

January 2025

THE FEA WAY

Case Study of the ‘Freedom Employability Academy’ⁱ

I. SUMMARY

The Freedom Employability Academy (FEA) runs free courses that teach core employment skills to low-income Indians, typically between ages 18 to 25. Founded by Indian-American entrepreneur Deepak Chopra, the courses are free, i.e. students don't pay, and any adult can join. Each course is one-year long, two hours per day, six days a week. Students are taught English, digital literacy, and other skills for career success. As of January 2025, FEA is teaching more than 75,000 students per year in 1000 branches in 8 states in north India. Preliminary studies have shown that completing an FEA course increases a student's lifetime income by 53 lakh rupees.

II. THE PROBLEM

Unemployment in India is as big a worry as underemployment, i.e. low-income Indians who work in jobs where they are unable to fulfil their potential. Data shows that 53 million Indians were unemployed in 2022.ⁱⁱ Trends suggest that underemployment is an even larger problem.ⁱⁱⁱ Part of the reason is that formal education – especially for the poor – is not designed for the skills needed to thrive in the job market. Another reason for underemployment is that young adults are often unaware of the range of career options in the market. The problem that FEA seeks to solve is: how to provide low-income youth with the career skills that increase their incomes, while turning them into givers rather than just takers from their community.

III. DEEPAK CHOPRA'S STORY

Deepak Chopra is a first-generation entrepreneur who grew up in Delhi and moved to the United States where he has co-founded many companies, all in the vitamins and food supplement space. Growing up in the 1970s, he remembers overhearing conversations between his father and a friend who was a scholar of the Hindu sacred texts, the Upanishads. Deepak would continue the discussion with his father. From these conversations, he was motivated from an early age that one's own spiritual development required service to others. Deepak also remembers that while growing up, everyone in his parent's social circle had regular jobs and careers. The one exception was a neighbor, who was an entrepreneur, who seemed to be leading the most interesting life. The entrepreneurial bug remained with Deepak. He studied chemical engineering at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Delhi and graduated in 1982. He began his career trying to build a metal printing business in Gurgaon, which failed. He ended up going to the United States, got a job working for a vitamin manufacturer in New

York, and soon quit to venture out on his own. He has since founded or co-founded many companies, including Qunol, which is a US market leader in two distinct lines of food supplements.

While building a successful career, the religious desire to do service to others remained in Deepak. In 1999, he started a foundation that aimed to provide non-formal education to slum children in India. The foundation has since grown, and, since 2009, is sharply focussed on imparting employability skills to low-income adults through free courses.

Deepak stresses the importance of three core employability skills. First is the English language. Deepak came across a study that English learning increases salaries in India by 25 percent, and since then FEA has been focused on teaching English. Second, Deepak has a strong belief – backed by data – that the internet can bridge the knowledge and hard skills gap of low-income Indians. As he puts it “The world’s best university is now Youtube”. Students just need to know how to navigate this vast amount of information to improve themselves. Third, Deepak’s own career taught him skills for success that even an elite institution like IIT did not. As he puts it: “building productive and ethical mindsets was not part of the curriculum. Things such as dealing with stress, postponing gratification, building a growth mindset, being ethical, to question everything, to have faith – nobody taught me these at IIT.” Teaching these soft skills that are a key to a successful career is the third pillar of the FEA curriculum.

IV THE FEA MODEL

Student Profile: As of January 2025, FEA teaches over 75,000 students spread over 1000+ branches in 8 states in India. Half these students are in urban branches, while the other half are in rural branches. Students are typically 18 to 25 years of age, and attend FEA after high school and alongside a college education or job. Of those who complete the entire one-year course, 55 percent tend to be women, while 45 percent are men. Most of the fathers of students tend to be daily wage workers, farmers, contractors, factory workers, carpenters, electricians, or tailors. They earn between 60,000 and 2.4 lakhs rupees a year. Mothers are almost always homemakers. Archana Verma is a typical FEA student in Delhi.^{iv} Her father has blue-collar job while her mother is a homemaker. Archana’s teacher at FEA was worried that Archana would not be able to focus on FEA since she was both working and studying to be a chartered accountant. But she has managed her time well and has completed the FEA course. Her improved English and self-confidence will allow her to deal with a wider range of clients as a chartered accountant, thereby improving her career prospects.

Advertising: In order to advertise to potential students, FEA builds its branches in low-income urban neighborhoods and knocks on doors asking: “if we run a free English class, will you join?” Of course, the FEA course is more than English, and in rural areas they put up posters advertising “free English, free computers, job search skills, and interview preparations”.

Branches & Staff: Each of the 1000+ FEA branches are equipped with teachers and computers, and teach twenty students per session. In urban areas, each branch has two classrooms and a toilet with eight two-hour sessions in each classroom per day, six days a week. All urban branches have four teachers, and 20 computers equipped with internet. Rural branches have a single classroom, with three two-hour sessions per day, one teacher and 10 computers. FEA currently has 2,000 full-time employees, and another 250 part-time cleaning staff. FEA has a large teacher training branch in Lucknow and a smaller one in Delhi.

