

# Innovative Adult Education through Distance Learning

By

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## Abstract

*In 1982 AIOU started an ODA assisted Basic Functional Education project for Rural Areas (FEPR) in 150 villages of Dinga, Tehsil Kharian, District Gujrat, as a test bed area aimed at helping the rural communities of Pakistan improve their quality of daily life through distance education techniques. Benchmark surveys of the areas provided in-depth information about the practices, aspirations and characteristics of the people for developing an effective methodology of passing information through non-broadcast media. The objectives were to help the rural masses improve their standard of living through betterment in economic, social and health conditions, practices, implement an appropriate strategy for rural areas, replicate the methodology to other regions and educationally deprived areas by extending AIOU outreach system; develop more felt need based and field tested courses, collaborate with GO's/NGO's concerned with rural development, and act as a resource center for them. In 1985 16 courses developed for FEPR became AIOU's regular program called Basic Functional Education Program (BFEP). BFEP methodology does not have face-to-face instructional by trained teachers. The courses prepared centrally at the campus, were presented to groups of 15 - 25 learners in their villages using simple low cost media. The methodology involves training of group leaders within each learning group, one of its members act as the group leader, whose task includes convening study meetings and presenting the course materials. The course material is in the form of flip charts and audio cassettes, a unit being material for one meeting with the*

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*audio cassette recorded in the local language having intervals for learners interaction and discussions problems. The flipcharts provide the visuals for the recorded information. The handouts are reduced flipcharts on a single sheet given to the learners at the end of the meeting to take home.*

## **Introduction**

In 1982 the Allama Iqbal Open University Islamabad embarked on an unusual and challenging venture of exploring if the university could work with rural communities by helping them through distance education techniques of improving the quality of day- to- day life of the villagers.

This venture was conceived as a project called Functional Education Project for Rural Areas (FEPR). The project resulted from the discussions between the university, the British Development Administration (ODA) and the International Extension College (IEC). The initial project proposal was based on AIOU's responsibility for functional as well as non-formal education and developing strategies for providing effective courses for functional education through distance teaching in rural Pakistan.

The project's field location or test bed area was selected with great care. It had to be truly rural, with close integration with other activities of the university and not be too remote or inaccessible. Finally it was to be a representative of a large part of rural Pakistan so that the materials developed and tested for the area would have wide applicability elsewhere.

After some exploratory field visits the project was set up at Dinga, Tehsil Kharian in Gujrat district about 180 km from Islamabad and half way between the capital and Lahore. Initially the project focussed on 50 villages but later it was expanded to 150 villages. A field base was established in the project area for starting a research programme to help with the course development at several important stages as given below:

## **Background research**

This involved formal and informal surveys during the early stages of the project for the familiarization of the field staff with the local

communities, to introduce them to the project's aims and methods, and to gain an in-depth understanding of their needs, priorities, constraints, and capabilities as potential learners. This initial research activity helped in deciding about the selection of appropriate course titles and methods and level of instruction.

## **Knowledge, Attitude and Practice (KAP) Studies**

Studies were carried out with the primary intent of finding existing knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP). These studies, therefore, formed basis for courses to be introduced, topics to be covered in a particular course, and were designed to find out what the potential learners already knew, did and felt about each topic and how it might be presented to them.

## **Pre-testing**

A systematic developmental testing of the course outlines and draft versions of the material was done with the sample of potential learners. This was to see whether any changes were needed before the final reproduction of the material.

## **Pilot Testing**

Finally, each course went through a pilot cycle with a small numbers of learners. This cycle looked at the course as a whole with monitoring and evaluation for assessing its learning effect and immediate impact, and to find out if any changes were needed for ensuring the attainment of course objectives, and satisfactory working of the outreach system.

Field research in this way played an important role in the production of course materials and thus became one of FEPRAs most important contributions to the University. FEPRAs research activities were highly specific to individual courses and target groups. They were geared to providing information of immediate use to the course production teams.

## **Course Topics**

Basic functional courses were prepared on the basis of felt and expressed needs and included courses like practical topics as Child Care,

Poultry Keeping at home, Electricity in the villages. The topics chosen were relevant to the needs of mainly illiterate adults, and were identified through local background research and in response to earlier course cycles. The third cycle was launched on a larger scale with the involvement of the Nation Building Departments in course design and in outreach. After the third cycle plans were made for the transition from a research and experimental project to an ongoing programme of basic functional education.

