

DISTANCE TEACHING IN RURAL PAKISTAN

by

Dr David Warr
FEFRA Consultant, 1982-85

Can distance teaching contribute directly to rural development? Can a university reach ordinary men and women in villages and help them to improve their day-to-day living conditions? If so, how can this be done?

On 30th June this year, Allama Iqbal Open University completed a three year research project designed to explore these questions. Known as the Functional Education Project for Rural Areas (or, more conveniently, as FEFRA) this project was run in collaboration with the International Extension College, U.K. and with financial assistance from the British Overseas Development Administration.

FEFRA was set up :

1. to devise and try out ways of gathering information about rural learners:—
 - (a) to help decide what types of course will benefit the village community and what distance teaching methods are appropriate;
 - (b) to help course producers to decide on the content, level and treatment needed for particular courses;
 - (c) to show, through the pre-testing of course outlines and materials, how successful a course is likely to be and what revision may be necessary; and
2. to develop and test an outreach system which will carry the courses effectively to village learners using distance teaching techniques.

Using a small test-bed area of some 50 villages, the project has conducted background research studies designed to give an in-depth understanding of the educational needs, the priorities and capabilities of rural communities. FEFRA has also assisted the University's course production staff by helping to develop a distance teaching methodology appropriate to village learners and has carried out a series of studies of their existing knowledge, attitudes and practices with respect to five basic functional courses.

Course outlines and draft versions of course materials have been pre-tested on village samples, and completed courses have been put through a number of pilot test cycles and evaluated. Finally, an outreach system which carries the courses to village learning groups has been developed and tested.

Five basic functional courses for rural adults were developed by the University during 1983 and 1984. These were :

- Child care (for women)
- Electricity in the village (for men)
- Poultry keeping at home (for men and women)
- Livestock management (for men and women)
- Agricultural credit (for men)

The first three were produced by adapting existing courses designed for higher levels. 'Livestock management' was added in response to suggestions made by participants in the earlier course cycles, and 'Agricultural credit' was initiated and developed in collaboration with the Agricultural Development Bank of Pakistan.

The aim of providing these course was to help learners to adapt to changing living conditions and prevailing pressures in the village by adopting new ideas and practices. (Note that this did not include teaching people to read or write. The basic functional courses were seen as being distinct from literacy work which requires different teaching methods. Future plans however envisage the possible coordination of the two approaches so that illiterate learners who have taken one or more basic courses may go on to learn to read and write.)

The courses were open to all interested adults and were conducted through village meetings in groups of about 20 learners. Simple audio visual aids were used, appropriate to largely illiterate target audiences and the need for materials which were robust, easy to operate and independent of a reliable source of mains electricity. For each meeting an audio-cassette (recorded in the local language) introduced the course topic and structured the learning process. A flip-chart* containing pictures and diagrams (with simple captions for those who could read) helped to hold the learners' attention and to clarify and reinforce messages on the audio tape. A variety

*10-15 pages of good quality cartridge-paper held by a wire spine in board covers. This construction enabled the flip-chart to be self-standing on a table, with the pictures large enough to be seen by a group of twenty. The group-leader turned the pages when so instructed by the audio-tape.

of charts, models and other materials were used in demonstration and practical activities, and a hand-out sheet, incorporating smaller versions of the flip-chart illustrations, was used as an aid to revision and as reference material to be taken home by each learner.

The materials were presented by one of the learners whom they had appointed as Group Leader. This person was also responsible for gathering the group for each meeting, leading discussions and practical learning activities and providing feed-back to the course producers. A week's training in these skills was provided in a nearby village, and the Group Leader received guidance during each meeting through instructions included on the tape. Note that the Group Leader was not a teacher or a subject matter specialist. In this distance teaching programme the teaching skills and information were provided by experts at campus and were presented through the course materials themselves and not the group leader.

In all the courses the aim has been to get the learners to examine critically in group discussion the new ideas and information presented to them, to relate these to their own experience and local village circumstances and to decide what follow-up action to take. Discussion was therefore an important component in every meeting and this, combined with practical exercises, helped to involve all participants actively in the learning process. Where possible the information was presented, not simply as a series of instructions (what you should or should not do), but included explanations of the underlying principles so that the learners could understand why instructions were offered and could apply them intelligently. An important aim of each course has been to help people to identify common problems and to decide on how possible solutions might be found.

