Newspaper Clips

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Times Of India ND 04/02/2012 P-21

'Meta univ to start next yr'

Manash Pratim Gohain | TNN

New Delhi: HRD minister Kapil Sibal announced here on Friday that a network of universities, forming a meta-university, will allow students to pick courses from across disciplines from different institutions from the coming academic session (2012-13).

He explained that this would reinterpret the concept of a university as not just a traditional, physical space of learning, but as a repository of knowledge and information that can be delivered in multiple ways and can be accessed from anywhere and anytime.

Addressing a conference on 'One Globe 2012: Uniting Knowledge Communities' organized by US-India Business Council, Sibal said: "The 21st century meta-university would be a network and an ecosystem rather than a single brick and mortar space. Though internet and technology are fundamental to the conception of meta-university, at the crux is not a new technology but a 'new pedagogy' that is more in tune with the requirements of the society of the 21st century."

PROGRESSIVE STEP

Referring to the PM's announcement on formation of a meta-university with the broadband backbone linking institutions of excellence in specific fields of knowledge, Sibal added: "To give this idea a shape we have mounted a National Mission on Education through ICT to link in 25,000 colleges and 2,000 polytechnics for enabling e-learning and content sharing."

The minister said there is a need to open doors to reputed foreign education institutions to usher in global competition in the higher education sector as well as to expand its base. He said the government is seeking to open up establishment of foreign colleges in India through enactment of a Foreign Education Providers Act, which will allow for 100% FDI in higher education.

Needed Urgently: An Education Revolution

Kanti Bajpai

No country has transited from being poor and backward to being rich and developed without an education revolution. We in India are busy boasting about our economic growth rates and geopolitical rise but have lost sight of the deep weakness of our society. The results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2009+ test, which Indian students from Himachal Pradesh and Tamil Nadu took, are an indication of the abysmal state of our education system.

Here are the results from these two states. In reading competence, of the 74 regions worldwide participating in PISA 2009+, Himachal Pradesh and Tamil Nadu beat out only Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia. In mathematics, the two states again beat only Kyrgyzstan. In science, the results were even worse; Himachal Pradesh came in last, behind Kyrgyzstan, while Tamil Nadu finished 72nd.

Of course, when we in India get bad news in terms of global comparisons, we have the usual reactions. The first reaction is to shoot the messenger: the person or organisation giving us the bad news must be anti-Indian or have a hidden agenda. The second reaction is to become methodological purists: question the nature of the test, the sample taken, the statistics used, and so on. The third and worst reaction is nativism and exceptionalism: India has its own way, its own genius and its own time horizons.

So i have heard responses to the PISA result that go something like this. Indian education is unique and is not geared to foreign tests. Indians are "essentially" clever and the tests don't pick up the "jugaad" culture of India. There is a deep wisdom in the humblest Indian, and literacy, numeracy, comprehension and problem solving are not true education. Finally, it is too soon to pass judgment on Indian education. We in India do things gradually.

REBOOTING INDIA

Perhaps this is all correct. Or perhaps we just don't want to face reality. I have been in school and university education in India since 1989. And i can say, in all earnestness, that the PISA results do not surprise me at all even if they are not completely accurate (would it really make a difference if Himachal Pradesh and Tamil Nadu had ranked 60th out of 74?). Incidentally, there are Indian studies carried out by respected groups such as Pratham that bear out the basic conclusions reached by the PISA test.

Let's face it. Our school system, vocational education (such as it is), colleges and universities are in a shambles. At Independence, India would have ranked much higher in Asia. Today, its education system has fallen massively behind. Our universities certainly were at the top of the pile in Asia in 1950. Today, not a single Indian university ranks in the top hundred institutions of the world while there are over a dozen Asian universities on that list. Even amongst Asian IT and engineering universities, India has only half a dozen out of the top 50 institutions – when India is the second most populous country in Asia and, on a purchasing power parity basis, the third biggest economy after China and Japan.