## **Essential Features of Course Methodology**

The project was aimed at helping rural communities to adjust to changing social and economic conditions and to improve the quality of life in the villages. The immediate target group consisted of rural men and women aged 15 and above, many of whom were illiterate and had little or no experience of formal education. The methodology was designed to be beneficial to them, in a cost-effective way using distance teaching methods to:

- acquire new ideas and skills in topics which they see as relevant and beneficial
- relate these skills to their local experience
- put what they have learned into practice through group or individual action

Teaching was done using low cost media, audio-cassettes, illustrative flipcharts, handouts which were reduction of the flip charts. These materials were prepared by course teams at the AIOU campus on the basis of action research in the field with the target audience.

## **Course Development and Course Presentation**

The concerned academic departments formed course teams. They comprised a distance teaching specialist, subject specialist, designer, audio producer, and a member of the field research team and a representative of any collaborating agency. Each team started its work on the first draft for pre-testing, based on the initial research and KAP studies.

The courses were divided into units, each containing the materials needed for one meeting. These comprised:

- an **audio cassette tape** which carried the main teaching content of the unit, together with instructions for the group leader
- **Flipcharts** with illustrations designed to hold the learners' attention and to clarify and reinforce the message on the tape.
- a set of **handouts** containing reduced versions of each flipchart illustration printed onto a single sheet which was distributed among learners at the end of the meeting as a reminder of what had been learned and discussed.
- **other materials** such as models, charts, pictures, and other items used for demonstrations or practical exercises.
- a **unit guide** to help the group leader to prepare for the meeting and introduce the unit.

## Learning Strategy

The **materials** were presented to learning groups of 15-25 members, in each meeting in their village at the time and place of their choice. One member of the group was appointed as a group leader and trained on how to convene the study meetings, present the materials, use the cassette player, lead discussions, carry out practical exercises and provide feedback. The cassette player, rechargeable batteries and flip charts were given on loan basis and collected back at the end of the course cycle.

The **teaching methods** emphasize learner participation and active learning through group discussion and practical exercises. The discussions help members share their existing knowledge, skills and experience where these relate to course topic. Additionally the learners were encouraged to look critically at the new ideas presented through the course materials, to consider the relevance of these ideas to their own circumstances and to put them into practice through group decision making and action.

A **feedback** system includes the recording of questions and comments from each meeting by the group leader and the course producers responded to these in an audio-cassette program played during the final meeting.



# The Outreach System

The functions of the outreach team included:

- setting up learning groups
- selecting and training group leaders
- distributing the course materials
- supervising and monitoring course activities
- gathering feedback from groups and communicating this to the course producers at campus.

The outreach system personnel were involved as follows:

- A field worker (FW) an employee of the university in addition to other field activities as specified above also acts as a supervisor for 5 assistant supervisors(AS). An assistant supervisor supervises 6 learning groups. A group leader (GL) has 20 learners(L). The system is illustrated in Figure 1.

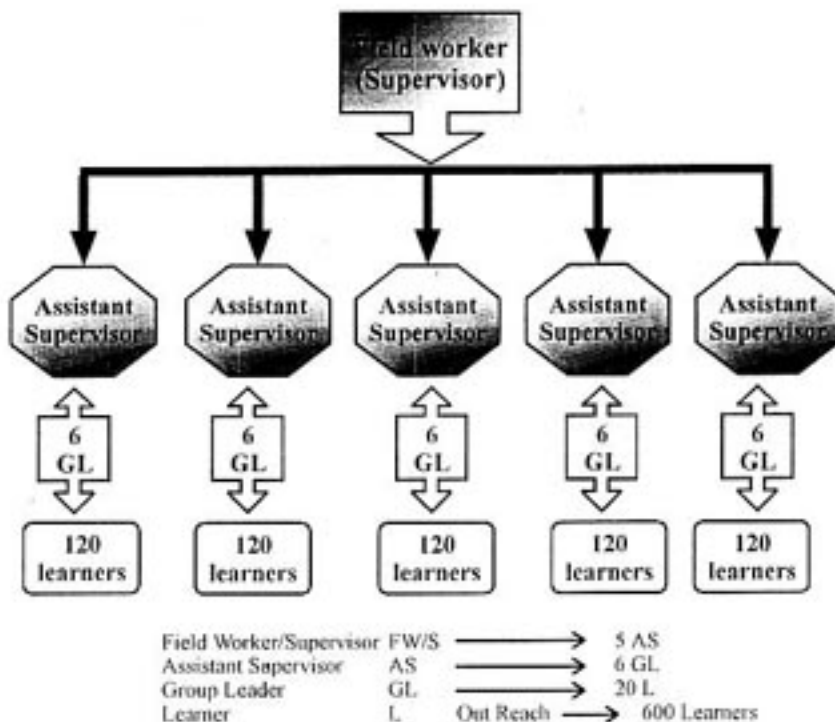


Figure 1: Outreach System

## Selection of Group Leaders and Their Training

The outreach team selected two candidates as nominated by the group. The criteria for selection were explicit that they should be respected members of the local community, they should not have other heavy commitments and they should not be teachers. The team also looked for members, who showed self-confidence and enthusiasm for the activity and enjoyed social position in the village. Finally where possible and other criteria met, the team preferred those who were literate mainly because they would be able to complete the feedback forms after each meeting without any help from supervisors.

