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Clinton inspires Asia to bridge digital divide

Projects range from India's slums to remote islands in the Philippines

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Take a basic computer with internet access, add a touch pad, bury it in the wall of a slum with very high levels of illiteracy and wait to see what happens. That was the experiment Sugata Mitra, professor of educational technology at Newcastle University in Britain, tried 10 years ago in a poverty-stricken shanty town in India.

"About eight hours later I found that there were eight 10-year-olds who were surfing," he said. "They were not supposed to know any English and they were not supposed to have seen a computer before or to have heard of the internet. So how was this happening?"

Professor Mitra was hooked. He repeated the experiment in different districts and villages across the sub-continent, including one where the children did not know any English whatsoever.

"Again I went back later and I found that not only were they using the computer but they were also using about 400 English words that they had picked up off the internet," he said. "These experiments went on for almost 10 years and, at the end, we found that groups of children, when exposed to a computer, will learn how to use it on their own - and enough functional English to be able to do it."

The Clinton Global Initiative Asia Meeting was in full swing at the Grand Hyatt in Wan Chai and Professor Mitra was addressing a special interest working session on bridging digital and learning divides.

The non-partisan initiative led by former US president Bill Clinton aims

to address global problems by turning ideas into action and fostering shared responsibility between businesses, NGOs and governments.

Participants at the meetings are strongly encouraged to make a "commitment to action" such as launching a practical project in a local setting that meets the campaign's objectives.

Education is one of its three key focus areas in Asia and three working sessions at this week's high-profile event in Hong Kong - the first ever to be held on the continent - were devoted to the field.

While Mr Clinton charmed an audience of 400 movers and shakers and quizzed heads of state including Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and Singapore Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew on topics such as climate change and the global financial meltdown, expert panelists tackled Asia's educational challenges.

Professor Mitra told the workshop his research - now focused on radical alternatives such as "self-organised learning communities" for children on the far side of the learning divide - was prompted by calculations that the Millennium Development Goal of universal basic education by 2015 was impossible to achieve.

"It won't happen because there aren't enough good schools and there aren't enough good teachers," he said. "And if you take the shortfall and work out how much time and money is needed, there isn't enough time and there isn't enough money."

Other panelists spoke of practical initiatives to bridge the digital and learning divides. Rina Lopez Bautista, whose family owns a cable-television company in the Philippines, used its network to set up an educational television channel to help raise standards in remote state schools across the archipelago.

The Knowledge Channel Foundation broadcasts programmes on maths, English, science, civics and values education based on government curriculum guidelines to all primary and secondary schools. It provided them with televisions and satellite dishes, and trained teachers to use the programmes in class.

"There are 7,100 islands in the country - spectacular islands which make the country beautiful but [make it] very difficult to provide learning materials or consistent teacher training," said Ms Bautista, who is president of the foundation. "So we would go to all these different

islands and mountains to provide the channel to these classrooms.

"It was really engaging the whole community - the teachers, the parents, the local government unit and the department of education. This has increased achievement test scores and the way [students] treat their peers and their parents has changed."

Former McKinsey consultant Jeremy Hockenstein is chief executive of Digital Divide Data, which provides unemployed school-leavers in Cambodia and Laos with university scholarships and paid part-time work in a bid to bridge the gulf between school and employment.

"We have three offices with 500 young people, most of whom have finished high school but can't afford to go to university," he said. "They provide IT outsourcing services to companies and organisations around the world, particularly digitalisation services. After three or four years, people graduate to a better job. We have 200 graduates who earn an average of US\$200-plus a month, which is about seven times the average income."

At a session on overcoming educational disparity and deprivation, Sebastien Marot, executive director of Friends International - which provides education and care for marginalised children in Southeast Asia, including refugees, Aids victims, street children and drug addicts - said the number of such children was growing "very, very fast".

"For these kids, you have to have two directions - getting them into education and keeping them there," he said. "We need to think about vocational education and we need to think about culture. We need to be cooler than drugs, we need to be more exciting than the streets and more inclusive, and giving them more identity than gangs. Otherwise these kids will simply leave."

John Wood, who left an executive position with Microsoft to establish the charity Room to Read, said it was essential that NGOs employed people from the business world to build links with corporate donors and make their projects "scaleable".

"Two-thirds of our management team are corporate refugees," he said. "They are ex-Credit Suisse, ex-Goldman Sachs, ex-Microsoft, ex-Unilever and ex-Lehmann Brothers. By the end of this year, that management team will have opened over 700 schools with 150,000 seats and desks for kids, with trained teachers and over 7,000 libraries with 5 million books and access for 2 million kids."

"That's in eight years and it's all because we are taking a management team that comes from the business sector and combining it with capital from the capitalists. We then bring in educational experts to make sure that we are training the teachers and librarians in a good way, so these classes and libraries will stay open and be used."

At the end of the meeting, Mr Clinton announced that commitments worth an estimated US\$185 million had been made at the event. They would help more than 10 million people, including some 715,000 children who would benefit from better educational opportunities and more than 260,000 adults who would learn new job skills.

"I am truly impressed by our CGI members and the new commitments announced this week that will bring real measurable change to millions of lives in Asia and across the world," he said.

At least 16 commitments were for projects related to education, with three pledges worth a total of US\$12.8 million made at the workshop on digital and learning divides alone. Sally Thompson, whose husband Jim is chairman of Hong Kong-based relocations firm Crown Worldwide Group, was applauded for a US\$70,000 commitment to rebuild a school in Phnom Penh so it can take 150 orphans with HIV - their second such project in Cambodia.

"The foundations are laid and it's going to be hopefully built by the middle of next year," she said. "It is brilliant to meet people from all over the world doing similar work to help disadvantaged children."