

Sustaining Work-based Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: Sustaining Work-based Learning during the COVID-19 pandemic became a challenge since access to working-cum-learning places for students of a work-based degree programme was depleted. Socio-economic challenges needed to be addressed as students came from economically weaker sections of society. Also critical were the pedagogic challenges in terms of validating the sustenance and spirit of the work-based learning (WBL) model.

This case study presents a special initiative of digital freelancing offering virtual workplaces as well as livelihoods to work-based learning students during the pandemic. Merits, limitations, potential spinoffs of the WBL model for higher education and learning for development are discussed.

Keywords: work-based learning, WBL, sustainability, livelihoods, Nai Talim, pedagogy, digital freelancing.

Background

This is a case study of higher education of students during the COVID-19 outbreak and the lockdown in India. These students belong to a unique work-based degree programme – BBA@Workplace, by Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) and Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University (YCMOU) in collaboration with Maharashtra Knowledge Corporation Ltd (MKCL) and industry.

In this system, the open universities, in collaboration with industry, offer work-based degree courses to suit the nature and needs of business (Sawant, 2017) and admit youth, especially from the economically weaker sections of the society, at affordable fees. The businesses/industries offer paid internships to the students for performing at the workplace.

Problem Definition

During lockdown, most workplaces were closed. Interns had to return to their hometowns and lost access to their workplaces. The core component and key pillar of the WBL model, i.e., exposure and experience in a real-life work environment was lost, thereby, challenging the very existence of WBL model.

The problem statement is “how to sustain the spirit of WBL during pandemic.”

Existing Model of Work-based Learning

The model attempts convergence of working and learning (Vinoba, 1955). From the student’s perspective the model under study is as shown in Figure 1.



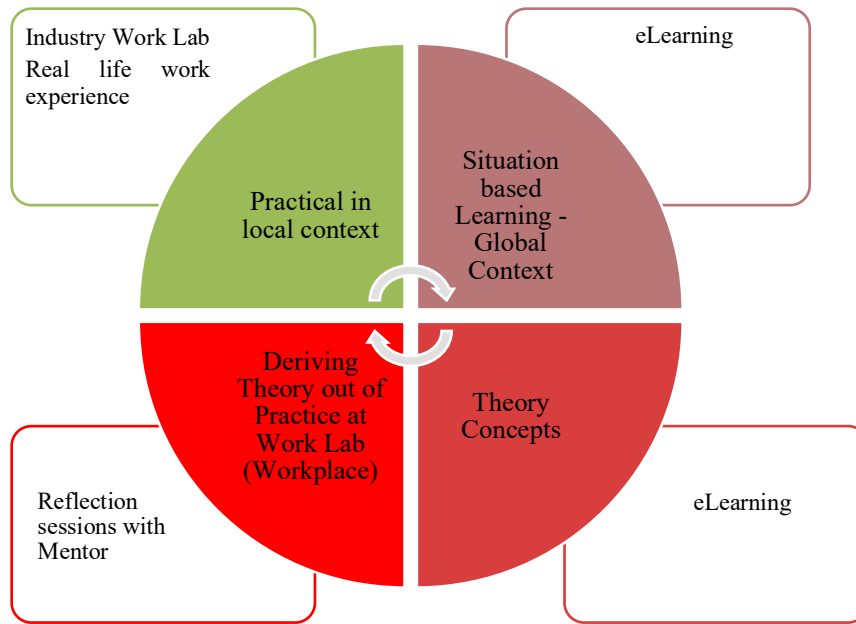


Figure 1: WBL Model

(Source: Namjoshi, R., 2017)

WBL students gain hands-on practical skills in a local context through exposure to real-life work experience provided by industry. (Raelin, 2008). Their connection with the global context and best practices is established through situation-based eLearning modules before and after office hours. eLearning content covers theoretical concepts and e-Assessments linked to the curriculum stipulated by the university. Finally, the derivation of theory out of practice at the work lab, i.e., the industry workplace, is enabled through reflection sessions conducted by mentors (senior professionals/industry experts) from the industry in question (MKCL, 2001). (See Figure 2.)

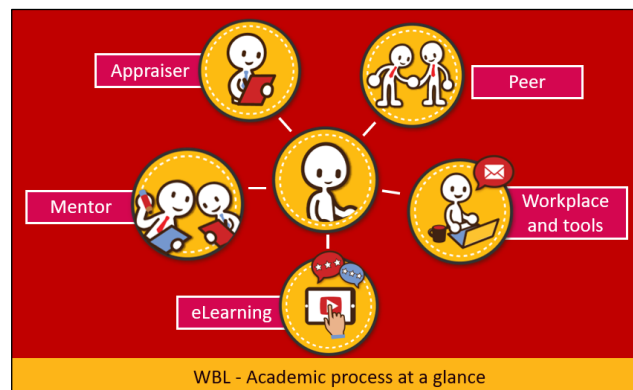


Figure 2: WBL academic process at a glance

The WBL ecosystem, including a real-life workplace, peers, appraisers, mentors and eLearning environment, contributes to offer 'Learning through Working' experience for WBL students (Namjoshi, 2020).

