



HOW THE PRIVATE SECTOR DEVELOPS SKILLS

AISECT: TRAINING RURAL YOUTH TO BRIDGE THE ICT GAP

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SUMMARY

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SUMMARY	The All India Society for Electronics and Computer Technology (AISECT) was created to bridge the information and communications technology gap between India's urban and rural areas. AISECT empowers youth with skill training and digital know-how; it also uses the franchise model to build an entrepreneurship network. The focus is on the most marginalized and disadvantaged sections of the population. AISECT provides end-to-end services for skill development, including support for community mobilization, counseling, training, assessment, certification and placement. Recently, AISECT joined with the National Skill Development Corporation to train and skill 1.3 million students in the next 10 years.
KEY FEATURES	AISECT is recognized for its multi-purpose centres. This model is one of its most innovative features. The centres are run by rural youth and graduates from AISECT programmes and are utilized for providing B2C and G2C services along with training activities. The centres quickly become sustainable and bring communities closer to useful and relevant services that were otherwise missing. Placement support provided by the organization uses online and offline mediums such as the IT Yatra, RojgarMantra.com and Rojgar melas. AISECT has designed and developed high-quality content and used multimedia and other IT methods to deliver services to students, increasing both accessibility and affordability.
RESULTS	AISECT currently operates more than 12,000 centres across India, serving 27 states and three union territories. It has trained more than 1.7 million students and created an entrepreneurship network of 12,000 rural men and women. In addition to training programmes, AISECT provides a range of services to its rural customer base including e-governance, banking and insurance. AISECT has been recognized by the World Bank and National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM) and awarded the Skoch Corporate Leadership Award 2013 and the TiE Lumis Entrepreneurial Excellence Award for a sustainable and scalable business.



Summary

The All India Society for Electronics and Computer Technology (AISECT) was born out of a massive demand for skilling in computer technology during the information technology (IT) boom in 1990s. AISECT's founders identified a need to impart skill-based knowledge and ICT penetration in rural areas. They launched AISECT in 1985 with a mission to impart technological knowledge to the rural, semi-urban and tribal areas of the country and promote ICT-based training and services to empower people, generate employment for youth and unfold entrepreneurship-based initiatives to create an inclusive society.¹ Its mission was also to impart skill-based vocational training to rural youth to close the country's huge skills gap between rural and urban youth.

Three decades later, AISECT operates 12,000 centres at district, block and *panchayat*² levels across 27 states and three union territories as well as offices in more than 30 cities. AISECT has a presence throughout India and a brand name of its own. With a variety of programmes and educational courses offered in each of its centres, AISECT has reported training more than 1.7 million people, generating more than 12,000 rural entrepreneurs, creating employment avenues for more than 75,000 people and empowering the lives of some 3 million people through innovative services. AISECT has joined NSDC with the aim of training 1.3 million individuals in the next 10 years, to contribute to the training requirements of the country.³

AISECT's business model is simple yet innovative. With huge mass appeal, its reputation is due to branding and marketing techniques such as the annual IT youth mobilization campaign (Kaushal Vikas Yatra) and e-learning teaching aids and content. AISECT's business model features a multi-purpose centre and a franchising system comprised of rural youth and graduates from the AISECT centres. This model has helped to create a network of more than 12,000 men and women entrepreneurs and has earned them several accolades including "the most sustainable and scalable form of IT penetration and popularization in India" by the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) and the World Bank. In order to make education and technology more inclusive and accessible, AISECT is now targeting schools and higher education institutions.



Context

The 1990's in India saw revolutionary changes such as the IT boom and globalization of the economy. Cities experienced unprecedented growth due to IT development, industrial expansion and job opportunities; however, the rural poor had little or no access to education. The founders of AISECT comprehended this uneven growth and the opportunities in skilling the rural poor. A group of scientists and engineers formed a core group called the Society for Electronics and Computer Technology (SECT) to undertake computer literacy and electronic awareness programmes in the schools of Madhya Pradesh. Among them was Mr. Santosh Choubey, the Founder and Chairman of AISECT, who was fascinated by the revolutionary idea of computer technology. However, his work in rural India made him realize that more than 70 percent of the countries' population, which resides in these remote locations, knew nothing about this. His love for science and for empowering rural people inspired him to bridge this great 'IT divide' and, after leaving civil service in 1981, he founded AISECT in 1985.⁴

The positive results of computer education carried out by AISECT among rural populations attracted the attention of the Government of Madhya Pradesh, which partnered with AISECT to provide classes to 150 rural schools. Mr. Choubey realized that in order to reach the most disadvantaged populations, it is important to communicate in local languages. He wrote a book in Hindi on computers called *Computer ek Parichay* (Introduction to Computers) that sold 100,000 copies in the first year, thereby validating the demand for IT education in India. Determined to take computer education beyond schools, Mr. Choubey mobilized a group of volunteers from the literacy movement to demonstrate IT and run computer learning centres for villagers in the evenings. He set up a small centre in Bhopal, capital of the state of Madhya Pradesh, and started developing training content in an offline format (CDs and manuals) and in local languages.⁵ By 1995, AISECT had approximately 1,000 centres in Madhya Pradesh.

