

THE VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY

Models &
Messages

Lessons from
Case Studies

CASE UPDATES

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NetVarsity, India

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A commercial enterprise



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



International Institute
for Educational Planning

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List of abbreviations

NIIT	National Institute of Information Technology
SEED	School for Employee Education

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Developments since 2003

1. NetVarsity and its context

NetVarsity was created in 1996 and represents one of the earliest learning portals on the Internet. Since the writing of the original case study, NetVarsity has become significantly more attached to NIIT (National Institute of Information Technology) Limited, its parent company. This is, perhaps, at variance with the original thought that it would behave like an autonomous university on the Internet.

At the institutional level, NetVarsity has become an integral and inseparable part of NIIT's education programmes, as will be described shortly.

At the national level, the number of Indians enrolled in NetVarsity has exceeded 500,000, while at the international level the number is around 60,000. Table 1 shows the distribution of enrolled and active students in NetVarsity. As is evident from the table, the dropout rate for registered students continues to be very high.

2. Organization and current programmes

Considerable changes have taken place in the organizational structure of NetVarsity. Content, technology and marketing are no longer considered to be separate departments and now exist as a single entity. The structure has been flattened: a single head looks after all aspects of the organization. The number of people employed by NetVarsity has reduced from forty to about seventeen.

Table 1 Top ten countries from where NetVarsity students are registered

GROSS		ACTIVE	
(20 May 2000-31 March 2004)		(7 July 2003-31 March 2004)	
Country	Reg. nos.	Country	Reg. nos.
India	499,600	India	80,175
United States of America	9,028	Vietnam	1,370
Nigeria	6,794	Nigeria	877
Philippines	6,054	Ghana	527
Ghana	3,545	Malaysia	359
United Arab Emirates	3,009	Bangladesh	347
Bangladesh	2,700	United States of America	346
Nepal	2,634	Nepal	327
Vietnam	2,550	Sri Lanka	308
China	2,468	Malaysia	267

Source: NetVarsity management, Udai Singh.

The current programmes offered by the NetVarsity fall into two categories. All students enrolled for regular (classroom) courses at NIIT are now automatically registered for NetVarsity and are addressed through a special website.¹ This section of the Varsity offers customized interfaces for NIIT students and provides a great deal of value to them in their regular coursework.

The general section of NetVarsity continues to provide Information Technology courses for beginners as well as professionals. There are also preparatory courses for students who wish to sit for examinations conducted by vendors such as Microsoft or Oracle.

3. Administrative issues

As a result of the restructuring, the operating costs of NetVarsity have reduced by about 50 per cent. This, when combined with the increase in revenue due to the induction of NIIT students, has resulted in overall improvements in profitability.

The technological infrastructure continues to be similar to that described in the original case study. The servers are located in Mumbai, India, and the hardware infrastructure is provided by an external company.

All content is owned by NetVarsity and appropriately copyrighted. In addition to in-house content creation, much of the content rights are also purchased from NIIT and its subsidiaries.

4. Academic issues

It is perhaps in this area that the greatest lessons have been learned. The head of NetVarsity is of the opinion that the closer the pedagogy is linked to that of a ‘physical’ course, the better the results will be. She reports that courses are more structured and, at the same time, more ‘human’. Personalized mentoring and numerous additional services are offered to learners. E-learning is no longer viewed as an alternative to the classroom but an invaluable supplement to it. Collaborative environments are vital to course completion and this is achieved through ‘batches’ of learners, a ‘tech chat’ section and other e-community building exercises.

As a result of the new approach, course completion rates have increased to 45 per cent; this despite the fact that the worldwide figure for completion of pure e-learning courses continues to be no more than 25 per cent.

5. Cooperation

NetVarsity collaborates with several subsidiaries and departments of NIIT. Some of the most important collaborations are with Enterprise Learning Solutions (dealing with corporate customers), Global Learning Business (classroom Information Technology education, NIIT’s main line of business) and Human Resources. NIIT has a facility called SEED (School for Employee Education), which is now closely linked with the NetVarsity through a programme called e-SEED, which enables employees to take courses online while continuing to work.

¹ <http://www.niitstudent.com>

Thirteen external companies have also taken customized courses for their employees through the NetVarsity.

6. Future developments

One of the most important projects planned involves the setting up of an online 'Placement Cell' that will enable students to find and prepare for appropriate jobs, after completion of their courses. This cell will provide career counselling, conduct mock interviews and provide intensive online mentoring of students undergoing professional work experience with companies or in the first year of their jobs.

7. Lessons learned

In conclusion, seven years of experimentation with e-learning has enabled NetVarsity to become a self-sufficient organization. In the process, it has learned that the Internet can make traditional, instructor-led training more effective, rather than replace it altogether. E-learning makes traditional learning more flexible, personalized and empowering for the learner.