In the specific context of 'no-workplace because of lockdown during COVID 19 pandemic', for implementing the above mentioned model of WBL, specific challenges on the forefront were as follows.

Pedagogic Challenges

1. In the absence of a physical workplace (an integral part of a WBL ecosystem), what would be the alternative?
2. Who would be an alternative for appraisers offering corrective feedback for better performance?
3. The WBL model is performance centric. How do you ensure that the students continue to earn work-ratings while being away from the workplaces and ensure performance in degree as well as a meaningful upgrading of their resume?
4. Since it is learning through working, how do you ensure that working continues?

Social and Community Challenges

1. With no stipend, how can the livelihoods of the WBL students be ensured, especially for students from economically weaker sections of society?
2. With no-stipend or deductions, the net earnings of families are adversely affected. Girl-child education is compromised.
3. How can we ensure that WBL students, especially girls, continue with higher education in the new normal?

Approach

According to estimates, India is the second largest market of freelance professionals (about 15 million), standing next to only the US (approximately 53 million). They contribute to about 40% of the total freelance jobs offered worldwide (Kathuria et al, 2017). India could have **20 million** freelancers by 2025, with a market size estimated to grow to **\$20-30 billion** (Gautam, 2018). As per Payoneer's Freelancer Income Report 2020, the average hourly rate of Indian freelancers is \$18.

Facts related to the gig economy worth considering are:

1. Seventy percent of corporations in India used gig workers at least once for major organizational projects in 2018 (Bhatia, n.d.).
2. Nearly **45% of human resource (HR)** heads want to hire a gig worker to supplement the skills of their existing workforce, 39% would do this to reduce the cost and 10% for filling temporary vacancies on their teams (Gautam, 2018).
3. Google's workforce has more freelancers than permanent employees (Bergen & Eidlson, 2018).
4. Hirers care less about freelancers' educations and more about their portfolios, ratings and experience (Payoneer, 2020) .

In view of this, digital freelancing activity was initiated for WBL students who lost access to their workplaces and faced a threat of loss of income and a loss of degree, as it is linked to performance at the workplace on an experimental basis. The objective was to address the challenges mentioned earlier.

Digital Freelancing and the WBL Model

Parameters of Digital freelancing were mapped with WBL.

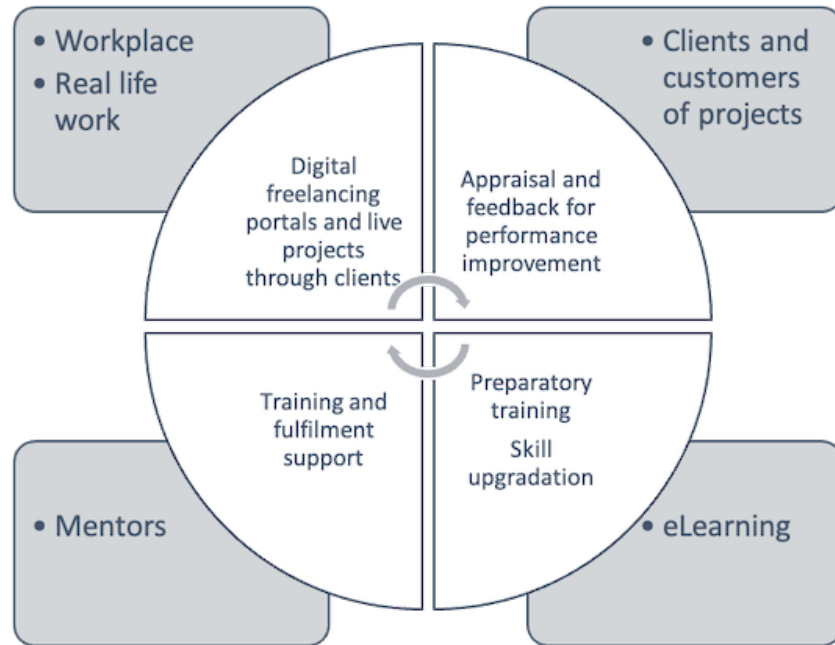


Figure 3: Digital Freelancing Parameters

Challenges and solutions:

Challenge	Solution
Workplace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Virtual workplace of digital freelancing portal offering real work in digital space.
Appraiser	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clients/customers stipulating requirements act as appraisers to some extent. Ratings and feedbacks received from clients/customers help student perform better.
Work-ratings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Awarded by mentors based on the client/customer ratings.
Continuity of work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access to global projects through portals.

Thus, the digital freelancing model attempts to offer a solution for various pedagogic challenges for sustaining WBL.

Mentors

Eight practicing digital freelancers with minimum of six months' experience from Odisha, India were selected as mentors. Qualification: graduation, age group, 20-30 years.

Responsibilities taken up by mentors:

1. Daily interactions for the students
2. Helping students identify the skill-sets for profile creation on portal and its updating
3. Scaffolding for bidding
4. Fulfilment support for submission of the final project.