AISECT expanded by motivating its own graduates and other unemployed youth to join the AISECT network and spread IT training under a franchise model. The vision was to reach the remotest parts of India using innovative ICT tools adapted to local contexts. After growing gradually, AISECT became a robust IT training and educational services network. Also, AISECT recognized the importance of vocational education and worked with the National Institute of Open Schooling⁶ to develop IT curriculum.⁷

The largest area of AISECT's work is skill development, divided into projects (backed by the central and state governments) and skill development (student-paid model). AISECT is also involved in financial inclusion through banking kiosks, e-governance services (through a unique identification or 'UID' for every Indian resident), schools and private institutions. AISECT aims to provide lifelong learning, enterprise development and contribute to empowerment of the communities that they work with.⁸

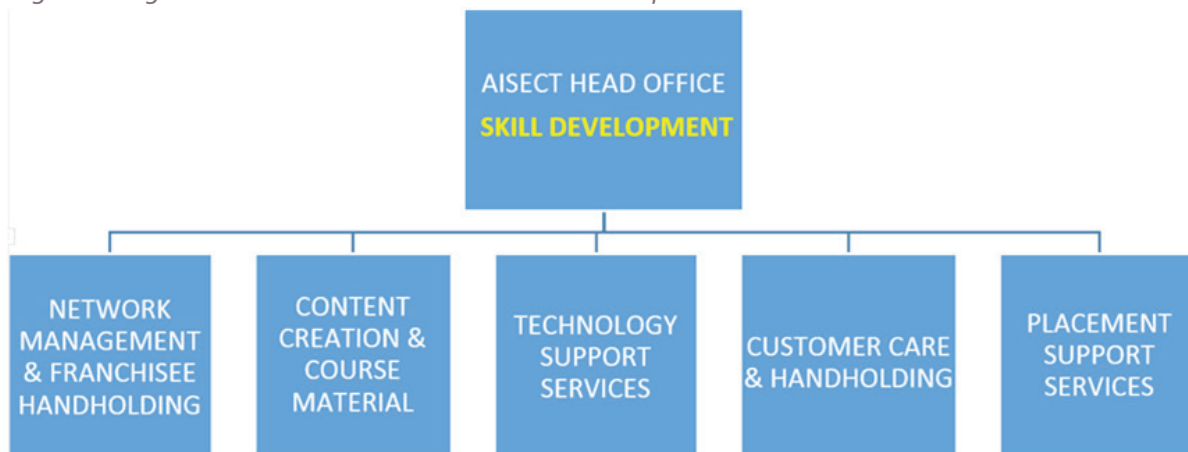
Today, the urban/rural divide recognized by AISECT's founders continues. Though the country is moving towards a modern tertiary and service sector job market, the rural poor (who consist of 69 percent of India's population) remain constrained by their socio-economic conditions and face substantial barriers to higher income and social mobility.⁹ Educational interventions coupled with employment generation for the unskilled rural workers is imperative to address the skill deficit, which poses a huge challenge to economic growth.¹⁰



Organizational setting

AISECT is an ISO 9001:2008 certified organization based out of Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. AISECT has professionally-managed groups that coordinate activities related to education, skill development, content creation, financial inclusion, grievance redressal and placement. It has a parallel office in New Delhi and state and zonal offices in all its operating areas. In the area of skill development, AISECT has a well-designed and managed team as depicted in Figure 1.

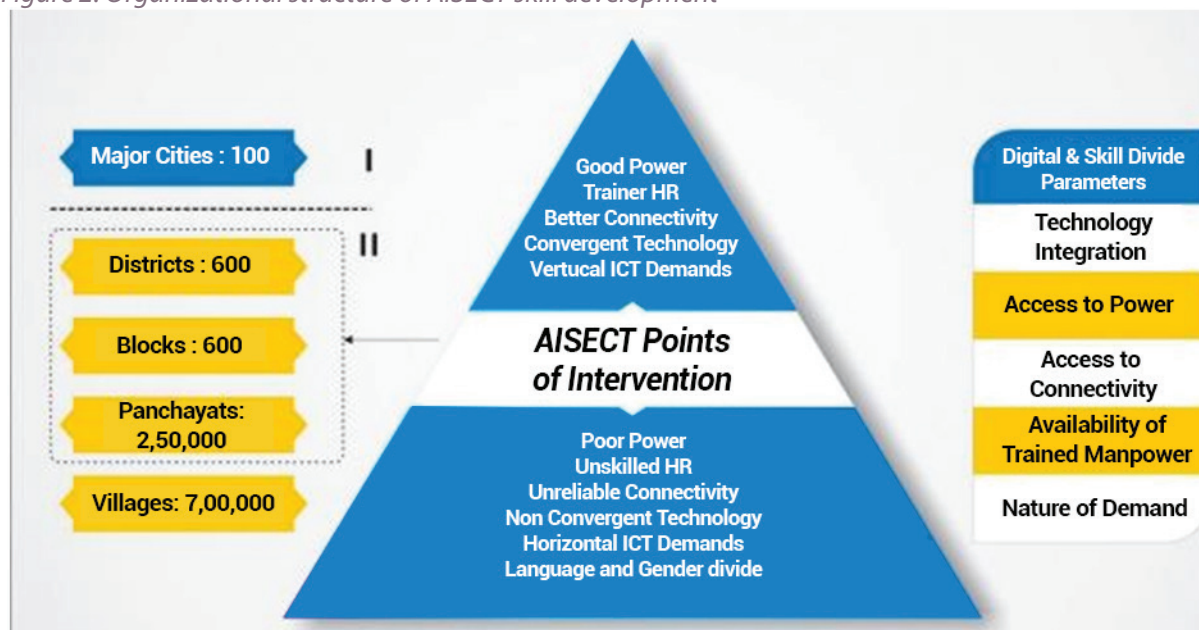
Figure 1: Organizational structure of AISECT skill development



Source: AISECT

AISECT compares its reach within the country to a 'skilling pyramid' whereby the penetration is highest at the bottom level, as depicted in Figure 11. The AISECT initiative is an inclusive business model because its target segment is people from disadvantaged groups from rural and tribal areas – those at the bottom of the pyramid.