Why such a mess? The central government, committed to spending 6% of GDP on education, spends 4%. Then there is the quality of teachers. Finland, which tops the PISA rankings, recruits its teachers from the top 10% of its graduates (yet does not pay them exorbitantly); i shudder to think where we get our teachers from. Thirdly, there is the accountability problem. The government recruits teachers, pays their salaries, and cannot get them to perform. And this when government teachers are paid twice the salary of private school teachers. Why the lack of accountability? The teachers' unions are too strong, legal protections for teachers seem unassailable and the government just does not care enough to challenge either.

The problems of our colleges and universities merit a separate column altogether, but government interference in their workings is a large part of the problem. Having said that, the ordinary Indian too is to blame, especially those who are educated and well off. Until we insist on high quality education for all Indians, little will change. PISA 2030 will be the same story as PISA 2009.

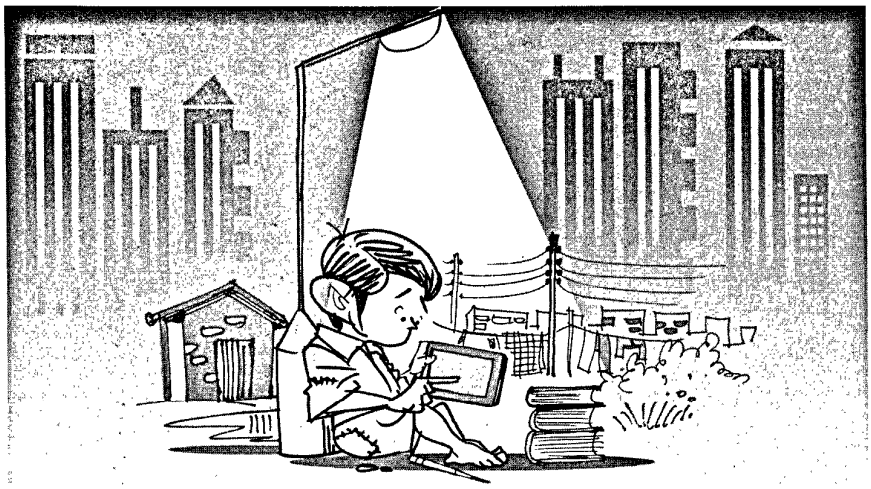
Financial Express ND 4/02/2012 P-9

AAKASH TABLET

Dawn of a new era

Revolutionary as the Aakash tablet is, it is a means to an end—greater and more inclusive education. Of greater significance is the government's need to bolster rural internet connectivity to harness the full potential of the low-cost tablet

PRADEEP UDHAS



Coincidental as it may seem, October 5, 2011, was a significant day for both the US and India. The former saw Steve Jobs—one of the greatest innovators of technology—breathe his last on this day, ending an era in American history. The latter witnessed the launch of the world's cheapest education tablet—Aakash, touted to be priced at $35 or ₹1,700 only—on the same day, marking not only the progress of India's technical know-how but also signalling the dawn of a new era in the way education is imparted in India.

With its affordable price, this initiative by the Government of India hopes to reach students across rural and urban areas alike and bridge the digital divide. It would deliver an enhanced learning experience and help students gain a multi-dimensional view of the subject while studying with features like video, audio and images apart from just textual content.

There is considerable interest towards cloud computing, which has the potential to allow students to work and research from anywhere across the world. Leading colleges and universities are aiming at synchronising their content to make it device agnostic. Tablets provide the desired portability and constant connectivity. The students' work and projects can be stored to a centralised location and the work can be accessible from any device. With the advent of tablets in the education sector, books can be made available in digital format, which would make the process of updating the syllabus easier. Students would no longer have to carry physical textbooks and can have central access to all the course material on a cloud repository, which can be accessed through tablets.

Aakash has an intuitive, easy-to-use interface that helps in providing a user-friendly and enriching learning experience to students. Easy usability of the device helps rural students—who have never had access to such computing devices before—move up the learning curve quickly and with considerable ease. In addition to this, the affordability of the device further adds to its attractiveness. The device made record breaking sales in the first week of its launch and racked up over 1.4 million pre-orders, which is a clear testament to the buzz it has created in the market.