Mentors offered scaffolding (Sulzberger, 2015) continuously through WhatsApp/email and conducted daily interactions through video conferencing/audio calls, both individually and for small groups. Success stories of early birds, project links were shared within groups based on the skill set of the team members.

Activity

Steps involved in unfolding the digital freelancing activity:

- a) Student Orientation: concept of digital freelancing, how to register on a portal, create a profile, etc.
- b) Sixty-one students divided into eight groups based on skills and mapping with the experience of the mentors.
- c) Student-mentor allocation.
- d) Training, support to create profiles, bidding through videos.
- e) Personalized guidance for exploring projects and bidding.

Operational Framework

Dedicated Team: project manager, student facilitators, students' WBL mentors (other than the digital freelancing mentors).

This team monitored the outcomes, implementation challenges, students' feedback and responses. Immediate corrective actions were planned.

Daily Log Sheet: number of bids, number of students who submitted bids, cumulative record of project bids, number of projects awarded, earning details, etc. Comments from mentors and student facilitators helped in incorporating mid-course corrections.

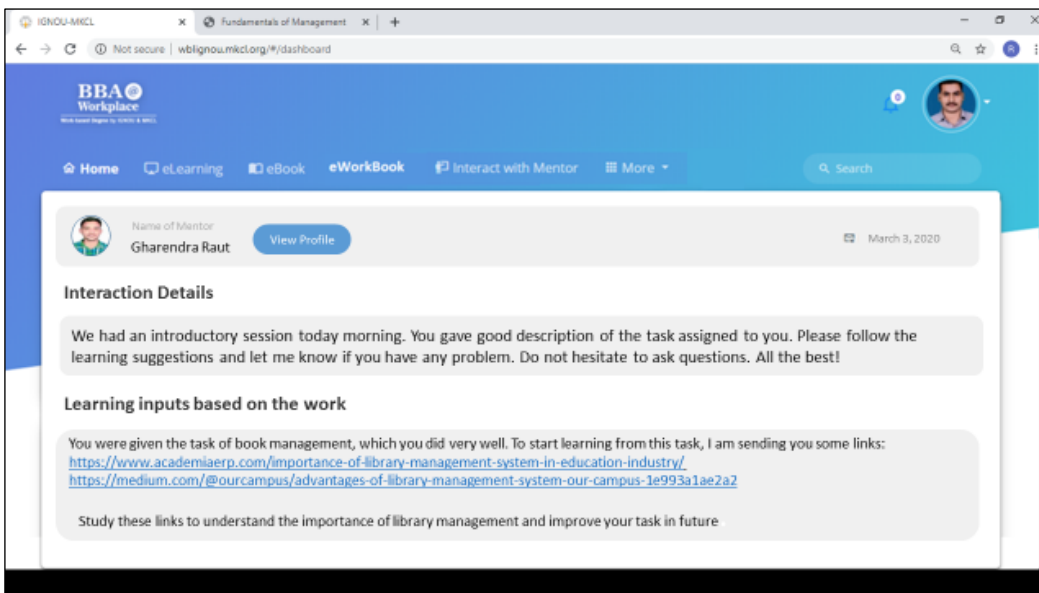
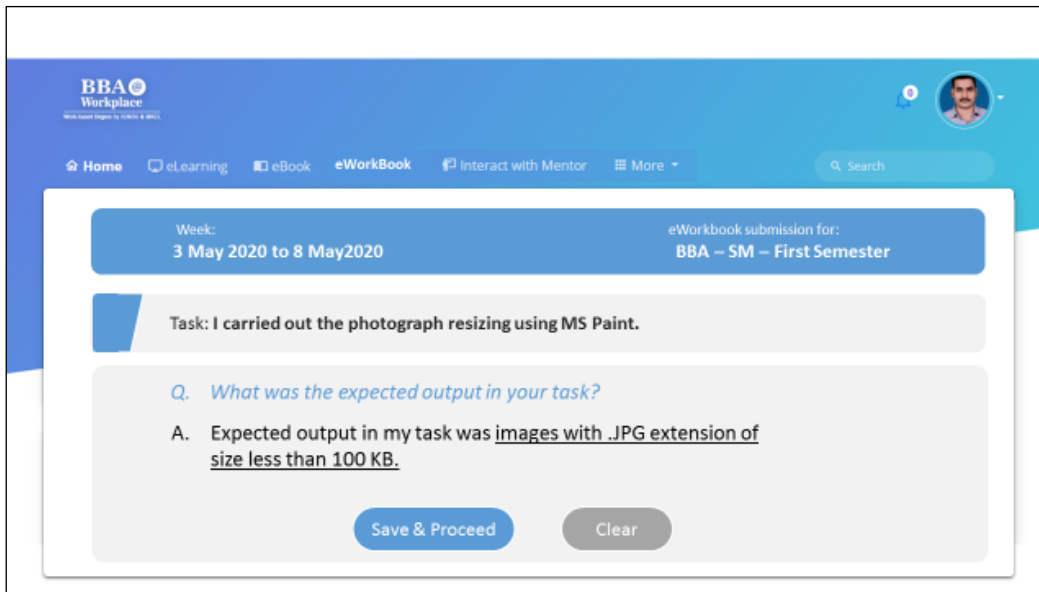
Daily Work Report: students were required to upload daily work report. This was validated by mentors.