Figure 2: Organizational structure of AISECT skill development



Source: AISECT



ORGANIZATIONAL SETTING

In the figure showing AISECT's target segment, the pyramid represents the country of India. AISECT believes that most of the growth and development happens at the top level of the triangle, which includes the country's 100 major cities. These cities are endowed with better power, trained trainers, better connectivity, convergent technologies and a vertical demand for technology. If these 100 cities are removed, however, the bulk of the country, about 600 districts, 6,000 blocks and 700,000 villages have exactly the opposite conditions. This is the great digital divide. AISECT's interventions aim to integrate technology with education and skill development for communities in the lower part of the pyramid.¹¹

To expand its reach, AISECT follows a franchise model by carefully selecting young entrepreneurs from their own graduates or rural youth who are further trained to set up AISECT centres, as described in the next section. Following this model, AISECT centres are now present in 27 states and three union territories as well as offices in more than 30 cities.

In 2012, AISECT formalized an agreement with NSDC to train and support 1.3 million students in 10 years across 11 sectors.¹² Courses offered by AISECT include short-term certificate courses, diplomas and postgraduate diplomas in approximately 350 sectors. Courses can be grouped in 11 overarching sectors:

- IT and management
- hardware and networking
- livelihood and vocational training
- banking, finance and insurance
- agriculture
- textile training
- fire safety and security
- auto skills
- telecom skills
- retail management
- teacher training

The Common Services Centres (CSC)¹³ are a more recent addition to AISECT's operations. Common Services Centres are located in remote areas and provide electronic services to the rural population, towards achieving the Digital India vision of Government of India. AISECT has tied up with the CSC programme of the governments of Madhya Pradesh, Punjab and Chhattisgarh utilizing 6,000 Common Services Centres at the panchayat level. Under the CSC programme, small village-level service kiosks are run by local micro-entrepreneurs trained and supported by AISECT to set up service delivery channels and provide secure and safe Government-to-Citizen (G2C), Business-to-Citizen (B2C) and Citizen-to-Citizen (C2C) services. While some of these CSCs are given a set up fund (as in Madhya Pradesh) all the operational management is run by AISECT. In Punjab and Chhattisgarh no funding was provided to the CSC network.¹⁴



AISECT has also tied up with national banks to set up Banking Kiosks in rural areas. AISECT act as a Banking Correspondent and develops these kiosks as a Customer Service Point. AISECT sets up, trains, manages and provides handholding to the kiosk owners. In all, AISECT has opened 1,500 kiosks over its operational areas and opened 300 million bank accounts for rural poor households.¹⁵

Box 1: AISECT numbers at a glance

- Operating in 12 states and three union territories¹⁶
- 12,000 AISECT centres franchised
- 1.7 million students trained
- 12,000 entrepreneur/franchisees trained
- 6,000 Common Services Centres supported with training
- 1,500 banking kiosks established and 300 million bank accounts opened
- 75,000 people gained new avenues for employment
- 1.3 million candidates will be trained across 11 sectors in 10-year NSDC project
- 200,000 job seekers and 600 employees use RojgarMantra.com
- 2 universities sponsored in Central India



Business/operational model

India's National Policy for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship 2015 highlights the importance of accelerating self-employment and social entrepreneurship to enhance employment generation and economic growth in the country.¹⁷ The concept of franchising is closely connected to entrepreneurship, and a franchisee who obtains the rights to an established business model in a particular geographical area can also be termed an 'entrepreneur'. Franchise models have the advantages of lower financial risks, the power of a collective brand, and more security and stability in day-to-day operations.¹⁸

AISECT's core business model is made up of 'IT education centres' that are franchised to rural people who are responsible for taking the AISECT vision forward. These local entrepreneurs are young men and women who are granted a license by the organization to deliver computer-based education and train local students.¹⁹ In the last 30 years, AISECT has developed a cadre of students and entrepreneurs for delivering low-cost quality services to the masses. AISECT's below line marketing (BLM) activities have boosted the network size and, with time, more and more entrepreneurs have become part of a reputable 'family'.