Much before Aakash was even conceived, innovations in educational hand-held devices were already under way in India. During the last decade, the Indian education sector has been drawn towards digital content. As blackboards and chalk gave way to smart boards in the classrooms, educational hand-held devices mushroomed alongside increasing connectivity; the demand for digital content grew. Hand-held devices are increasingly being considered the new-age medium of education for students in schools and colleges. However, the steep pricing of other devices, like Edutor Advantage, iProf, myDrona and iBerry, stifled their proliferation. Cost remains one of the biggest barriers in increasing the spread of education in rural areas. In such a scenario, the launch of Aakash promises to take learning and teaching at a different level by providing digital opportunities for all.

However, soon after the launch of Aakash, it got mired in controversies due to its low-end technical specifications. Viewing this, DataWind—the manufacturer of Aakash—stopped the production of the tablet and announced the launch of its next and improved version, Ubislate 7+, which is expected to hit the market by March-end and would be priced at ₹2,999. The new version would run on an upgraded version of Android and will have a better processor as well as longer battery life. The newer version also aims to address the problems of poor connectivity in rural areas with an additional feature of GPRS connectivity. Now, the users would not have to depend solely on Wi-Fi signal strength and internet plans and can switch to GPRS when the connectivity is poor. It remains to be seen whether this version of the tablet would be able to fulfill the requirements of several institutions and eager customers who are waiting patiently to embrace this technology.

But let us not lose the forest for the trees. Aakash is just the beginning and is a means, not the end. Over time we will have more number of tablets, with advanced technical specifications, that will be of satisfaction to the student community and institutions alike. What really is of a larger implication here is the entire idea of connectivity, and probably the largest initiative of connecting the student community in India across states, cities and villages. Whichever way we look at it, it is a revolution in the way the younger generation of this country will communicate with each other and the rest of the world. This itself is worth every penny being spent.

And the facts bear out—in spite of the not-so-great specifications, the first version of the Aakash tablet was sold-out within a week and Datawind claims to have received retail orders of over ₹700 crore!

In the global arena, various technology players are making strides to re-invent textbooks and move towards digital content. Devices such as the Kindle and iPad have targeted the e-book market. Recently, the industry witnessed a renewed focus on this segment with Apple's launch of the iBooks 2, an application for e-books and iBooks Author, a Mac application to create a textbook for iBooks 2. Apple is hoping to redefine the future of education and self-publishing by replacing physical books, which are too big and heavy, quickly obsolete and lack interactivity. With India now holding the tag of introducing the cheapest tablet in the world, it is opening up several new prospects for tech companies to replicate similar technologies for the price-sensitive Indian market and provide an equal footing to Indian students.

Technologies and products like these are going to enable India to achieve inclusive growth by providing equal learning opportunities to students from urban as well as rural areas. While the market for tablets in India is still at its infancy, increasing connectivity will propel the growth of these devices. With approximately 540 million potential students in the 0-24 age bracket, there is immense potential for these devices. So rest assured, the next generation is not just going to learn different things, they will learn it differently!

The author is head-IT & ITeS Practice, KPMG

Times of India Chennai 03.02.2012 P-2

Tailor-made IIT course to train engineers for metro rail

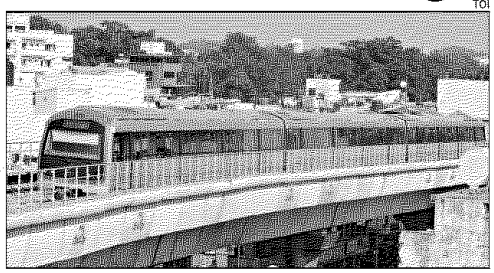
Sandhya Soman | TNN

Chennai: IIT-Madras has started a postgraduate diploma programme in metro rail engineering and management in association with Chennai Metro Rail Ltd (CMRL). The first batch of students of this customised course will pass out in a few months and join CMRL.

