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Distance learning helps India address its voracious demand for managers

In the middle of a class on retail and trade accounting, Ayyalusamy Kanagaraj pauses to quiz a student about gross sales and closing book inventory. Mr Kanagaraj is teaching this class from the elite Indian Institute of Management in Indore.

His students, however, are all over India. He springs a question on a student sitting in front of a computer in a New Delhi classroom. The young man squirms as Mr Kanagaraj presses him for an answer via microphone and headphone. "Do you have a short-term memory problem?" demands the teacher, whose image is simulcast on the computer screen from a studio on the IIM-Indore campus.

Fellow students sitting at the same table wear headphones that allow them to hear the rebuke. They chuckle and the young man laughs too.

Most of the 80 students in the class are sitting hundreds of kilometres away

from Mr Kanagaraj in cities across India – from Hyderabad in the south to Kolkata in the west.

But there is still no escaping the long arm of IIM-Indore's notoriously strict teachers thanks to a sophisticated distance learning network of computers, nimble software, webcams, headphones and microphones.

This virtual classroom is part of NIIT Imperia, the new management education division of NIIT, the education giant that pioneered computer training in India in 1981.

Over the years, NIIT has helped supply manpower for the country's booming IT industry and now teaches 500,000 students in a variety of fields at 3,000 centres worldwide.

With the help of technology and distance learning, NIIT and others in India are racing to train more managers and educate students in order to satisfy the country's voracious



Multi-tasking to learn management

demand for skilled workers. In spite of a vast population of 1.1bn, India has a shortage of qualified workers that is readily cited as one of the country's biggest challenges for maintaining economic growth. Teachers are scarce at all levels and there is a dearth of reputable higher education institutes.

As new industries take off, business schools are struggling to keep up with demand for managers – there are not enough high-level institutions. About 300,000 students take the highly rigorous exam for entrance into India's seven Institutes of Management but only 1,700 are admitted.

NIIT Imperia, launched in 2006, has partnerships with the Indian Institutes of Management in Ahmedabad, Kolkata, Indore and Lucknow as well as the Institute of Management Technology in Ghaziabad and the Indian Institute of Foreign Trade in New Delhi.

Tutors from these institutions remotely teach students at 19 NIIT centres across India who must first pass an entrance exam.

The courses taught last from four to 18 months and usually entail three-hour evening classes twice weekly that cater to working professionals.

When they finish, students receive

certificates in management, strategy, marketing and other disciplines.

Biju Madhavan, a 29-year-old revenue manager for Indian hotelier Park Hotels, is enrolled in a course on sales and marketing.

Full-time business school was not possible for Mr Madhavan who has a wife and baby to support. But he says NIIT Imperia allows a "great opportunity for working students to get in touch with premium institutes".

This year, NIIT Imperia plans to enrol 3,000 students, compared with 700 last year. So far, it has 2,200 alumni.

Distance learning in India has taken other forms too. In 2003, all seven of the elite Indian Institutes of Technology, along with the Indian Institute of Science began digitising their science and engineering course materials to disseminate knowledge beyond their own campuses.

This government-backed National

Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning (NPTEL) sought to set up a digital library and create online and interactive programmes.

So far, 5,000 hours of lectures on science and engineering have been recorded. The NPTEL originally wanted to broadcast lectures on Indian government television channels.

"But TV has the disadvantage of being restrictive. It's not video on demand," says Mangala Sunder Krishnan, a chemistry teacher at IIT-Madras and web courses co-ordinator of NPTEL.

Through a partnership with Google, NPTEL has posted 3,500 hours of lectures on YouTube – and it has now become the most popular channel on YouTube India, surpassing even Bollywood videos.

Amy Yee

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