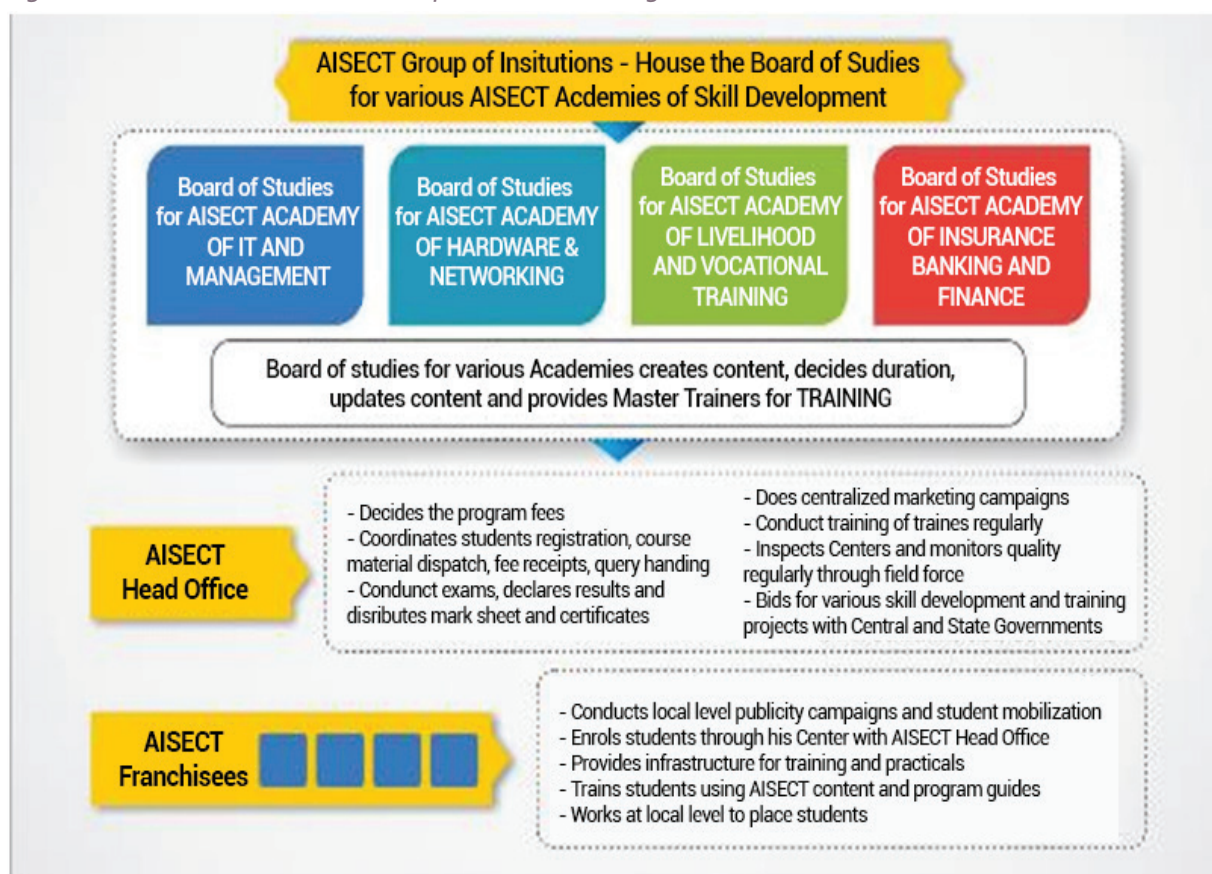
Setting up and sustaining a rural centre is a process based on these key ideas:

- Begin with training provision as the process of mobilizing and campaigning creates awareness regarding the centre and the inflow of students will begin to make the centre self-sustaining;
- Make the centre multi-purpose so that it is economically viable;
- Link up with rural and educational institutions, banks, schools and panchayats;
- Focus on innovative courses that appeal to the masses;
- Use regional language as far as possible;
- Drive towards attaining sustainability within two to three years.²⁰

The AISECT Head Office has a role to play in supporting its franchisees. In the management of skill development and training activities, it will decide on programme fees, coordinate student registration, conduct exams, carry out regular training of trainers, and inspect and monitor the centres. Franchisees are expected to conduct local campaigns and student mobilization, enroll students in the local centres, provide infrastructure for training and coordinate local placements of students. The different roles are further elaborated in Figure 3



Figure 3: AISECT model of skill development and training



Source: AISECT

Franchisees are also responsible for providing five to ten computers, internet connectivity, a printer and a scanner – an investment in their centre of approximately \$4,760.²¹ The computers and internet connectivity are used to provide skill training modules and e-governance services. AISECT supports the entrepreneurs by centrally negotiating the rates for the retail arrangements and providing the courseware (educational material for teachers or trainers, packaged for use with a computer) and training material. AISECT has partnered with government agencies, telecom and insurance companies such as Airtel and Idea Cellular, and national banks such as the State Bank of India to facilitate this process.²²

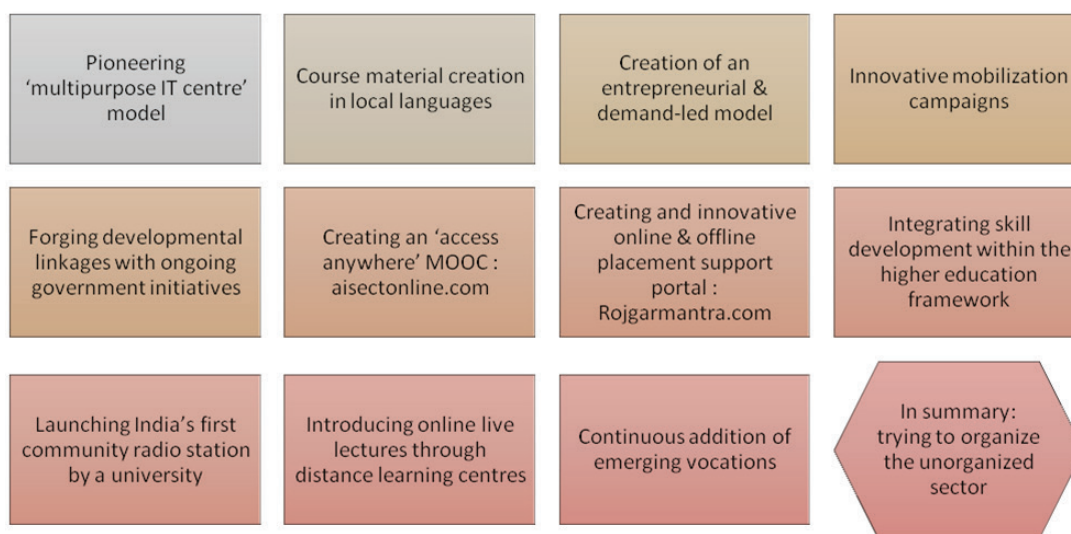
To enable the centres to attain sustainability, AISECT has pioneered the concept of a 'Multi-Purpose Centre Model'. While vocational training remains the mainstay of the centres, the infrastructure is also utilized for numerous other fee-based offerings. This includes Business-to-Citizen products and services such as the sale of mobile phones, SIM card and DTH recharge, printing and photocopying, e-governance services such as government forms and job applications, sale of railway tickets and data entry operations. It also includes Government-to-Citizen products and services such as the sale of insurance policies and banking facilities.²³ The centres are made multi-purpose, demand-led and flexible to address the multifaceted ICT and skill-based education and services requirements of rural people, and to generate additional revenues for the entrepreneur. AISECT's entrepreneurship model through franchising has helped it to integrate disadvantaged populations with markets and provide them with sustainable livelihood options.