"We need qualified people who can handle both the technical and management sides of the operations. The one-year course will help us get a talented workforce for the future," said a senior CMRL official.

The BTech graduates who are doing the course learn the nuances of contract management, including how to float tenders for projects. "There are a lot of management lessons and I can apply whatever I learn as soon as I start working," said S Bhavya, a student.

The technical aspects are equally important. "It is a highly specialised field that needs engineers who have a good understanding of civil, mechanical, electrical, and electronics and communication engineering," said R G Robinson, associate professor, civil engineering, IIT-M. The course has been structured so that students will learn more about these streams.



TOI

ON THE RIGHT TRACK: Apart from IIT professors, retired Indian Railways professionals have been roped in to provide training in signalling and station design

Apart from IIT professors, retired Indian Railways professionals have been roped in to provide training in signalling and station design.

The only other institution that offers a similar course is IIT-Delhi, which has been running a programme in association with Delhi Metro Rail Corporation for about two years.

IIT-M has been running an MTech programme for infrastructure company Larsen & Toubro (L&T) for more than a decade. "L&T is huge and needs people with training in technical and management components," said Robinson.

Since metro rail engineering is a specialised course, only students with a BTech in civil, mechanical, electrical, or electronics and communication, can apply. Candidates are shortlisted based on their score in the Graduate Aptitude Test in engineering and a qualifying examination. Those selected receive a monthly stipend of ₹20,000 from CMRL.

"The first batch, which will pass out in July 2012, will have to work for CMRL for the next five years. Students find it attractive as it is a core engineering area and the metro system is coming up in many Indian cities," said Robinson.

Students also see opportunities in the field. "There is also scope for the students to work abroad later as most major cities have metro rail systems," said a senior official.

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Indian student accuses Harvard of race bias

Washington: An Indian-origin student has levelled allegations of racial discrimination against two prestigious American universities — Harvard and Princeton — in their admission policy, prompting a probe by US authorities. The unnamed Indian-American student, who was among the top students in his California high school class and whose family originally came from India filed the complaints against the two institutions. Acting on the complaint, the US education department is probing whether the Harvard and Princeton Universities discriminate against Asian-Americans in undergraduate admissions, Bloomberg reported.

The department's office for civil rights is investigating a complaint it received in August that Harvard rejected an Asian-American candidate for the current freshman class based on race or national origin, a spokesman said. The agency is looking into a similar August 2011 allegation against Princeton as part of a review begun in 2008 of that school's handling of Asian-American candidates, said the spokesman citing department policy. The new complaints, along with a case appealed last September to the US SC challenging preferences for blacks and Hispanics in college admissions, may stir up the longstanding debate about whether elite universities discriminate against Asian-Americans, the nation's fastest-growing and most affluent racial category, the report said.

Harvard "does not discriminate against Asian-American applicants", and doesn't comment on the specifics of complaints under federal review, spokesman Jeff Neal said. PTI

US mulls H-1B revamp to woo skilled workers

Amidst pending immigration reform, the US has proposed several steps — including changes in the F-1 and H-1B visas — to attract foreign skilled workforce, a move likely to benefit professionals from countries like India. PTI

Times Of India ND 04/02/2012 P-23

New habitable planet discovered

22 Lights Years Away, The Super-Earth Most Likely To Hold Water & Host Life

Washington: International astronomers said on Friday they have found the fourth potentially habitable planet outside our solar system with temperatures that could support water and life about 22 light-years from Earth.

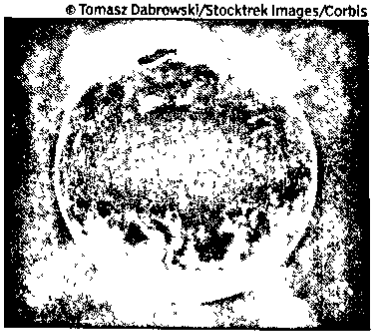
The team analyzed data from the European Southern Observatory about a star known as GJ 667C, which is known as an M-class dwarf star and puts out much less heat than our Sun.