Curriculum. Every urban branch teaches standardized 12-month courses that are completely free for students. For rural branches, the course is for six months, for 2 hours a day, six days a week. The curriculum in urban and rural branches are different and available for download here: <https://feaindia.org/resources/>. In the first three months at an urban branch, i.e. the basic level, students are taught ‘English skills’ such as writing, proofreading, speaking and pronunciation. They are also taught ‘life skills’ such as career planning, computer skills, and managing one’s time. The next 4.5 months, i.e. the intermediate level, focusses on higher-level English such as letter and email writing, and pronunciation. It also focuses on personality development such as self-confidence, social etiquette and public speaking. The final 4.5 months, i.e. the advanced level, teaches the highest-level of English skills such as idioms and phrases and creative writing, alongside job search skills, advanced personality development, and interactive skills such as learning from online resources. The rural curriculum modifies the urban curriculum, with less emphasis on English and more on employment skills. The curriculum is constantly being updated by a 7-person curriculum development team. Research scholars from around the world also conduct experiments with the FEA curriculum.

V. MEASURING FEA’S IMPACT

Researchers from Stanford University have conducted a large-scale randomised controlled trial (RCT) to evaluate the effectiveness of FEA’s programme.^v From September 2019 to August 2020, researchers randomized 1,260 prospective students to receive immediate acceptance into the programme (the ‘treatment’ group) or one-year deferred acceptance (the ‘control’ group). Each student – both from the treatment and control group – then participated in an automated, video-recorded job interview in which questions were asked in both Hindi and English. A team of twenty hiring managers from third-party firms were then randomly assigned to view the job interview videos, and assess the expected starting monthly salary of the student in an average entry level job. The results showed that students who attended for the full 12 months (the ‘treatment’ group) were 11.7 percentage points more likely to obtain employment in an entry level job, 12.3 percentage points more likely to obtain employment in an entry level job that required English skills, and were likely to earn an additional 1,568 rupees per month. On average – and using conservative calculations – they would make 53.76 lakh rupees more over their careers, compared to those who did not do the FEA course.

While more such impact measurement studies are being planned, anecdotal evidence seems to confirm this impact. FEA has over 2,00,000 alumni, who typically have starting salaries of 18,000 to 25,000 rupees a month. A success story is Sameer Ahmed from Delhi, whose father works in a factory and earns less than 8,000 rupees a month. Due to poor communication skills, Sameer couldn't even get a job as a shopkeeper. But after a year at FEA, he was able to speak in English, write emails, and get a job at the global consultancy Accenture as a customer service representative. He now earns 50,000 rupees a month.

Another example is Rohit Sikarwar from Agra whose father is a tea-vendor and mother is a housewife. He has a passion for photography. Rohit's family was so poor, he had to leave private school, and the family subsisted on a single meal a day. When he joined FEA, Rohit struggled to learn English. But his determination helped him improve. As he puts it: "FEA is not teaching you only English. FEA is teaching you to grow in life as well". Because of his enhanced communication skills due to FEA, Rohit is now able to attract more clients and earn more as a professional photographer.

VI. HOW YOU CAN HELP

Researchers: FEA aims to eventually reach five million students a year. It is currently focusing on increasing its branches in rural areas, where the biggest roadblock is finding trained managers. FEA is constantly looking to update its curriculum based on research feedback. If you are interested in researching the FEA model or using FEA as a research test site, please contact manyu.angrish@feaindia.org.

Mentors: FEA is also looking for mentors who can serve as successful role models for low-income students who usually do not know educated, successful people. The time commitment is minimal. To sign up, please go to: <https://feaindia.org/mentor/>.

Potential Students/Employees: If you are a student looking for a branch close to you, or a potential employee (teacher/manager), please navigate the FEA website: <https://feaindia.org/>.

ⁱ This case study has been put together by Vinay Sitapati, associate dean and professor at Shiv Nadar University Chennai. It is based on information provided by FEA.

ⁱⁱ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/indicators/india-has-53-million-unemployed-people-as-of-dec-2021-cmie/articleshow/89016043.cms>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/underemployment-is-the-problem-not-joblessness/article26582684.ece>; <https://theprint.in/opinion/from-would-be-employed-to-badly-employed-the-group-that-will-lead-indias-next-mass-movement/737812/>; <https://theprint.in/opinion/from-would-be-employed-to-badly-employed-the-group-that-will-lead-indias-next-mass-movement/737812/>

^{iv} See the FEA video on Archana Verma:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OStdCAvStOw&list=TLGGNPG4AssNwRYyMjA4MjAyMg&t=11s&ab_channel=FEA-FreedomEmployabilityAcademy

^v <https://feaindia.org/FEA%20Impact%20Study%20by%20Stanford%20University.pdf>