Skilling value chain

Most of AISECT skill development and training activities follow a skilling value chain model that includes mobilization and campaign among rural masses, training of trainers, development of training modules and teaching methodologies, services dissemination and execution of large e-governance projects, assessment, certification and placement. All of these activities are aimed at addressing the skill gaps pertinent to the emerging needs of a rapidly growing economy.²⁴

Figure 4: Innovations by AISECT in the skill development model



Source: AISECT

The training delivery mechanism in this model is typical of other skill providers in the country; however, certain innovations and tools used by AISECT are useful in reaching the rural and tribal population and have become good practices over the years. Innovations in the value chain approach have built brand recognition for AISECT and helped it to scale up its activities. Several innovations are described here in more detail:

1. Sourcing

AISECT interventions begin with a preliminary survey, data analysis and selection of a nodal point before proceeding to infrastructural development. Both household and market surveys are done in parallel to identify the youth aspirations of the area and what kind of services are needed in the target communities.

AISECT also identifies like-minded educated individuals who are looking for a sustainable source income and motivated to contribute in development of others for establishing the centres. Most of these entrepreneurs belong to middle- and low-income backgrounds and are often graduates from AISECT centres.

Selection of the franchisees is a process that begins with mobilizing and campaigning for like-minded people. The next step involves a screening process that involves a background check of the entrepreneur, operational feasibility of centre location, demand assessment of courses, etc. Once the franchisees are identified, an agreement is signed between the individual and AISECT and a ToT (Training of Teacher) is held on financial management, operational management and reporting techniques at the headquarters.



A dedicated Network Management & Franchisee Handholding team handles the agreements with the franchisee centres and helps in setting up the business unit, maintenance and daily operation. The team is also responsible for physical verification of the centres, providing support services and occasional training on updated course and current requirements in the market. AISECT developed a unique concept of conducting a tour or 'IT Yatra' in rural India with the aim of 'demystifying the aura around usage of computers'.²⁵ It was a simple strategy wherein two to three computers were tied to a van with a trainer who would go village to village talking about computers and enlisting candidates for courses at the same time. The concept has now evolved into a more regular and better-organized campaign, the 'Kaushal Vikas Yatra', which is undertaken across states in small towns and villages for demand mobilization before the admission sessions begin. The Yatra is comprised of a three-day marketing campaign for reaching to local youth, panchayat leaders, teachers and community members. The campaign reaches out to schools and colleges to initiate awareness about IT and various IT-based skill development programmes and services offered by AISECT centres, distributing literature and registration forms. Interested candidates are then asked to come to the centre to join the programme.

AISECT uses attractive posters with local movie themes and pictures to depict the aspirations of youth and draw them to the centres. Such innovative campaigns create awareness regarding skills and vocational training, mobilize trainee candidates and generate mass appeal for the brand. While the AISECT Head Office is responsible for the organization of centralized marketing campaigns, the franchisees create local publicity to mobilize candidates.²⁶

2. Training standards and content

A Content Creation and Course Material team is responsible for creating relevant industry-linked course material in 13 different trades in various formats as per the requirement of the project execution agency. Course curriculum in various trades are aligned with the National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF), the Modular Employable Skills (MES) and Sector Skills Council (SSC) standards.²⁷ A solid academic backing to the network is strengthened by ties to two universities run by AISECT, and by incorporating the industry perspective into the curriculum by inviting industry experts to enrich the courses.²⁸ Recognizing the fact that there are multitudes of skilling companies in the country, AISECT propagates the idea of 'standardization of skilling' that places all training content and techniques for all courses in a standardized format while providing flexibility to its franchisees only in terms of content delivery.²⁹

To manage the standardization process, AISECT also uses an interactive learning management system through which a wide range of activities from registration to placement of students is managed. AISECT offers some 600 courses that are run for students at a distance, and many lectures for online courses are broadcast live to students. This includes use of the MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) mode of education, an online learning platform offering vocational courses free of charge.³⁰ The 'AISECT Online' portal (aisectonline.com) is a learning management system that can be accessed by students irrespective of any geographical barriers. Students can register for courses, access course material, take exams for some certificate courses, and communicate with the management teams about milestones in the curriculum.³¹ AISECT Online has been developed keeping in mind the basic issues of accessibility and affordability in distance education, due to which a large number of youth still lack access to quality education infrastructure. This portal endeavours to bridge this gap by making quality education accessible to greater numbers of students.



The skill development content designed by AISECT is industry-relevant and consists of a multi-skilling approach. Along with core skill training, this includes provision of soft skill training, personality development and entrepreneurship development, all of which helps candidates to get placed and perform well in their jobs. AISECT students are also supported for skill upgrading and diversification trainings as they proceed in their careers.³²

Trainings cover a range of topics such as computer literacy, vocational skills, livelihood development, management and entrepreneurship.³³ Training on domain content is facilitated by Master Trainers who are selected and trained by the centre as per the requirements of the chosen courses. AISECT also provides hands-on learning to its candidates through its network of local vendors and domestic industries. Through this unique blend of pedagogical learning, online easy access of material and practical training system, AISECT has been able to train and place over 100,000 students every year.³⁴

3. Assessment and certification

All student assessments are conducted through AISECT's online portal and managed by a centralized team. AISECT conducts formative assessments (through an internal assessor) done at regular intervals during the course and a summative assessment (through an external assessor) at the end of the course. All AISECT courses are certified by either the National Council on Vocational Training, Sector Skill Council, the AISECT-sponsored Dr. C.V Raman University or other AISECT university certified programme.³⁵ Certification of any course depends of the terms and conditions provided by the sponsoring agency and is awarded to the students at the end of the course. All certificates have AISECT's name and logo as the awarding body, and partners are mentioned only when guided by the funding agency, e.g. in case of training under Schneider, joint certification of AISECT-Schneider is provided to the students.