The reasons for training two people from each group through a six-day workshop were as follows:

- It allowed the outreach team to select the better candidate on the basis of his /her performance during the training.
- Training in pairs gave greater confidence, and in the case of women, helped to overcome the cultural problems of women travelling outside their villages.
- It provided a safety net for groups in which the leader dropped out for personal reasons either during the training or in the middle of the course cycle.

The aims of group leader training were:

- To introduce the trainees to the university, the program of functional education, and its aims, the learning methodology, and the current cycle of courses.
- To explain the functions of the group leader in organizing meetings, presenting the materials, leading discussions, and practical exercises and reporting on each meeting
- To help the trainee acquire and practice the skills needed to perform these functions, and in particular to develop competence in leading discussions.
- To take the trainee through the course materials, unit by unit and to help them prepare themselves to lead the discussions and exercises in each meeting
- To explain the administrative aspect of the course cycle, including its timing, how the groups would be supervised, how to

collect course registration fee, complete attendance registers and report forms.

The study group methods used in training the group leaders were on the same pattern as they themselves would use later in their groups. This technique was used to build their self-confidence.

## **Supervision and Monitoring**

The close supervision by the outreach teams proved very effective. The role of the assistant supervisor was more crucial. The planning and staggering of the meetings for each group was planned in such a way that the groups on the average met twice a week. This arrangement helped the assistant supervisors attend every one of his groups meetings throughout the course cycle. Each assistant supervisor received a schedule of meetings for their area showing them where they should be each day. This close supervision also helped in remedying the problem of replacing cassette player batteries.

The outreach team members aimed to spend two days a week with each of their assistant supervisors by accompanying them on their visits to group meetings according to the schedule for the day. One of the days was arranged in advance and the other visit could be any day during the week. This arrangement had both the element of regular monitoring and the surprise element of unscheduled meetings proved advantageous for the less conscientious assistant supervisors.

## **From Project to Program**

The message from the FEPR evaluation team clearly states:

"We believe that the foundation of an effective system of basic rural functional education using distance teaching methods has been laid. The information and guidelines are also there for the university to build on that foundation a far reaching program in the future, but this should be a development program, not a series of small-scale replications, if the impact is to be both educationally significant and economically sound (IEC/AIOU, 1985, p.21).

The program is now a regular university program known as Basic Functional Education Program (BFEP) located in the Institute of Mass



Education (IME). The program has adapted and extended its distance teaching methods for Mass Education For example preparing courses for Haj Pilgrimage, education for the inmates of the five prisons in Punjab. The program has also begun to explore ways of extending the breadth of course offerings available to village learners. This is being done partly by considering the development of more advanced or second stage functional courses (AFEP), and partly by seeking to link existing courses with the program of Functional literacy. The following courses have been developed for BFEP use:

1. Livestock Management
2. Electricity in the village
3. Poultry keeping at home
4. Agriculture credit
5. Childcare I
6. Childcare II
7. Sanitation
8. First Aid
9. Better yields (for barani areas).
10. Better yields (for irrigated areas)
11. Population education
12. Women's health
13. Hajj training program
14. Poultry farming (for Northern Areas).
15. Livestock diseases (for Northern Areas).
16. Family health
17. Environment problems

## **Collaboration with outside Agencies**

The BFEP staff over the years has trained a large number of staff working in national and international development agencies and projects funded by those agencies. The major ones are:

UNICEF  
UNESCO  
USAID  
World Bank  
Pak German Based, Peshawar  
British Council  
Overseas Development Authority (ODA)

World Vision  
Agha Khan Rural Support Program  
Ministry of Religious and Minority Affairs  
Ministry of Social Welfare  
Pakistan Literacy Commission  
Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission  
Ministry of Local Government and Rural Program  
All Pakistan Women Association  
Catholic Relief Services  
Punjab Social Services Board

Finally, AIOU as an institution which has acquired appropriate skills for this work is in a special position to lead the way in developing and applying programs, which contribute to providing basic education for all. IME has taken another leap in the year 2000 by having the field base take the education beyond basic education by serving as a test bed for the Middle level education, which is a missing link in the educational ladder of the rural masses.

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