

Information Tech

A boost to IT education

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The government is launching a virtual university on March 25. The university will impart formal education to students across the country without having them relocate and giving them access to one of the best faculties in the world. Virtual study facilities like this initiative could prove an asset to under-funded traditional higher education sectors in developing countries. In the first phase, 1,000 students will be enrolled in a four-year degree programme of Bachelor of Computer Science (BCS).

In Pakistan, Internet has come a long way since its modest beginning at prohibitive rates in 1995. From a symbol of luxury and status carrying an hourly price tag of Rs 75 an hour, today the ISPs are engaged in a fierce "price war" to lure users, offering packages which offer less than one-tenth of the price seven years ago.

With the privatisation of Pakistan Communication Company

Limited (PTCL) drawing to a close in June this year and the end of its monopoly over fixed-line telephones from January 1 next year, an already aggressive IT sector is readying itself to play a prominent role to turn it into a full-fledged industry.

The encouraging signs of growth are visible all over, the most prominent indications of which have been a dramatic increase in the number of Internet users, drastic reduction in internet bandwidth rates, expansion of universal Internet access from 30 cities to over 500 cities, towns and villages across the country.

During the last year-and-a half, PTCL has slashed the Internet bandwidth tariff tremendously from an extremely prohibitive \$ 100,000 to \$ 3,000 Mb per second. The reduction of the tariff by PTCL to the ISPs has also resulted in reduction in retail Internet tariff so much so that at present there is a raging price

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war for the share of the market between over five dozen ISPs operating in the country. Internet packages offered by various ISPs offer as low hourly Internet rates as rupees five.

What has fueled this sudden price war is not just a marketing strategy to capture a significant portion of the market by the ISPs to best benefit from the privatisation of PTCL this year but also the incentives given by the government to the providers. For instance, the ISPs now have to pay much lower royalties, 0.66 per cent instead of 1.5 per cent. In addition, of the 62 ISPs operating in the country there are many virtual ones, as well as smaller ones, which have almost no or relatively less operational and overhead costs to offer low internet prices.

The university will expand the number of subjects and students in

the future. Though not an entirely new idea, the only other similar model is the African Virtual University, which is a World Bank-sponsored project. Students gaining admission to the university will have to meet strict selection criteria. Once enrolled, they will have to log on to virtual university learning management system servers everyday for a minimum number of hours equal to lectured hours at a conventional university.

The biggest advantage of having a virtual university in Pakistan is to be able to have the expertise of faculty available to students. Experts say many good professors did not want to move to Pakistan, but their skills could be utilised through online, interactive lectures. Competent facilitators, who can bridge the gap between students and their inhibitions in asking questions in English language, can play a very effective role.

Apart from not having to leave

their homes to get admission to the university, a student would only have to stump up one tenth of conventional tuition fees, which would allow poor but talented people to take advantage of the facility. The monthly fee will be 1,445 rupees, much lower than the public sector institutions as well. Private sector IT training institutions are mostly profit-oriented and often charge very high fees. They are also concentrated in the larger cities, thus denying students living in remote and rural areas a chance to improve their skills and qualifications.

Setting up a virtual educational facility costs one sixth of what a regular university would cost because capital and revenue costs are much lower. Pakistan's virtual university has an approved budget of just 16 million dollars for a period of four years, whereas a conventional university would require 100 million dollars in start up costs.