4. Placement and post-placement

AISECT provides placement support to its trainees in a three-step process using both online and offline mechanisms. First, an Employment Exchange programme is conducted whereby registration drives are held for both non-AISECT and AISECT job seekers as a single point employment solution for the rural population across 818 AISECT-NSDC centres (under the Employment Exchange Pointsat programme).³⁶

The second step is to conduct employment surveys at district and block levels to identify and locate employers, who may be at national, regional and local levels. In addition to preparing its students for employment in the organized sector, AISECT focuses on building an employment base around every centre by creating a network with the local markets. Some of these roles include computer operators, banking kiosk operators, sales agents, teachers and machine operators. This not only caters to the needs and demands of the informal economy of the rural poor; it also addresses the issue of migration whereby candidates who are not willing to move/travel out of their villages can find employment closer to home.³⁷

The final step is to organize job fairs known as 'Rojgar Melas' at district and block levels. These events facilitate the interaction of students and companies at the ground level, thus creating better opportunities for the skilled workforce. AISECT organizes these job fairs across seven states (Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa and Uttar Pradesh) with several national companies including Bajaj Capital, Dominos India, Reliance and Sri Ram Life Insurance, among others, and regional companies such as Navbharat Fertilizer, Navkisan Bio Plantech and STI textile.³⁸



One of the unique tools developed by AISECT to facilitate their placement and handholding processes is the 'Rojgar Mantra' (www.rojgarmantra.com), which is the largest online job portal for rural India. The organization has creatively utilized its understanding of the job market and its network with the industrial sector to link a rural trainee with relevant employment opportunities and related services. This interactive online portal is free for students and is open to current and past students of AISECT.

Rojgar Mantra's uniqueness lies in the real placement services that it offers to rural populations in such remote and undeveloped areas; services that would otherwise be unobtainable. The support includes helping a job seeker assess his or her qualifications, streamline job prospects according to his or her skill set and obtain communication and resumé-drafting advice from a panel of experts. Rojgar Mantra provides ease of accessibility and communication facilities for the more disadvantaged youth from remote areas.

Larger companies also benefit from Rojgar Mantra, because they often find it hard to recruit employees in semi-urban and rural India due to the fragmented and unorganized job markets. To cater to this need, the platform also offers job advertisement and online testing of candidates to these employers,³⁹ helping them tap into potential young candidates who suit their requirements yet live in distant locations. At present, 200,000 job seekers and over 600 employers are registered on this online portal.⁴⁰



Source - AISECT



Financing

AISECT has two models for revenue generation. First, they rely on their student-paid model whereby they collect a fee for their training programmes depending on the duration and type of programme. Hence the fee could range from INR 2000 to INR 20,000. Secondly, AISECT also receives grants for implementing various central and state government programmes such as the Prime Minister's Kaushal Vikas Yojna (PMKVY), Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY), which they utilize to cover some of their expenses.

Training for impact

AISECT's mission is to 'reach out to the remotest corner of India and promote ICT-based training and services to empower people, generate employment for the youth and unfold entrepreneurship based initiatives to create an inclusive society'.⁴¹ AISECT has been pioneering rural development through non-formal education and skill development initiatives and strengthening micro- entrepreneurship ventures to contribute to the economic growth of these areas.

AISECT works on several government projects to provide vocational and skill development training to vulnerable and marginalized segments of the society, including Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe, Other Backward Classes, Women, Minorities, Below Poverty Line, Scavengers, etc. Training has been supported by the various Ministries of the Government of India and state government departments. Minority groups have been the focus of AISECT's engagement with governments in multiple states to implement skill development projects and special training projects. Empowering women is another aspect of AISECT's work through various state and central programmes.

- AISECT participates in State Skill Development Missions in Gujarat, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. Among the important initiatives that AISECT is involved in are Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY), MoRD Skill Development initiatives (DDUGKY), District Poverty Alleviation Programme (DPIP) and Implementation of Vocational Education in Senior Secondary Schools. The vocational education effort encompasses 150 government schools in Delhi, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab and Rajasthan. Under the SGSY, project training was provided to 13,000 youth living below the poverty line in Madhya Pradesh, yielding placement for over 76 per cent through job fairs.⁴²
- Placement-linked skill development services have been provided at 11 locations to youth living below the poverty line, under the District Poverty Initiative Project (DPIP) of the Government of Madhya Pradesh (GoMP). Another 1,260 candidates have been trained and 792 placed through the Department of Backward Class and Minority Welfare, GoMP. In Rajasthan, 1,041 students have been trained and 549 placed through the Rajasthan Skill Livelihood Development Corporation, in an AISECT skill development programme for minorities and youth living below the poverty line. In Odisha, 2,334 students have been trained in IT and retail management since 2012 as part of the NRLM ORMAS Project. AISECT has also been working with the Bhopal Gas Tragedy Relief and Rehabilitation Department (GoMP) to provide computer education to gas tragedy victims and their dependents.⁴³
- The Indira Suchana Shakti Yojana (ISSY), one of the most prestigious programmes of AISECT, has trained more than 100,000 girls in ICT skills through 1,297 schools in Chhattisgarh. AISECT was selected as a 'facilitator NGO' for the Tejaswini Project, an extension of the Swashakti Project in Dindori district of Madhya Pradesh. The project envisages enhancing the skills of members of microfinance self-help



groups (SHGs) by linking them with markets. The project has helped form some 500 self-help groups for women, trained all SHG members on livelihood-based activities and is now linking them with various income generation activities. Also, AISECT has trained more than 2,500 women at Common Services Centres through the Women Digital Literacy Programme for Training and Empowerment of Women on Basic Computer Course.⁴⁴