MKCL's Work-based Learning Management Framework

Technology platform deployed for work-based degree students is used for the special activity of digital freelancing.

The Work-based Learning Management Framework is a comprehensive technology platform used by all the students of work-based degree programme. It offers learning management and WBL management functionalities to students including filling up of e-Workbook and work-reports (weekly, monthly, semesterly), which is most relevant to the digital freelancing activity.

Snapshots of work-reporting, interactions with mentor:



Challenges and Solutions

Key challenges during implementation:

1. Awareness

Most of the students were unaware of Digital Freelancing. They had inhibitions about its authenticity and credibility and were hesitant to create profiles.

Solution: An orientation programme with high quality eLearning videos was designed. This included real examples of earnings. Project managers and student facilitators offered personal guidance.

2. Self-awareness

Students were unaware of skill sets that could be mentioned in the profile, e.g., minimum skills required for translation jobs include proficiency in two languages. For app promotion, proficient spoken communication skills are essential.

Solution: Student facilitators and mentors interviewed students to identify skill sets based on the previous tasks performed at the workplace.

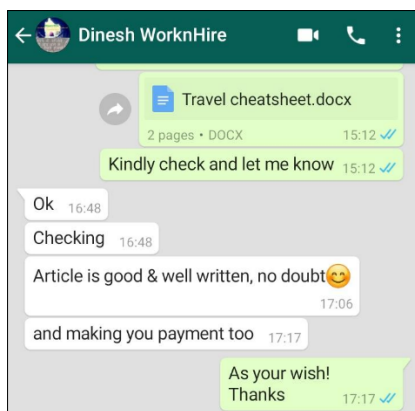
They offered scaffolds for the creation of appropriate profiles.

Mentors searched for appropriate jobs/projects for students.

3. Perseverance and Patience

Freelancing requires substantial time to establish a credible profile on the portal and attract good jobs and projects.

- During the activity under discussion, the first six days were spent for creating profiles. First bidding was done on day 7. The bidding count gradually improved: Day 7 - 12, Day 8 - 34, Day 9 - 51, Day 10 - 77. On Day 15 the bid count crossed the 100 mark.
- The first student received the first project five days after the bidding. It was on Day 11 of the activity. She earned INR (Indian Rupees) 50. The project was assigned to her by her mentor.



- Keeping students motivated, restraining them from quitting, ensuring that they continue to bid even if the project is not awarded was challenging.

Solutions:

- Mentors shared their personal success stories with data.
- Observing that the students are reluctant to bid if there is no immediate response received from the client, mentors shared projects.
- At times, university officials were involved.
- Mentors monitored students' performance, recorded personalised remarks and awarded ratings.
- Rating criteria used for award of ratings included these parameters: Proactiveness, Bids, Connectedness, Projects, Earnings, Ratings, New skill/profile upgrade, Independent projects, Posting projects as Client/Owner. These ratings were then considered as work-ratings for respective months.

- Students were re-grouped based on mentor ratings:
 - Group 1: 24 students (Rating 0)
 - Group 2: 21 students (Rating 1 - 3)
 - Group 3: 16 students (Rating 4 - 8)
- Group 3 students were asked to record videos

4. **Lack of Infrastructure (laptop/computer, poor Internet connectivity)**

Few interested students faced challenges of poor Internet connectivity/access to laptop.

Solution: Students were exposed to mobile apps to take up projects that could be completed using smartphones.

E.g., one student completed a voiceover project using smartphone with limited Internet access. Another student completed a video editing project using the KineMaster app on his smartphone.

Social Background, Student Experiences

The social background and reflections of students are imperative for understanding the impact on their families, especially in view of the community challenges being addressed.

Representative student profiles, experiences collected through informal interviewing are mentioned.

1. Amrura Manohar Khopade

Address: Wathar Nimbalkar, Maharashtra.

(2011 Census: Population — 3954, Number of houses — 830. Female population — 49.1%. Village literacy rate — 71.7%, Female literacy rate — 32.1%.) (Villages-India, n.d.)

In a family of four, Amruta's stipend was the only regular income source. Her mother is an ASHA worker (Accredited Social Health Activist), kept record of COVID positive patients' families, carried high risk during pandemic. Amruta's earning contributed to the psychological well-being of the family.

Project: On Freelancer.in, First earning: \$10, 5-star rating. Project — Converting math research papers from PDF to Word.

freelancer.com/projects/latex/Convert-PDF-Research-Paper-containing/details

Please provide your GSTIN
As per Indian government regulations, freelancers are required to provide GST details for Tax Collected at Source (TCS) purposes. [Learn more](#)
[Update your GSTIN](#)

freelancer [Browse](#) [My Projects](#) [Messages](#) [Updates](#) [Post a Project](#) Amruta K. @Amrutamvk ₹250.00 INR

Convert PDF Research Paper containing Math to Word without changing Mathematics

COMPLETE

[Details](#) [Proposals](#) [Payments](#) [Files](#) [Tasks](#) [Reviews](#)

Project Details

\$10.00 – 11.00 USD

Convert PDF Research Paper containing Math to Word without changing Mathematics, So that we may be able to edit the paper.

