the NITTTR (National Initiative for Technical Teachers Training) and the AICTE preceded by a LeAP training programme at the University of Cambridge, UK (Leadership for academicians programme, LeAP, IITKGP/MHRD/IfM, University of Cambridge, Training Module, November 2019- January 2020). The breakup for the ASC training experts during 2021-22 at VIT is given below:

National = 63, International = 8, Industrial = 7, Internal (VIT) = 9.

Number of registrations exceeded 4500 during 2021-22. Under the transformative leadership of the current Director, with the slowdown of the pandemic, 119 productive FDPs were conducted from April 2022 till December 2022. The pie chart of the monthwise breakdown is illustrated in Figure 4. During the end of the calendar year 2022, the verticals of the TLC (Teaching Learning Centre) the ASC were redefined to incorporate the Enterprise Model of a growing Institution that generates its own revenue not only to sustain but also to feed the needs of higher education aspirations of the region among the not so resourceful people. VIT draws its inspiration from the Cambridge Enterprise model (CBiG). The value systems incorporated in the new verticals emphasise the need for progress with transformative leadership and strengthen the contributions from the Indian Knowledge Systems. Personal development sessions are also held to enable the holistic development of the community, as shown in Figure 5. The entire set of activities and the modes of post-pandemic learning are depicted in Figure 6. The domains of activities and learning addressed by the ASC and the online, off-line Campus, and hybrid modes of learning facilitated a flexible environment, post-pandemic, to exploit the new avenues created by Digital Applications which augmented the on-campus platforms of learning. Again, the expectations of a higher learning system in creating awareness and holistic development are highlighted.

Identification of the subject areas by the ASC, Schools, and Departments in the University/Centres as fields requiring training is carried out with the following procedure; New areas are identified for training based on curriculum design and development needs, Fundamental research requirements, Areas for Industrial collaboration and Progress, Industry 4.0, Society 5.0 and UN sustainability goals keeping National Priorities in mind. Senior faculty at VIT and external experts (Academic and Industrial) mentor the younger faculty in forefront

areas. New faculty are recruited based on domain-specific needs. A minimum of a total of 5 days of Training is required per faculty per annum for performance evaluation.

Faculty Orientation Programmes and Well-being

The FOP Programme by the ASC is its flagship event and is intended to help the newly joined faculty members synchronize with VIT University's academic workflow without difficulty. The FOP addresses the following domains for synchronization;

- Help Faculty members understand the Vision of the Institution and the Expectations of the University.

- To Introduce Faculty Members to advanced Practices like FFCS, CAL, and PBL.

- Technologically equip the Faculty Members for Digital Academics.

- Help Faculty Members use advanced Learning Management Systems (LMS), including V-Top.

- Provide learning related to Psychological education, counselling, and teacher–student bonding programmes.

- Provide inputs for excellence in research and publications and patent filing.

- Improve written and Oral Communication skills to enable high-quality presentations and publications.

- Train the teachers towards Industry-Academia Interaction and building lasting professional associations.

- Help teachers understand the professional standards and requirements of national and international accrediting agencies to provide audit training.

- Develop the managerial skills of the faculty members.

- Preparing for Flipped Classes through Video Lectures, Virtual Classrooms.

- Help teachers develop a better understanding of various educational theories.

- Introduce faculty members to creative teaching techniques like Edutainment.

- Help faculty members excel in documentation towards filing patents and securing intellectual rights.

- Help faculty members get to know each other, work together as teams and move towards inter-disciplinary research and cross-functional studies.

- Help faculty members make their academic pursuits industry relevant and socially relevant.

- To promote the culture of Continuing Learning among academicians.

- Outbound learning activities to encourage teamwork.

- Experiencing industry visits to help them replicate them in the future.

Figure 7   provides the titles of some topics covered during the FOP. The list is not exhaustive, and constant up-gradation is carried out for every batch of new employees to benchmark with the realities of frontier pursuits and revise the roadmap with a mandatory periodicity to further the achievements and attain a higher level of professional and personal development.