AISECT's work with women entrepreneurs has been featured as a best practice for its social impact, as in a 2012 study titled 'Connectivity: How mobile phones, computers and internet can catalyze women's entrepreneurship'. The organization has encouraged the participation of women in its franchisee network by providing financial incentives to women entrepreneurs (i.e. up to 15 percent discount or start up and renewal fees), negotiating rates for retail arrangements and linking women to financial support from the government (e.g. ex-national e-governance plans for women's empowerment). Women entrepreneurs operating AISECT centres have also played a critical role in supporting other women and girls to build their ICT skills and entrepreneurial skills, offering a 15 percent discount to selected girls.⁴⁵

AISECT's financial inclusion initiative is another innovative solution supporting rural development. The initiative provides comprehensive financial services to the underprivileged, including savings, credit and other financial benefits particularly in unbanked areas. Banking kiosks are run by rural entrepreneurs who act as business correspondents for the bank to support their financial operations away from their branches.⁴⁶ Many customers are farmers, small shopkeepers, labourers, rural women and students working part-time who until this time had no access to a bank.⁴⁷



Source - AISECT



CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

Quality assurance

AISECT uses technology in innovative ways to manage daily operations and ensure quality in its franchisee network. Student registration and course dissemination are conducted through the AISECT central online portal. There are help lines and email communication channels between the franchisees and AISECT management teams to provide assistance, including SMS facilities to send information and updates to the network. An online log of student registration and transactions is maintained to keep track of the training volume. Each franchisee contract is renewed on the basis of performance, an approach that encourages each centre to function efficiently while maintaining quality.⁴⁸

Challenges and solutions

Introducing ICT to rural areas is a challenge recognized by AISECT founder Santosh Choubey. “Technology can be very intimidating, more so to the rural folk. One of the biggest challenges we faced in rural India was to get people to use ICT and basic technology,” he said.⁴⁹ The modern world is marked by an increasing need for information technology at all levels, both in the workplace and ordinary life. The digital divide is the difference between those who have access to information (the have’s) and those who do not have access to information (the have nots). The digital divide remains a challenge especially for disadvantaged sections of the population. The low literacy rates in rural India and lack of English-language education create barriers to the age of information.⁵⁰

AISECT understood the IT challenge in rural India very early on and began creating regional language content to breakdown the communication barriers. All AISECT educational courses and materials are now available in 11 regional languages.⁵¹ The ground-level IT Yatra campaigns brought computers closer to the masses and mobilized youth to join IT courses. The effective awareness-generation and publicity of the Kaushal Vikas Yatras have won recognition for this initiative as a best practice by the Government of India’s skill development programme.⁵²

Mobilization and retention of youth for the training programmes is one of the most difficult tasks in skill provision. “Aspiration is a challenge,” said a member of AISECT’s senior management team. “Youth in rural areas do not want to go for sectors such as construction and textiles... everyone wants to join electronics and service sector employment as they see more mobility in such jobs,” the team member explained.⁵³ AISECT believes that trust and familiarity of the brand and providing simple knowledge about computers are important factors in mobilizing large-scale masses.⁵⁴ The training content and design is student-friendly and interactive. Studios on AISECT campus constantly deliver live online lectures and support classroom training. There are community radio stations that deliver news and updates to get a community buy-in for AISECT training programmes.⁵⁵ And, related to retention, the organization provides opportunities for horizontal mobility of its students by linking them to higher education programmes within its university network and engaging them in entrepreneurial activities.⁵⁶ This not only facilitates retention of students; the activities also build aspiration to aim for a better life and livelihood.

Power and connectivity pose ongoing challenges, according to Santosh Choubey: “Two of the other challenges which we continue to face while working on the grassroots level are that of power and connectivity, or the lack thereof. Availability of continuous power and broadband connectivity at panchayat level can revolutionize the role of technology in vocational training,” he said.⁵⁷ The target segments of AISECT’s intervention are the districts, blocks and panchayats in India, which usually suffer from lack



of power and unreliable connectivity. While the problem is large scale and difficult to address without government support, AISECT has been able to better equip its centres through various innovative ideas and delivery mechanisms.

Infrastructure expenditures including power back-up, computer installation and internet connection are high while setting up centres. Hence, AISECT believes that while the key focus of the centres should be to provide training to the rural masses, a single activity might not render a centre economically viable nor put t

he technology to its optimum use. A centre has to be a 'multi-purpose' facility with training plus service provision to achieve sustainability within a few years. Apart from these basic requirements, AISECT allows flexibility in centre training timings, usage of online and offline content and training delivery mechanisms, use of laptops and mobile devices, etc., to considerably ease the connectivity situation.⁵⁸

Another way to reduce the operational expenditures that centre operators might initially incur is to use existing government or private infrastructure. AISECT focuses on leveraging existing infrastructure such as schools and *panchayats*.⁵⁹ Also, the Common Services Centres are government-owned kiosks given to AISECT to run e-governance services programmes for rural people, and thereby help in reducing infrastructural expenses. AISECT currently supports a network of 6,000 Common Services Centres bringing e-governance and e-business services to the doorsteps of rural people, linking them up to services and reducing the long chain of intermediaries.⁶⁰



Source - AISECT



Results

Skills and knowledge are the driving force of economic growth and social development for any country. AISECT has been involved in the skilling business for 30 years, empowering youth with ICT and skill development, education, training and other services. Since its inception, the primary focus of AISECT has been to train and skill semi-urban and rural youth who are from the most vulnerable and marginalized segments of society. The organization has so far provided training for over 1.7 million students through various national- and state-level programmes.