Skills Required

PDF Word LaTeX Mathematics

Project ID: 25100096

About the Employer

India

8 projects completed

5.0 (8 reviews)

Member since Sep 6, 2013

Employer Verification

- Identity verified
- Payment method verified
- Deposit made
- Email address verified
- Profile completed
- Phone number verified

Need a youtube channel with 1k-10k subs...
Facebook Marketing, Social Media Marketi...
\$5 - 15 USD

Chats 4:22 PM 4/29/2020

freelancer.com/projects/latex/Convert-PDF-Research-Paper-containing/proposals

freelancer [Browse](#) [My Projects](#) [Messages](#) [Updates](#) [Post a Project](#) Amruta K. @Amrutamvk ₹250.00 INR

Convert PDF Research Paper containing Math to Word without changing Mathematics

COMPLETE

[Details](#) [Proposals](#) [Payments](#) [Files](#) [Tasks](#) [Reviews](#)

Awarded Freelancers

Amruta K. @Amrutamvk **\$10.00 USD** in 7 days

5.0 (1 reviews) 0.0 ██████████ 100% Completion

Hello, I have reviewed your project description. I can do this job with 100% accuracy and commitment. Please be assured of quality without any complaints. I have a lot of experience in this project and ability to deliver quality and reliable work. I can achieve the results that you are asking for. Please pick me up if you think I am worth the job. Thank you

[Request Edit](#)

Budget
\$10.00 – 11.00 USD

Bids
48

Average bid
\$14.00 USD

Other Proposals

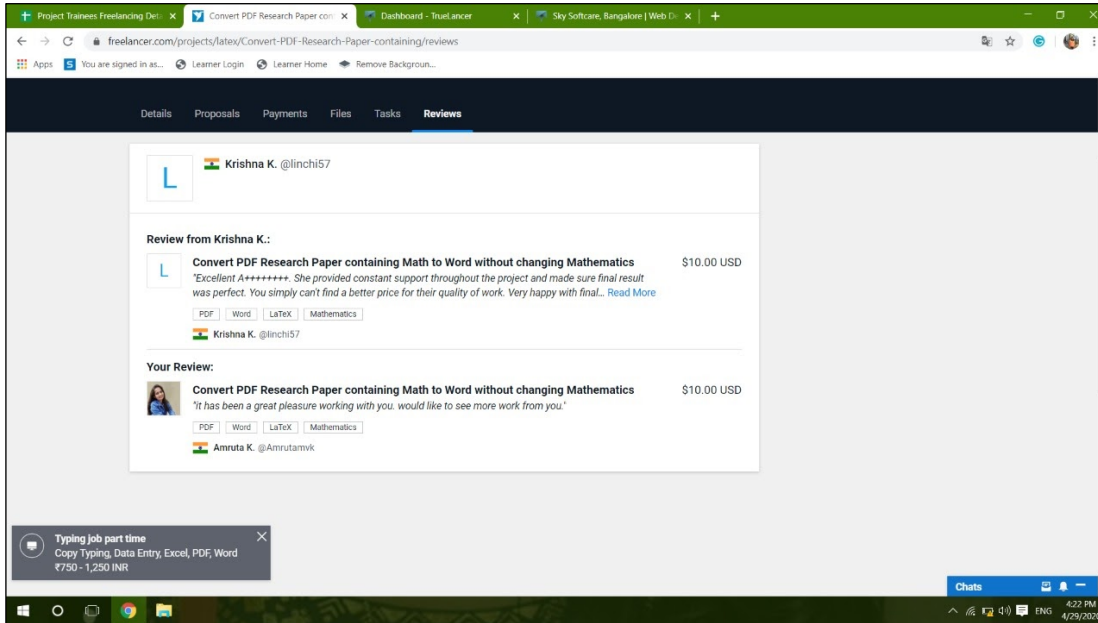
Sobha D. @sobhad20 **\$10.00 USD** in 1 day

5.0 (75 reviews) 4.6 ██████████ 95% Completion

Hi,

I have gone through your project description and I am very much interested in... [Read More](#)

Chats 4:22 PM 4/29/2020



2. Vaibhav Rameshwar Mandal

Address: Jalna, Maharashtra. (2011 Census — Total population — 285349) (Jalna)

Vaibhav, with a small family of three, was worried about his father, working in the health department as a supervisor. His family was surprised with his earnings sitting at home! They were happy to see him productively engaged when his friends sat idle during lockdown.

Project: WorkNHire, First earning — INR 1200. Project — Synching audio and video by referring the scripts.

3. Rutika Hemchandrakant Satpute

Address: Ballarpur, Maharashtra. (2011 Census — Population 89,452) (Census, n.d.)

