



Swaraj University: A Transformational Approach to Learning

Swaraj University is a three-year learning programme that creates opportunities for young learners to develop the knowledge, skills and perspectives they need to create sustainable livelihoods and to support healthy and resilient local communities. This self-directed learning process invites learners to identify their hearts' vision and engages them in developing the skills and practices they need to manifest that vision. The programme is as much about developing the capacities and confidence we need to create and follow our unique learning paths as it is about strengthening the leadership capacity and livelihood opportunities in communities.

Context

“There is a lot of teaching and training happening in India but very little learning or understanding.”

--Yashpal Committee report

It is no secret that the present education system is struggling, and while there have been massive efforts to revamp it through quality education, teacher training and other such means, these have had little positive effect. The present education system has not been able to adapt to the fast-changing social, economic, cultural and political transformation that has been taking place over the past decade. Moreover, growing threats to our ecology, disruption of local communities and the rise of global consumerism have made it necessary to question many of the basic assumptions that have shaped the modern world. Today, we are left with a worldview of society as a great machine whose purpose is to extract and convert natural and human resources into commodities for concentrated profits.

As a result, today's youth find themselves at a crossroads, not sure of their own ideals and values, or of their identities. Alien (and alienating) institutions like schools and colleges, the mass media and government promise a successful life, but in reality drain their labor and energy and leave them cynical and dependent. The education system has not prepared them to understand their needs, strengths or dreams. Rather, it has urged them to become standardized products, designed to fit into techno-industrial moulds.

The time is ripe for a radical transformation in our education systems—and it is already happening. The rapid growth of home-schooling and alternative schooling demonstrates the appetite for learning to be placed in the hands of the learners. There are a number of educational experiments which are developing community-based and internship-oriented learning networks. The call for self-directed learning is growing because many people recognize

that the desire to learn is simply part of human nature. We all are natural learners, and if provided an opportunity, young people would spontaneously and efficiently learn what they need to lead a meaningful life.

Purpose and Vision

The purpose of the Swaraj University programme is to enable learners to become self-directed and fulfilled leaders who are connected with their communities and who serve a vision of building livelihoods that bring about social transformation.

We believe many young people are ready to walk their own unique paths, but any number of factors stops them: socio-economic responsibilities, fear and doubt, lack of mentorship or guidance, or simply not knowing how to start. Swaraj University is an attempt to create and reclaim self-directed learning processes in a community of peers. By learning together as a cohort, learners strengthen their knowledge, skills, relationships and inner perspective to facilitate a livelihood and life based on sustainable, harmonious and healthy values in communities throughout India.

Swaraj University is not an attempt to reform or reconstruct yet another educational institution. We are not offering a ready-made framework. Instead, our commitment is to create an environment in which learners explore genuine self-inquiry grounded in their local reality; their learning proposals are linked to long-term, continuous, stable and sustainable livelihood choices; and, perhaps most important, the entire process is about self-learning and intrinsic motivation. Touching the inner universe is essential for creating choices that have long-term impact and vitality.

The objectives of Swaraj University are to:

- Provide opportunities to selected youth to pursue their learning interest through a self-designed methodology;
- Connect learners through internships with individuals and organisations that enable them to develop their knowledge, skills and practices;
- Demonstrate that self-directed learning initiatives strengthen the confidence, dignity and self-worth of learners as leaders;
- Equip learners with the capabilities they need to initiate livelihoods that support their families and contribute to strengthening their local communities.

Structure and Attributes

The Swaraj University programme is a three-year process of peer-based learning, internship and apprenticeship, project work, reflection, mentoring, learning journeys and other collaborative learning processes. In the pilot year, we will invite 20 youth (ages 16 to 30), mainly from economically marginalised communities. The three-year process would be as follows:

First Year: Unlearning and Self-Directed Learning

The aim of the first year is for learners to begin to *unlearn* their dependence on external sources of knowledge and to engage in co-creating their *self-directed learning* path. They will also learn basic *jugaad* (practical) skills, as well as identify a practice area to pursue in more depth.

- Gatherings: For 90 days spread over the year, learners will be together to learn, unlearn, share, raise questions and reflect together. These gatherings will take place before and between such learning events as internships and learning journeys.
- Mentorship: Each learner will have an opportunity to identify a suitable mentor who will be responsible for his or her learning in the field. This includes staying with mentors, dialoguing with them, getting involved in hands-on work and participating in day-to-day activities. In addition, each learner will be assigned a *Mitra* (friend) to provide emotional support throughout the learning process.
- Individual and Group Project
- Learning Journeys: Learners will travel together to explore ideas and practices. These journeys are an opportunity to develop skills around decision-making, working in teams, engaging in creative pursuits, experiencing tough living conditions, doing physical work, documenting learning and building collective learning culture.
- Assessment: Evaluation will be based on a mix of self, peer, mentor and *Mitra* appraisals—rather than standardised examinations. Each learner will be equipped to assess him or herself honestly and sincerely so that the process leads to future growth and clarity.

