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Indian American Entrepreneur-led 'Learning Upgrade' Among Adult Literacy Program Finalists

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Vinod Lobo (right) leads the Learning Upgrade team, which was named a finalist for the Barbara Bush Foundation Adult Literacy XPRIZE competition. The Indian American entrepreneur is seen here at #ProLitCon with (l-r) AdultLiteracy XPRIZE director Shlomy Kattan and team leaders Ira Sockowitz and Dana Rozier. (Twitter photo)

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Indian American-led Learning Upgrade and India-based AmritaCREATE were among five finalists named for the Barbara Bush Foundation Adult Literacy XPRIZE.

The competition, presented by Dollar General Literacy Foundation, is a global program that challenges teams to develop mobile applications for existing smart devices that result in the greatest increase in literacy skills among participating adult learners in just 12 months.

The solutions will overcome key barriers to literacy learning by improving access, while increasing retention, and scaling to meet demand.

The vision, according to the competition website, is to empower the nearly one in six adults in the U.S. who lack basic literacy skills to improve their lives and realize their dreams.

Teams will compete in a multi-stage competition that tests for the ability to measurably increase the literacy level of low-literate adults within 12 months; creation of a design that is easy and accessible for use on a mobile phone so that learners can access it and operate it from anywhere, anytime; and software curriculum that is engaging, relevant and attuned to the needs and interests of the adult learner.

"In selecting the finalist teams, we are one step closer to eliminating the barriers to literacy learning for the over 36 million low literate adults living in the United States," the competition wrote on its website, in making the announcement. "Their technology will disrupt the cycle of isolation, lack of opportunity and poverty for these individuals and their families. We are one step closer to the radical new approach to adult literacy learning."

Led by Vinod Lobo, San Diego, Calif.-based Learning Upgrade is a team of educators, musicians, artists and programmers that designs innovative, engaging lessons for English, reading, writing and math. Through songs, video, games and rewards, Learning Upgrade has helped over 1 million students make learning breakthroughs, according to its bio page.

With the new Learning Upgrade app designed for the XPRIZE competition, everyone with a smartphone can start where they are now and move up to where they need to be to succeed in school, earn a diploma, get a better job, or enter college, it said.

The app has already proven effective in a variety of literacy programs including adult schools, libraries, community colleges, migrant education, public housing, refugee centers, and workforce training. Independent learners in over 40 countries have experienced the app, the competition page noted.

After successful pilots, the company has expanded its deployments at Queens Public Library in New York, Bunker Hill Community College in Boston, and READ/San Diego Public Library.

It said that its next challenge is to scale up to serve millions of learners and change lives around the world.

"We are making this happen by partnering with organizations, companies and education providers to expand app access to more unserved learners," the company wrote.

Lobo is the co-founder and CEO of Learning Upgrade. He has worked for over 20 years producing educational technology programs.

His expertise is bringing together educators, musicians, artists, and programmers to create lessons that are engaging and effective, according to his bio.

The mix of product development and work with instructors and students in schools gives Lobo a unique perspective. His goal is to combine learning research, creative media, and technology to help students make learning breakthroughs, the bio noted.

Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, led by Prema Nedungadi, was established by humanitarian leader Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi, who is also the chancellor of the university. Her concept of education for both living and life skills, compassion-driven research and commitment to instilling universal values have come together to shape Amrita into an institution where the latest advancements and discoveries combine with service-mindedness, according to its company bio.

AmritaCREATE has a unique mix of multidisciplinary teams in the areas of adaptive and personalized learning, language learning, large-scale platforms, data visualization, STEM education, virtual learning environments, and technology platform developments, it said.

Large-scale projects developed and deployed across India include Amrita Rural India Tablet-enhanced Education in rural and remote villages, Intelligent Tutoring Systems for School Education, eGovernance Systems for Schools, Big Data Analytics in Education, Health Awareness and Monitoring IoT based Systems and Simulations and CASE-based Environments for Medical Education.

The center coordinated 72 rural education centers in 21 Indian states and has trained over 16,000 teachers in over 4,000 schools in technology-enhanced learning, according to the competition page.

Each of the finalist teams were awarded \$100,000. A total of \$7 million will be doled out to the teams. Among the winning prizes include \$5 million to the grand prize winner; \$1 million each to two teams that demonstrate the greatest literacy gains by their respective field test participants over a 12-month period; \$100,000 to each finalist team that advance to the Communities Competition; and \$1 million to the team that encourages the greatest percentage of its adult learners to download and use any of the finalist solutions over a six-month period.