Developing distance teaching materials for village learners requires special skills. Aided by the feed-back gathered by FEPRRA during pilot-course cycles, AIOU's production teams have been learning how to communicate more effectively. The starting point must be the learners' existing knowledge, attitudes and practices. Information must be presented for their point of view and not in a theoretical, text-book manner. Long passages of 'lecturing' on the cassette tape do not lead to effective learning, and need to be broken up by drama, recorded interviews or group activities. The presentation of important facts needs to be carefully paced, and repetition and active learner involvement are essential. Illustrations may need explaining and must be carefully linked with the audio tape.

FEPPRA has developed an outreach system designed to carry the courses to large numbers of village learning groups in a cost effective way. A small mobile team of University field workers (four members and a leader) working with locally recruited part-time Assistant Supervisors can reach approximately 5000 learners in two cycles per year. Field trials have demonstrated that each field worker can supervise up to six Assistants who in turn can supervise five or six groups situated in nearby villages. This gives a ratio of 600 or more learners per full-time field worker.

The mobile team starts each cycle by setting up learning groups and training group leaders and Assistant Supervisors (who have often been Group Leaders themselves in previous cycles). A schedule of dates for course meetings is prepared which will enable the Assistant Supervisors to visit each meeting of each their groups on foot or using local transport.

Each group holds a preliminary meeting at which learners are registered (on payment of a nominal fee) and the members then decide at what time and where they wish to hold the course meetings. They then listen to a short introductory tape which includes a welcoming message from the Vice-Chancellor. At this meeting the Assistant Supervisor delivers the course materials to the Group Leader.

For a number of reasons it is important that AIOU collaborates closely with the agencies, both government and non-government, already involved in rural development. For one thing, the basic functional courses should be designed to complement and support, not to duplicate or conflict with the work of local extension agents. Secondly, if the courses are to encourage learners to apply new ideas, it is essential that the necessary facilities and long-term support are available in the areas concerned.

Thirdly, although the University could, in the manner described above, reach many rural learners, it could not through its own resources expect to make a significant impact on the nation's 45,000 villages. With the assistance of local field staff of other agencies however, the courses could be carried to a much larger population.

Collaboration is therefore needed during the design and production of the courses, in the presentation of the courses and in long-term support for the learners after the courses have been completed. FEPPRA has found an

encouraging response to these ideas from a number of organisations. Representatives from the departments of Health and Livestock and the Women's Division have participated in course production, WAPDA (the organisation responsible for electricity supply) has offered to print course materials. The Provincial Livestock Department and Agricultural Development Bank have directed their local field agents to participate in the presentation of courses and have begun what is hoped will be a fruitful relationship with the participants in poultry, livestock and agricultural credit groups.

Careful monitoring of the courses over three pilot cycles revealed a number of positive facts :—

- (a) Villagers are attracted by the courses (the majority of villages approached decided to form at least one learning group and some were involved in more than one cycle of courses).
- (b) They will attend group meetings regularly (the average drop-out rate was in the order of 10% — a very low figure even though the courses were short).
- (c) They can learn from the courses (as demonstrated by knowledge tests administered by interviews with a sample of learners before and after each course).
- (d) They do apply some of the advice offered in the courses: participants have, for instance, got their children vaccinated, purchased improved breeds of poultry, monitored their use of electricity through meter reading, given their cattle balanced feed and applied for agricultural loans.

These findings, which have been persistent, over the three cycles are very encouraging. They are, of course, only a start. There is much room for improvement, particularly in the quality of the learning materials, and one of the most important lessons learned has been the need to base course production on carefully executed action research.

The University is now considering ways of incorporating the lessons learned through FEPRRA into a long-term programme of basic functional education — a programme that could eventually include second stage courses, literacy courses, and courses for urban as well as rural learners. Not

all are agreed on how to fulfil the University's brief to cater for the uplift of the masses and doubtless the debate will continue. In the meantime, however, a workable methodology and outreach system have been developed and the AIOU has the knowledge, skills and experience to make a very valuable contribution to rural Pakistan.

A more detailed account of the FEPRAs experience will be published by the International Extension College early in 1986.