Members in family — 7. Rutika's family income depends on labor-work under MGNREGA. Her family suffered a financial crisis during COVID-19.

Rutika is one of the top performers. She paid TYBBA fees from her earnings and plans to continue digital freelancing. She is now mentoring others.

Project: On Freelancer.in, First earning — \$16. Project — Providing Marathi voiceover to messages in app.

Freelancing Tasks Status - Google | 2 Native Marathi Speaking Freelancer | WhatsApp

freelancer.com/projects/administrative-support/Native-Marathi-Speaking-Freelancer/details

You are signed in as... Learner Login | Learner Home | Remove Background...

Details | Proposals | Payments | Files | Tasks

Project Details

\$15.00 - 16.00 USD

Read First !!! Apply only if your Native Language is Marathi !!!

Need 2 Freelancers !!!

Your task is very simple. We will give you a "Scripts/Text set of 1100 sentences" written in Marathi Language and Our Company Android Voice recorder app to open these scripts.

After opening the script with the app, all 1000 sentences will appear on the APP screen 1 by 1. All a person needs to do is Read & Record these 1100 sentences 1 by 1 by clicking the start, stop and Next button in that Voice recording app.

For better understanding, Please check the video instruction and project details from the google drive link below.

Video Instruction:
<https://drive.google.com/open?id=1FvYqZGUuRj-dFD7p6T1Ia2vAZ7y5Lr>

Check All Details from this Google drive Folder:
[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1IjBR9X-HYq\\$zou594IYvwhdIEuY7uqprsharing](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1IjBR9X-HYq$zou594IYvwhdIEuY7uqprsharing)

***** The payment for reading 1 script is 1\$ (USD) *****
 *****Please place your bid as 1\$*****

- * This work will need 3-4 hours of continuous work.
- * A quiet and noise free place is mandatory
- * Stay Online between 11pm-1am IST time to get a reply from me.

Some important requirements are:

About the Employer

Bangladesh 🇬🇧

26 projects completed

★★★★★ (19 reviews)

Member since Jul 23, 2017

Employer Verification

- Identity verified
- Payment method verified
- Deposit made
- Email address verified
- Profile completed
- Phone number verified

Bids Left	0/8
Until next bid	17 hours
Refresh speed	1x
Average bid	\$20 USD

Chats

4:33 PM 4/26/2020

Freelancing Tasks Status - Google | 2 Native Marathi Speaking Freelancer | WhatsApp

freelancer.com/projects/administrative-support/Native-Marathi-Speaking-Freelancer/details

You are signed in as... Learner Login | Learner Home | Remove Background...

Details | Proposals | Payments | Files | Tasks

Project Details

\$15.00 - 16.00 USD

Read First !!! Apply only if your Native Language is Marathi !!!

Need 2 Freelancers !!!

Your task is very simple. We will give you a "Scripts/Text set of 1100 sentences" written in Marathi Language and Our Company Android Voice recorder app to open these scripts.

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For better understanding, Please check the video instruction and project details from the google drive link below.

Video Instruction:
<https://drive.google.com/open?id=1FvYqZGUuRj-dFD7p6T1Ia2vAZ7y5Lr>

Check All Details from this Google drive Folder:
[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1IjBR9X-HYq\\$zou594IYvwhdIEuY7uqprsharing](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1IjBR9X-HYq$zou594IYvwhdIEuY7uqprsharing)

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 *****Please place your bid as 1\$*****