However, at least three planets are orbiting close to the star, and one of them appears to be close enough that it likely absorbs about as much incoming light and energy as Earth, has similar surface temperatures and perhaps water.

The new rocky planet, GJ 667Cc, orbits its star every 28.15 days — meaning its year equals about one Earth month — and has a mass at least 4.5 times that of Earth, according to the research published in Astrophysical Journal Letters.

"This planet is the new best candidate to support liquid water and, perhaps, life as we know it," said Guillem Anglada-Escude who he conducted the research. The theory about water, however, cannot be confirmed until astronomers learn more about the planet's atmosphere.

Other planets circling the same star — which is part of a three-star system — could include a gas-giant and an additional super-Earth with an orbital period of 75 days, but more observations are needed to confirm that. AFP

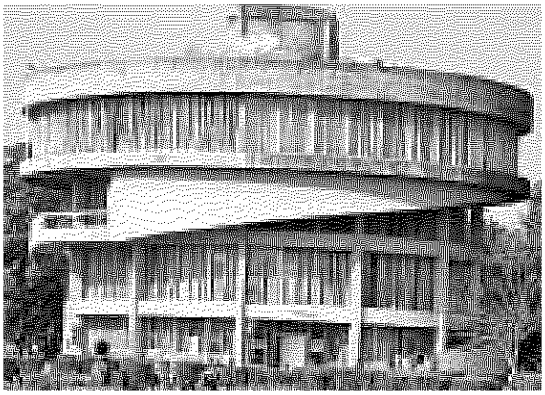


OUR NEW HOME?

Dainik Bhaskar Chandigarh
03.02.2012 P-2

दुनिया की नजर में पीयू है हाई इम्पैक्ट यूनिवर्सिटी

दुनिया में 380, भारत में आईआईटी और आईआईएससी के बाद तीसरे स्थान पर



सत्येन ओझा | चंडीगढ़

द यूनिवर्सिटी ऑफ वेस्टर्न आस्ट्रेलिया की ओर से कराए गए एक सर्वेक्षण में पंजाब यूनिवर्सिटी को भारत में हाई इम्पैक्ट इंस्टीट्यूशन की श्रेणी में तीसरी रैंक हासिल हुई है। हाई इम्पैक्ट यूनिवर्सिटी इन साइंस के लिए दुनिया भर की 507 इंस्टीट्यूशन पर सर्वेक्षण कराया गया था। दुनिया भर में पीयू 380वें रैंक पर है। भारत में पीयू से आगे सिर्फ आईआईटी कानपुर और इंडियन इंस्टीट्यूट ऑफ साइंस बेंगलुरू ही हैं।

पीयू का दर्जा आईआईटी रुड़की, आईआईटी खड़कपुर और मुंबई से भी ऊपर है। आईआईटी मद्रास चौथे, रुड़की पांचवें और खड़कपुर एवं मुंबई को छठवें स्थान पर रखा गया है। हाई इंपैक्ट यूनिवर्सिटी में यूनिवर्सिटी ऑफ बर्कले को दुनिया की सर्वश्रेष्ठ साइंस इंस्टीट्यूशन का दर्जा दिया गया है।

साइंटिफिक रिसर्च इन इंडिया ने बताया नंबर 1

साइंटिफिक रिसर्च इन इंडिया के करेंट ट्रेंड में पीयू को साइंस के क्षेत्र में नंबर 1 यूनिवर्सिटी का दर्जा दिया गया है, जबकि साइंस एंड टेक्नोलॉजी एजुकेशन के क्षेत्र में काम कर रही इंस्टीट्यूशन के क्रम में पीयू को देश में चौथे पायदान पर रखा गया है।

हाल ही में यूजीसी ने बनारस हिंदू यूनिवर्सिटी को यूनिवर्सिटी विद पोटेंशियल फॉर एक्सीलेंस का दर्जा दिया है, लेकिन साइंटिफिक रिसर्च इन इंडिया के करेंट ट्रेंड्स में बीएचयू को पीयू के बाद पांचवे क्रम पर रखा गया है।