Figure 4

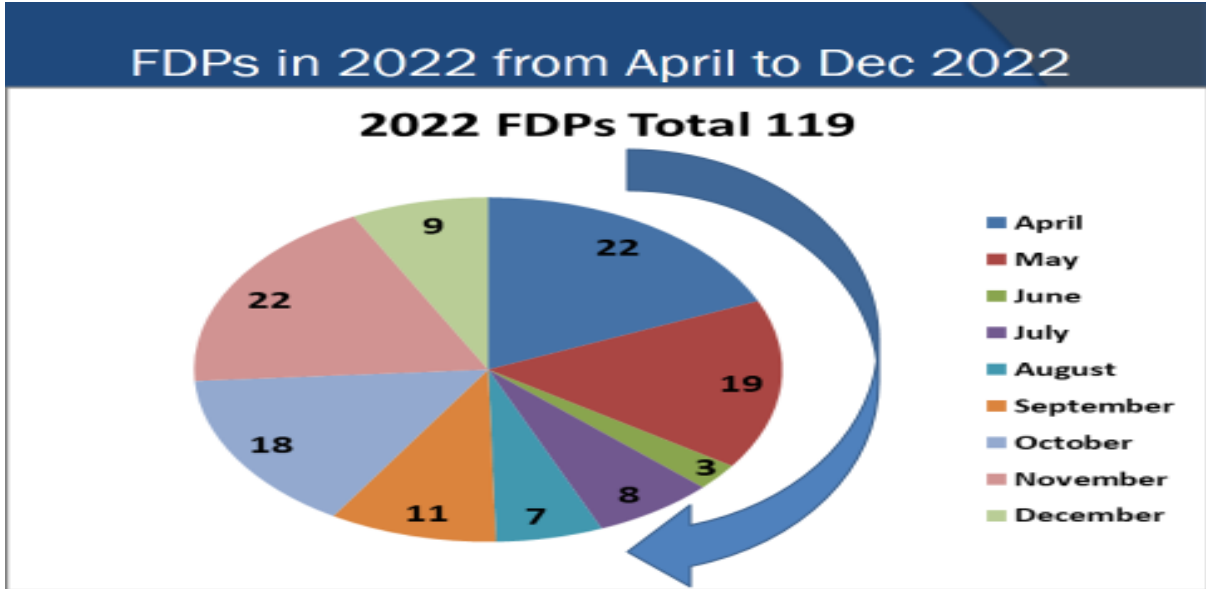*The number of Faculty Development Programmes Conducted during 2022*

Figure 5

The Enterprise Model and the New Verticals for the Teaching Learning Centre
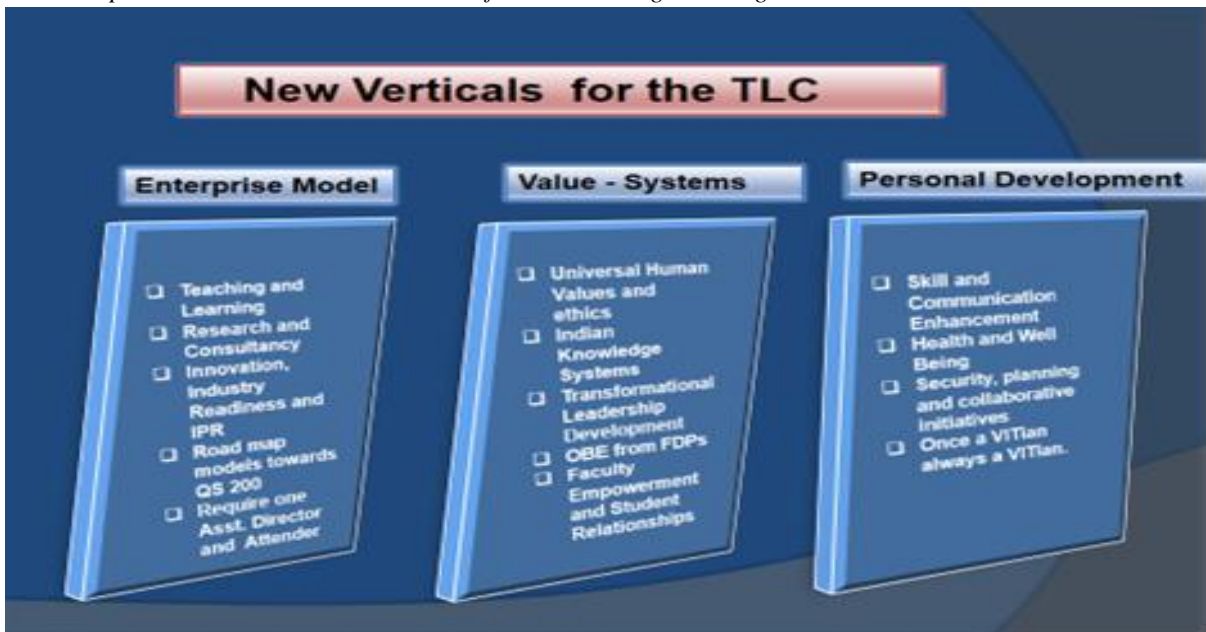
Figure 6