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About the Employer

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26 projects completed

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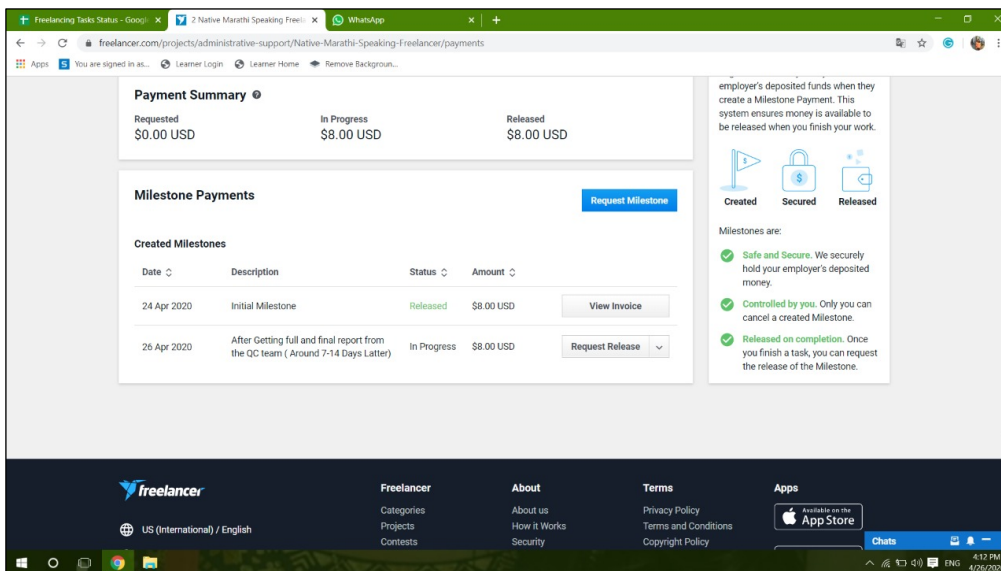
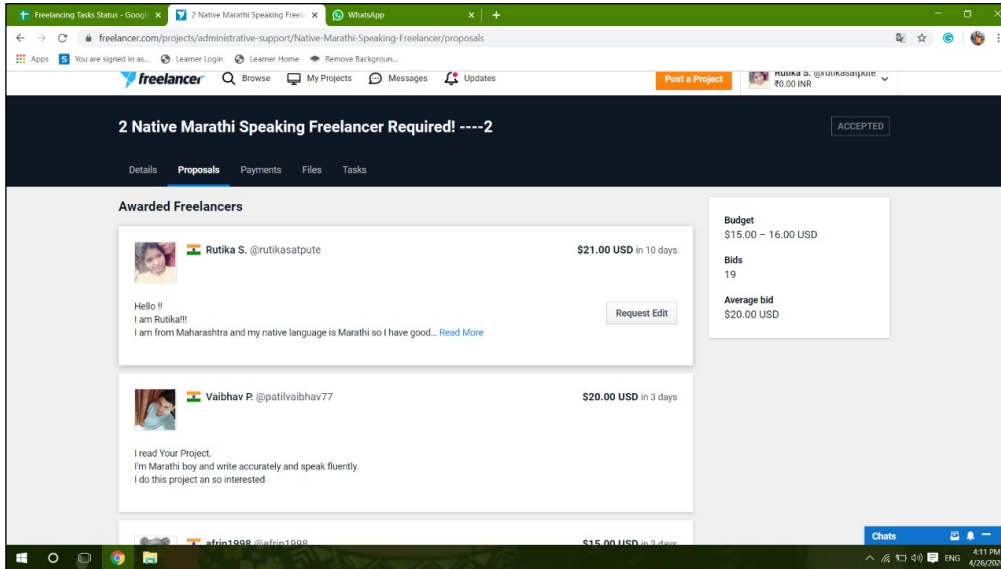
Employer Verification

- Identity verified
- Payment method verified
- Deposit made
- Email address verified
- Profile completed
- Phone number verified

Bids Left	0/8
Until next bid	17 hours
Refresh speed	1x
Average bid	\$20 USD

Chats

4:19 PM 4/26/2020



4. Amrish Rameshwar Singh

Address: Shahpur, Rohtas, Bihar. (2011 Census — Total population is 643, Number of houses — 105) (Villages-India, n.d.)

Amrish is one of the highest earners. He comes from a farming family.

Amrish was not sure about the credibility of digital freelancing. According to him, communication skills and understanding the actual price in the market are crucial.

Project: On Freelance.in, First earning — INR 400. Project — Tele-calling. He re-approached the client and gained the project.

Work from home opportunity. Need people for domestic calls preferred language Hindi, Marathi, english

Project Details ₹100.00 – 400.00 INR /hr

Need people who can call for advertising and marketing purposes. We will provide list of people whom to call. Need good communication skills.

Skills Required

Translation Data Entry Telemarketing Voice Talent Hindi

Project ID: 25011355

About the Employer

- India
- 0 projects completed
- 0 reviews
- Member since Feb 4, 2020

Employer Verification

- Identity verified
- Payment method verified
- Deposit made
- Email address verified
- Profile completed

Work from home opportunity. Need people for domestic calls preferred language Hindi, Marathi, english

Proposals

Vivek0landge @Vivek0landge ₹389.00 INR per hour

Budget ₹100.00 – 400.00 INR /hr

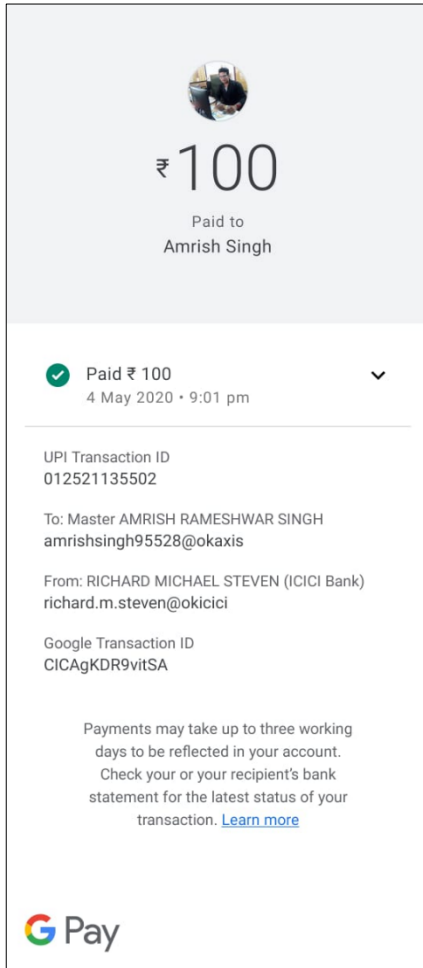
Bids 67

Average bid ₹270.00 INR

Hi sir,
I am Vivek I am from Maharashtra and well known about marathi my mother tongue is also...