Second Year: Practice-Based Knowledge and Community Engagement

The focus of the second year will be to move into deeper learning around the learner's emerging vision for community action. Learners will also begin to gain leadership skills in engaging others to support their vision. Gatherings, internships, mentoring, learning journeys and self-assessment will continue throughout the year. In addition, there will be a focus on developing knowledge, relationships and skills that support accessing resources needed to move into right livelihood, such as hosting dialogues and understanding financing options.

Third Year: Right Livelihood and Spreading Learning

In the third year, learners are preparing to launch their livelihood initiatives. They will participate in workshops on entrepreneurship and financial management, and will be invited to develop the models they want to initiate. The focus will be on creating the relationships and structures they need to develop social enterprises that benefit their local communities.

As a result of completing this three-year process, learners experience:

- An opportunity to initiate a socially-relevant community enterprise;
- Relationships that connect them to financing systems and help in securing capital to establish their initiative;

- Skills to chart their own path, including communication, self-awareness, creativity, conflict management, facilitation, health and body awareness, computer and internet literacy, finances and budgets, and more;
- Internships in high performing organisations;
- Scope for further study/fellowship, including possible accreditation with some university

Who We Are

Swaraj University is being launched by two Indian organizations—Abhivyakti, based in Nashik, and Shikshantar, based in Udaipur—in partnership with the U.S.-based Berkana Institute. The program is an evolution of a youth fellowship we launched in 2005, which invited youth from disadvantaged communities to embark on a yearlong, self-directed learning process in their community. Participants chose practice areas (such as herbal medicine, community media, making products from waste, organic farming and more), developed their skills and explored the possibility of creating viable livelihoods that would benefit their communities. The success of this program—and our learning from it—has led to its evolution into this Swaraj University proposal.

About Abhivyakti

Abhivyakti Media for Development is a Nashik-based NGO engaged in fulfilling the media and communication needs of grassroots organizations and strengthening their leadership abilities. Abhivyakti has been in existence for the past 20 years and has extensive experience facilitating change through collaborations, partnerships and networking.

About Shikshantar

Shikshantar, a non-profit movement, was founded to challenge the monopoly of the culture of schooling and its institutions of thought control. Shikshantar is based in Udaipur and is committed to creating spaces for individuals and organizations to dialogue on finding alternatives to some of the fundamental models of education, development and progress.

About The Berkana Institute

The Berkana Institute works in partnership with a rich diversity of people around the world who strengthen their communities by working with the wisdom and wealth already present in their people, traditions and environment. Berkana and our partners share the clarity that whatever the problem, community is the answer. We prepare for an unknown future by creating strong and sustainable relationships, by wisely stewarding the earth's resources, and by building resilient communities. Berkana was founded in 1992 by Margaret Wheatley.

Preliminary Budget

We are seeking several kinds of support for the Swaraj University program. First, the start-up costs for developing the approach, process, relationships, infrastructure and selection process are approximately \$30,000, and we are seeking direct investment in this development phase.

Second, we are building the full cost of the program into the tuition fees, and will be seeking scholarship and tuition support. A preliminary estimate of the annual tuition is \$2500 per participant, based on 25 participants. The three-year cost is \$7500.

Start-Up Costs

For 16-month development period from May 2008 - Aug 2009

Management Team	18000
Travel Costs	6000
Administration	6000
Total	30000

Three-Year Budget

Rates are per person based on 25 learners

	Annual	3-Year
Cohort Gatherings	500	1500
Stipends for Learners	200	600
Mentor and Mitra honorariums	200	600
Learning Journeys	50	150
Workshop resources & facilitators	100	300
Cohort Selection	100	300
Management Team	750	2250
Travel and Administration	600	1800
Tuition Per Learner	2500	7500

Invitation

This initiative is an opportunity for young people to take control of their learning—and as a result, their future. We invite you to join us by bringing in your expertise, good wishes, finances and voice to take it forward. You can join us as a volunteer, workshop facilitator, mitra, mentor, partner, or some other role you envision. For details, please contact Shetal Dandage or Nitin Paranjape.

We invite you to support this work.

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