DIGITAL ACADEMY FOR THE POOR AND MARGINALISED

Equally Able Digital Academy of Digital Empowerment is providing co-learning and co-working space for Generation Z from Rural Areas in India

New Delhi, October 10, 2021 — The Equally Able Digital Academy of Digital Empowerment envisioned as a co-learning and co-working space that encourages creative minds of Generation Z from rural areas of India to explore and solve local problems have started its operations and begun to show initial results. The Academy Centres in Nuh (Haryana), Puducherry and Ghazipur (Delhi) have started reopening and re-operating from August 2021, post Covid-19 reopening of society and unlocking from lockdown and curfews due to Covid-19 fallouts.

The Academy, a joint initiative of Digital Empowerment Foundation and the EquallyAble Foundation, was planned to launch its activities during Covid-19 pandemics in mid-2020, but had to restrict its activities (largely offline based) due to pandemic protocols and limitations.

The agenda of inclusive and sustainable growth cannot be achieved without including the 600 million people of India, residing in the rural and underdeveloped areas, unconnected and deprived of basic needs. This Equally Able Digital Academy of Digital Empowerment project stems from the belief that the hinterlands of India have immense knowledge that is untapped and excluded from knowledge networks and economy. The lack of accessibility to infrastructure, creative and educational tools among those with social-economic and physical disabilities has resulted in the adoption of foreign solutions versus the creation of indigenous solutions to local problems. Solutions need to be inclusive and incorporate the sensibilities and voices of all. This is what the Equally Able Digital Academy of Digital Empowerment has been envisioned for.

Unlike formal education and vocational centres where students are required to follow a set curriculum and engage in rote learning, this project supported largely unstructured learning space allowing local adolescents and youths including those with physical disabilities to decide their own projects, take ownership of their education and create innovative solutions for their communities.

The project has been conceptualised as an inclusive maker space to enable digital solutions to social, economic and environmental problems through inquiry, experimentation and innovation. The academy project hosts 3 major components – (i) A Makerspace; (ii) A Life Skill Training Centre and; (iii) A Virtual training Centre.

The Academy activities are now concentrated in Nuh District of Haryana, Puducherry in Southern India and Ghazipur in Delhi. The virtual learning centre is hosted at https://www.defacademy.org/.

The project aims to help communities through - Broadening experiential learning at grassroots level and enhance rural innovations through exploring interests in science, technology, and creative arts; Enabling understanding the concepts and application of STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, Mathematics); Inculcating curiosity, analytical, design computing, mathematical and team working skills; Enable to leverage design thinking approach for identifying real time community problems and creating tangible contributions to rural development; Enable to inculcate a bottom-up approach to problem-solving and nurture a sense of inquiry; Enable adolescents and youths to equip themselves for further studies and careers aligned with the 21st century demands.

The project mobilises and targets communities that have been excluded from mainstream society due to their economic, social, physical, cultural and political, geographical conditions. These include: Economically Weaker Sections (EWS); Women and girls; Persons with disabilities (PWDs); Scheduled Castes (SCs); Scheduled Tribes (STs); Sexual Minorities; Non-script communities; Minority groups. The project largely focuses on children, youth and adults with an age group of 10 to 24 years of age.

The project from October 2020 till September 2021 reached out to different beneficiaries with different age groups and academy supported activities. Under Makerspace, the project reached out to 277 students and youths with 28 STEM related activities with 14 facilitators from different expertise areas in all these 3 project locations. 1 overall curriculum with 16 modules and activities developed and designed. The modules cover Science, Art and Craft modules. A total of 3 Makerspace infrastructure setups were executed. Furniture, Makerspace kits (STEAM) kit, Internet facility, laptop, and projector were made available in these learning centres.

Under life skills training, the project reached out to 421 beneficiaries with 21 activities supported by 14 resource persons in activities including screen printing; Video Editing; Craft; Photography Workshop ; Videography Workshop; Social Media Workshop- How to promote your Business through social media; English language and Digital Inclusion Workshop; Blogging Workshop; Career Counselling; and Mask Making.

Under virtual learning, a total of 35 students into two batches were trained in digital, life and soft skills from Nuh location. This online learning was conducted through Academy LMS platforms.

Post Covid, the Equally Able Academy of Digital Empowerment is committed to engage adolescent boys and girls, youths and young women in creative skills, life skills for self-development and for continuous problem solving locally with innovative ideas and solutions through the academy learning centres and online platform.

NOTES

EquallyAble Foundation

EquallyAble was founded in 2001, since then has been empowering people with disabilities globally through access to education, equipment, employment and inclusion. Over the years, we have transformed the lives of thousands of individuals with disabilities around the world. Details at https://equallyable.org/

Digital Empowerment Foundation

DEF is registered as a not-for-profit organisation under the Indian Societies Registration Act, 1860, to carry out this mission of empowering people digitally. DEF constantly acts in the creation of information empowerment, equitable communities by providing digital access to information, knowledge and contextual capacity. Details at https://defindia.org/