*The Entire Activities of the ASC in Various Modes of Learning*
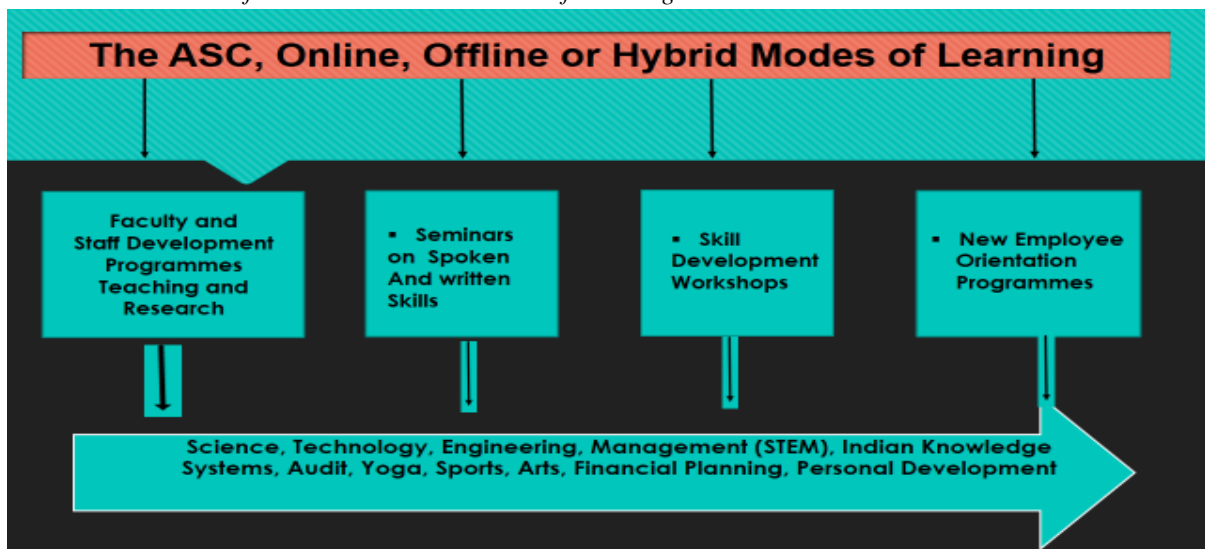
Figure 7

