

Online education tutorials make great strides in India

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NEW DELHI // When Balaji Thirumalai and Pady Srinivasan started their online tutorial website last year, they named it Clay6, referring to the six great unsolved mathematical problems as defined by the Clay Mathematics Institute.

In its own way, Clay6 is grappling with a great unsolved problem as well. India's schools are filled to bursting with students, but there is an alarming deficit of quality teachers.

"You'll have cases where a teacher is handling a single class of 50 or 60 people, and in the next period, she'll go and tackle another class that is just as big," said Mr Thirumalai, a former computer hardware engineer. "So the teachers never have the bandwidth to deal individually with students and their progress."

Clay6, based in Chennai, is one of a slew of Indian internet firms that have emerged over the past five years to tackle this problem. In a country where education is extremely competitive, the market is a massive and growing one.

Between 2008 and 2011, according to an estimate by the consulting firm Grant Thornton, the after-school tuition industry grew from US\$5 billion (Dh18.4bn) to \$6.36bn. In the 12th grade alone, around 3.6 million students across India are looking for an extra edge, and Mr Thirumalai estimates that this number will grow to 8 million by 2020.

The market even stretches outside India, to countries such as the UAE where many private schools follow the Indian government's Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) curriculum.

MeritNation, which claims to be India's largest education portal, has 6.5 million registered students across nine countries.

"I think 85 to 90 per cent of all CBSE students in the UAE are enrolled in MeritNation," Pavan Chauhan, one of the portal's co-founders, told The National. "More and more kids in India are coming online now as well. They have broadband connections at home. This is why the market is growing as fast as it is."

The firms work in different ways. MeritNation provides study material for grades one to 12, based on the CBSE syllabus or other curriculums. For 4,000-5,000 rupees (Dh240-300), a student gets access to a year's worth of lessons, in all subjects. MeritNation provides videos, interactive activities, revision notes, and practice exam papers.

Another company, Everonn, offers live classes where students can interact with subject experts in real time. MathGuru, which focuses exclusively on mathematical concepts, hosts videos of an instructor solving algebra and geometry problems.

Clay6, on the other hand, works by tying up with individual schools, providing periodic assessments to students based on their teacher's pace and course of instruction.

"As soon as the teacher finishes a chapter, say, the student will have to log on and do a 30-minute test on its contents," Mr Thirumalai said. "Our software figures out where the student is falling short, and provides that feedback to her teacher."

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A school pays approximately 1,000 rupees per student per year for the service.

“So this way, teachers can measure how every one of their students is doing on a regular basis,” Mr Thirumalai added. “Students gain confidence. Teachers get an extra tool.”

The feedback they have received so far, he said, has been encouraging.

Srikanth Narasimhan, whose son is in grade 12, was grateful for Clay6’s tracking of his progress.

The website “clearly shows your areas of strengths and helps you focus on the areas which require improvement”, he said.

Convincing parents and schools to regard these online services as an ally, however, is not always easy.

Mr Chauhan recounted how, in MeritNation’s first year of operations, in 2009, parents would grumble that their children were already on the internet too much, and that they did not want to add to their time online.

“We had to persuade them that the internet is here to stay, and that they may as well use it to improve their children’s education,” he said.

Teachers sometimes look upon these services as an encroachment on their turf, or as an accusation that they are not doing their job well. Kalyani Gupta, a middle school science teacher in New Delhi, also contended that education portals were placing yet another layer of work and assessments on already burdened students.

“Our energies should really be focused on getting more and better teachers into schools, so that students can get more out of their classroom experience,” Ms Gupta said. “These portals may be useful at times, but they don’t do much to address the real problems.”

Mr Chauhan agreed that websites such as MeritNation could never replace the teacher-student relationship.

“The stuff that a school does, we can never do,” he said. “But we’re looking to be complementary to a school, not to compete with it.”

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