AISECT's unique value proposition lies in its vast array of training and services that cater to the needs and requirements of the rural poor. Its range of initiatives – skill development, e-governance services and financial inclusion – comprise a multi-pronged approach to empower youth and uplift rural India that has been recognized by the World Bank, NASSCOM and TiE, among other leading bodies.

The organization is also one of the largest entrepreneurial-driven networks in India, enabling young entrepreneurs to operate IT centres or kiosks that sell diverse products and services to customers. This not only facilitates sustainability of the centre; it also provides useful and relevant services to the community. Through this innovative business model AISECT has created entrepreneurship opportunities for more than 12,000 persons, of which there are over 1,000 women entrepreneurs.

The Rojgar Mantra online job portal is designed to offer placement in local companies to skilled workers in rural areas. With the basic idea of accessibility and affordability, the portal has empowered students and employers alike to access the job market in an interactive manner. This is another unique feature of AISECT that has received a massive response from the rural population, with more than 200,000 job seekers and 60 employers currently registered on the platform.⁶¹



Source - AISECT



Conclusion

With an unmatched understanding of the rural population, AISCET is now trying to integrate skill development within the higher education framework. It has introduced two private universities in Central India, in areas that lack good infrastructure and high-quality content. AISCET is the sponsoring body of the Dr. C.V. Raman University in Chhattisgarh and AISCET University in Madhya Pradesh. The universities encourage skill training with two mandatory skill-based courses incorporated in every course curriculum of the undergraduate degree. These universities are privately run bodies with AISCET founder Mr. Santosh Choubey as the Chancellor.

Dr. C.V. Raman University has launched a community radio station named 'Radio Raman' with an objective to broadcast educational and entertainment-based content that focuses on the basic rights of the local community in terms of education, health and law. Classroom lectures delivered by the faculty are also recorded and broadcast through online live radio stations as part of the Distance Learning Programme, benefitting students in rural and remote areas.

Beyond skills development activities, AISCET is also expanding its reach into schools at the small town, district and block levels. The organization has launched EduVantage PRO, which is a low cost and high quality interactive multimedia classroom solution for K-12 school students.⁶² The product has been assembled in the form of a pen drive (a mobile USB storage device), making it affordable for both private as well as government-run schools.

AISCET has a market advantage given its brand recognition in the central and western parts of the country where it is presently operating. However, the southern areas have been left behind due to language barriers.⁶³ The organization seeks to expand its geographical reach and its network of IT centre entrepreneurs in previously untapped markets by taking the number of AISCET centres from 12,000 to 20,000 over the next five years. Consistent with its mission, the expansion plan will prioritize students and entrepreneurs who belong to disadvantaged and marginalized population groups.⁶⁴

¹ Singh, Jauhari and Tiwari, An Analytical Case Study on AISCET.

² Panchayat is the elected body of five senior members of the village, responsible for the effective functioning of the village.

³ AISCET website, About us.

⁴ Ashoka India.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Formerly known as National Open School (NOS), the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) was established by India's Ministry of Human Resources Development (MHRD) to provide a number of vocational, life enrichment and community-oriented courses in addition to general and academic courses at the secondary and senior secondary level.

⁷ Singh, Jauhari and Tiwari, An Analytical Case Study on AISCET.

⁸ AISCET Case Writeshop (30 March 2015).

⁹ Bartolome 2014.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ AISCET Case Writeshop (30 March 2015).

¹² The sectors that AISCET is working in are IT and management; hardware and networking; livelihood and vocational training; banking, finance and insurance; agriculture; textile training; fire safety and security; auto skills; telecom skills; retail management; teacher training.

¹³ For details see: <https://www.csc.gov.in/>



- ¹⁴ AISECT website, Introduction to Training and Skill Development.
- ¹⁵ AISECT One Pager. File provided by AISECT.
- ¹⁶ AISECT presentation, "AISECT's Skill Development Initiatives".
- ¹⁷ National Policy for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship 2015.
- ¹⁸ Pallavi, Rao 2013.
- ¹⁹ Malhotra, Kanesathasan and Patel 2012.
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- ²⁴ Economic Time, "Pathbreakers: Santosh Kumar Choubey and how he bridged the IT literacy gap".
- ²⁵ AISECT presentation, "AISECT's Skill Development Initiatives".
- ²⁶ AISECT Case Writeshop (30 March 2015).
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
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- ³⁰ AISECT has also partnered with the global online learning company ALISON to collaborate on e-learning and vocational skills training. For further details, see: <http://community.alison.com/2015/07/01/global-online-pioneer-alison-signs-agreement-with-indian-education-provider/#.VsxQ7vmLQgs>
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- ⁵⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid.
- ⁵⁷ India Today, "Technology is at the heart of empowered India".
- ⁵⁸ PCQUEST, "AISECT Uses ICT to Transform Rural and Semi-Urban India"
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- ⁶⁰ AISECT website, Social Impact.
- ⁶¹ "AISECT – UNDP Presentation". File provided by AISECT.
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- ⁶³ AISECT Case Writeshop (30 March 2015).
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