Some of the Topics Covered in the FOPs
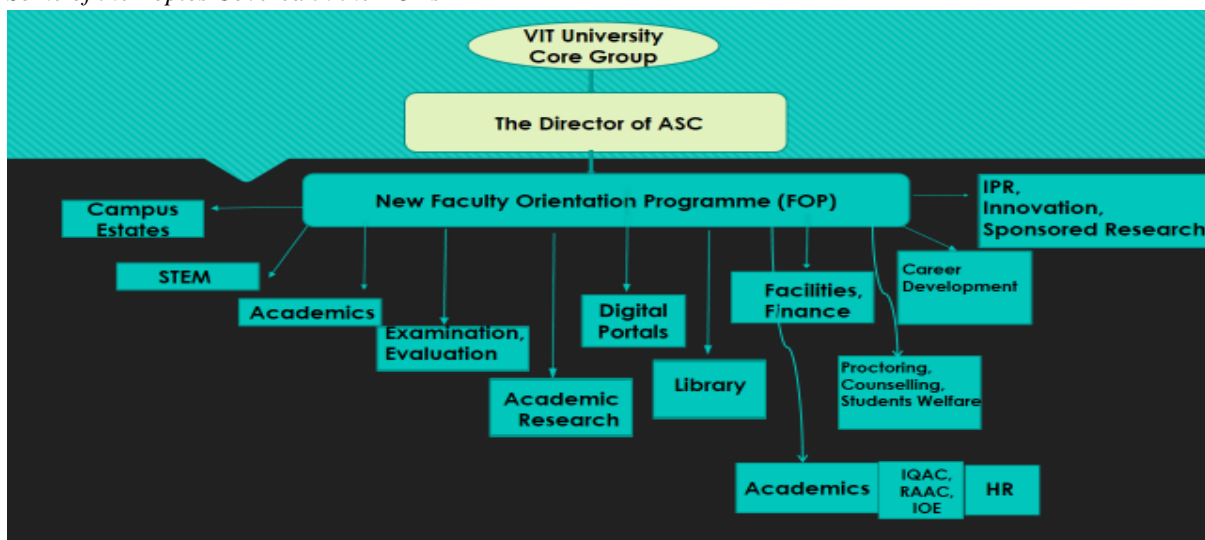
The ASC also understands the need to develop personality, communication skills, financial planning, physical and mental well-being, musical and artistic talent, counselling skills, and improve teacher-student bonding. 10 to 20 % of the FDPs are identified to target this quarter as emotional and holistic well-being is a prime concern and objective, as detailed in Figure 8. POSH, referred to as Prevention of Sexual Harassment at the workplace, is addressed by the top administration and the core group to remind the employee of his ethical conduct and professional duties.

Figure 8

*The ASC, POSH, and Extracurricular Development*
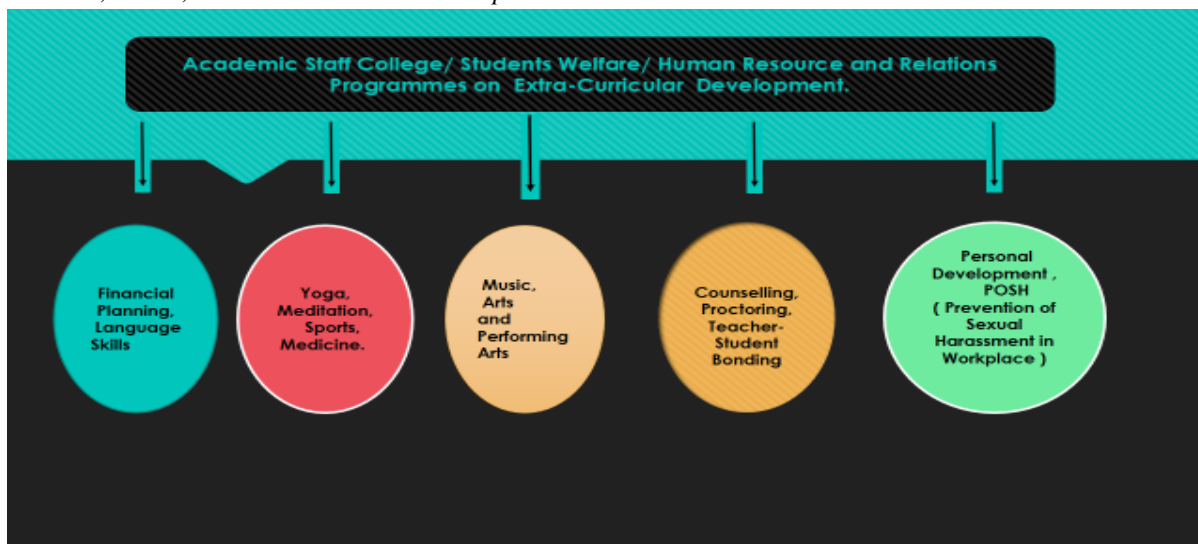
The ASC Model for Inclusive Growth

The salient highlight of this paper is the ideation and implementation of the ASC model for the inclusive growth of the University through feedback, follow-up of the FDPs, and measurable qualitative actions and outcomes.

