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Extension Education - New Opportunities.

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Background:

* Let us first agree on our objective in Extension Education.

- a. Our Target group are the educationally weaker section of society.
- b. We need to give these a better quality of life, possible only through increment in their income generation capability.
- c. We have to operate in the existing financial constraints. We have to cost effective.

* **We shall recount some basic beliefs** and I hope we agree on them.

- i Information + Experience in using it = knowledge
- ii Information and knowledge, like wealth grows exponentially. Life is like a machine where we use information to generate more information, gaining knowledge in the process. More our - knowledge, faster we operate the machine - to produce more information and gaining more knowledge. This is the nature of the exponential character of learning.
- iii Learning should go from concrete to abstract; from specific to general.
- iv The real test of-knowledge/learning is in the use of acquired knowledge.
- v Learning is such faster, if the learner has a fast feed back. Example, learning to ride bicycle etc.

Present Situation:

The existence of a large section of educationally backward section has come about because of first, our caste system, which kept them out of the education activity and secondly, because of our book based education, those who are slow in learning drop sat as they need more concrete-situations to learn, so because of the exponential nature of learning as also economic activity, any new technologies, make the rich richer, and relatively-the poor poorer. Using new information is dependent on what skills we has already. The Information Technology revolution will increase disparities, if we do not specifically help the weaker sections with acquiring knowledge not just financial concessions.

We have a mindset, that because of the financial constraints, we try to save money rather than invest and get good returns on the-investment. We neither have a fast feed back system to monitor our implementation of programs, nor do we evaluate economic gains honestly.

The emerging Information Technology revolution, is affording a great opportunity for us to rectify the above situation.

The Alternative:

The new education system must have the following features.

- * It must focus on doing, not on reading about it.
- * It system have a fast/immediate feed Sack to the learner, particularly on his economic activity. He should have the economic out put of education as one of the performance indices for evaluating him and his teacher.
- * During the learning process we should be able to demonstrate the economic value of the lesson.

The Strategy:

I suggest that we start by selecting subjects for extension where the economic benefits would be easier to see and monitor. For example: agriculture/animal husbandry, service industry, and small manufacturing industries. We should avoid going to topics where learning is more paper work.

Let us take agriculture related topics as an example.

Let us see what modern technology can offer.

The electronic networking through VSAT or leased lines, using multimedia system. This has made it possible to have 2-way communication, which includes, text, voice, and pictures/video. This in simple language means the "teacher" can converse with and actually see what the learner, is doing, even from across the country/world. The contact can be very fast, in real time and the consultation can be effective- as effective as the consultant is. More over, it also gives access through services like Internet, to information from all over the world. The technic of "virtual reality" can allow the learner to explore any part of what is offered.

Financial Outlook:

* The Govt. of India has already spent crores on establishing VSAT networks under different ministries, like NICNET, ERNET, HVSET. etc. Certainly IGNOU can choose which is convenient for it. These would be district wise, generally.

* IGNOU should franchise block wise centers, with computers with sound and scanning/video facility and link these with district VSAT centres by cable/leased line or wireless. Technical advice on this may be obtained.

* The staff in these centres should get a core salary and balance linked to number of learners and their economic activity. They may be allowed to use these for giving information services- to the public for a fee, a major portion of which may be given to the staff (after deducting expenses.)

* Initially staff should be trained by actually – doing - key operations in there subject using the information facility. For example, a poultry man may be trained as a staff member for this and taught how to use his Information Technology (IT) hardware, for improving his poultry operation, which can act as a demonstration for more learners. Thus the new IT centre would be located riot in a college but on a farm. The staff will be not a graduate, who has not practiced agriculture as a vocation, but a farmer who is literate enough to understand how to use the new information. He may be assisted by a local interpreter for certain topics. Such staff if trained these same technics, will not only learn faster, but also be more effective, in asking for information and giving feed back. They will also be available for less remuneration as they get the free use of the IT facilities and learn more themselves, in addition to their own vocation of-farming or agriculture etc.

* I would like to point out that even the multimedia computers today cost less than a lakh, and about the same as a teaching staff. Perhaps much less, when you consider that the computer will work for less next, year, and staff member will need an increment and promotions, leave etc The staff strength could be effectively reduced, in number, they could be practicing farmers, and working part time or full on their our farms and benefiting by the information technology.

This is a new model and there would be many doubts and hurdles. But it is worth experimenting and then evaluating. The question is not whether we can afford Information Technology- it is whether we can afford not to use it. I think the question of educating our weaker sections is too important to be left to experts alone. We should demonstrate it to the learners and ask them whether they can benefit from it.

Most of the IT services mentioned here, such as multimedia computers, Internet, E-mail etc. are already operating in India. In addition, we can expect, global communication through handheld mobile phones from any where in the country, in the next 2-3 years. Similarly the rate of expansion of home computers in India to a -million mark is expected in the next.3-5 years.

Summary: It is suggested that IGNOU plan immediately at least for-a proto type centre in a rural area, for training through active multimedia and a fast/instant feed

back system through VSAT network. The centres should be located in production centres and not book learning centres, and demonstrate by actual use, ten the Information Technology helps in the operation.