The ASC model for the inclusive growth of VIT University is outlined in Figure 9. Its impact on the outcomes from the FDPs is measured through certain activities that result from the feedback due to the FDPs. It is said that what happens to you is not experience, but what you do with what happens to you is experience. The faculty and staff are expected to feedback on the outcomes from the FDPs, Seminars, and Skill development Programmes that contribute to measurable outcomes. These measurable outcomes are listed in the figure where specific activities like a project proposal, the expert speaker being invited as a consultant, the expert speaker's organization setting up a centre of excellence, or the topic contributing to curriculum development contribute to auditing commends, accreditation, and ranking. The outcomes also lead to more visibility and a better assessment and appreciation by academia. This continual auditable process leads to sustainable growth and societal service in VIT's pathway to QS 200 and more. VIT is now ranked high in the NIRF (National Institutional Ranking Framework) and NAAC accreditation, and even if 40 or 50 % of the 150 odd FDPs conducted per annum translate into any of the listed activities mentioned in Figure 9, it would be a major leap in the accreditation of higher learning and research. Here the, inclusive growth is achieved by the faculty and staff who would sincerely rely on feedback and outcomes from the feedback. This new normal post-pandemic model for VIT University has adapted to the necessities of Digital Education, leading to Degrees or Certificatres of Merit and additional on-campus leverage in Higher Education and learning with its assistance.

Figure 9

The ASC Model for the Inclusive Growth of VIT University
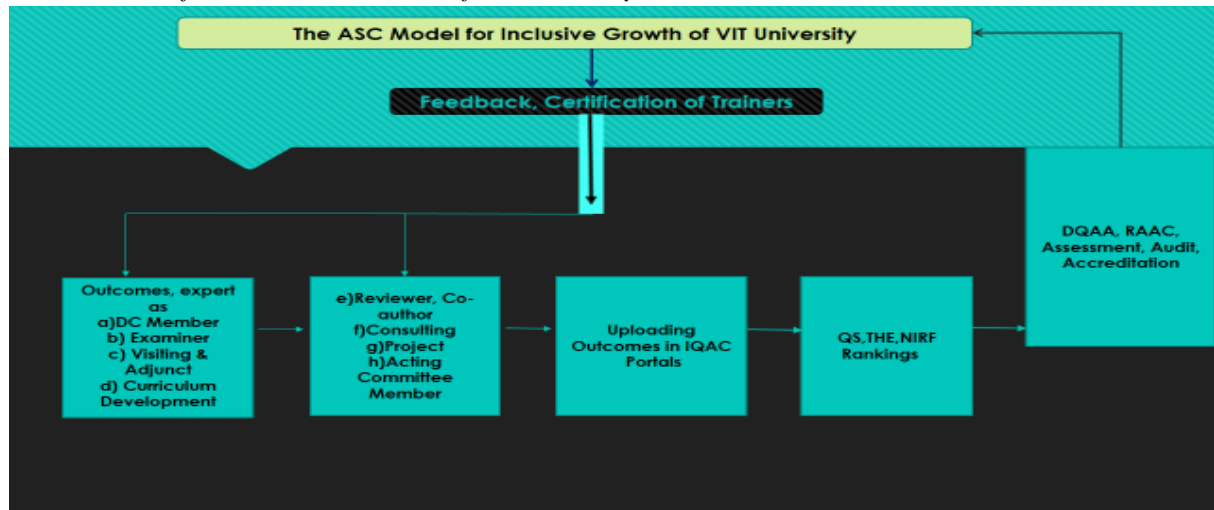
Conclusion

The following are the extracted conclusions from the presentation and the research paper:

- A brief introduction to VIT University and its Academic Staff College was given.
- The Methodologies followed by the ASC and its event management schemes were highlighted.
- The contributions and data for the pre-pandemic, during, and post-pandemic periods were presented.
- The transformative leadership initiatives of the ASC or the TLC were discussed.
- The HR roles and programmes that train the trainer were illustrated and explained.
- The flagship event, the Faculty Orientation Programme to train the new employees, was described with its expected outcomes and deliverables.
- The ASC strategic model followed for inclusive growth, accreditation, and ranking was described from a higher attainment point of view.
- The implications of the outcomes and feedback from the ASC activities on VIT's pathway to QS 200 ranking were discussed.

Declarations

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