Amrish S. @amrishsingh95528 ₹278.00 INR per hour

Hello !!
I am Amrish..
I am a good freelancer. I have good knowledge about Hindi and English languages. I can speak hindi fluently. Hindi is my native language. Also I have good computer knowledge. I can do work with MS Word and Excel. I can do this job. If you will hire me then you will get a satisfactory result.

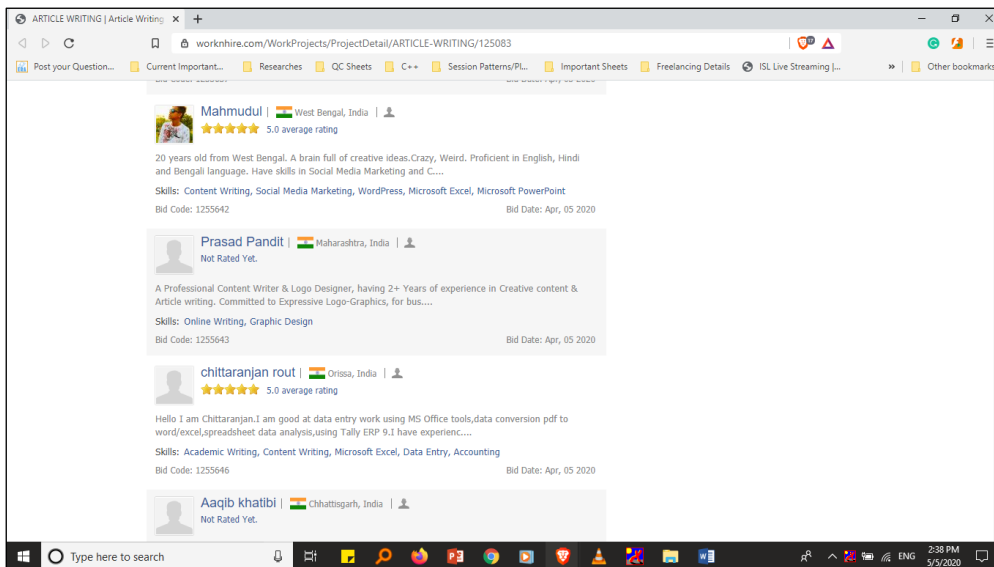
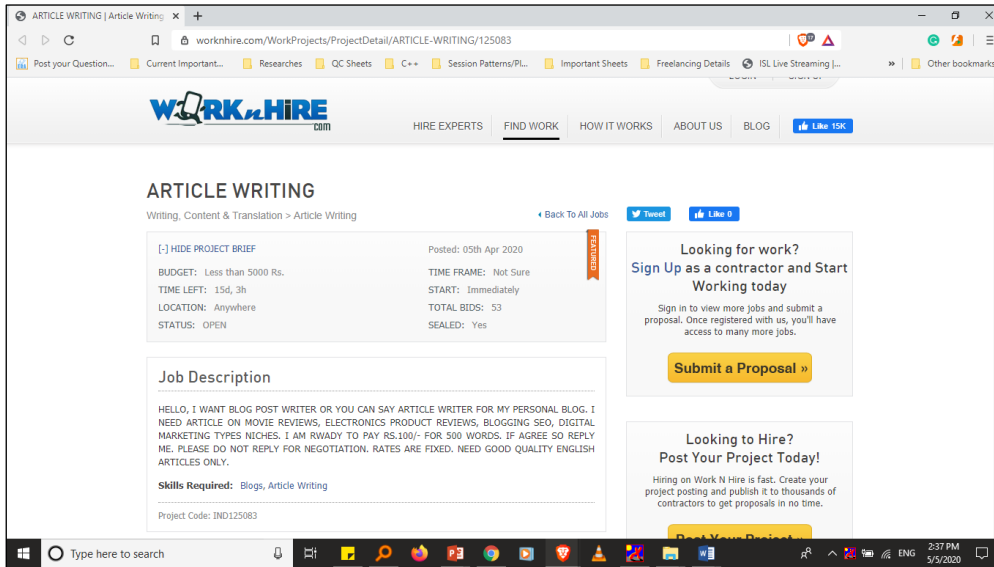


5. Prasad Uddhav Pandit

Address: Bhagpur, Nasik, Maharashtra. (Population — 12,353) (Census, n.d.)

Prasad doesn't belong to the financially weaker section, however, the closing down of the family business (Computer Training Institute) increased the liabilities on each family member. His family is satisfied with his involvement and new way of earning.

Project: On WorkNHire.com. First earning — INR 320. Project — Blog writing.



Data, Outcomes

The activity was initiated on March 26, 2020, i.e., on the next day after the declaration of lockdown in India.

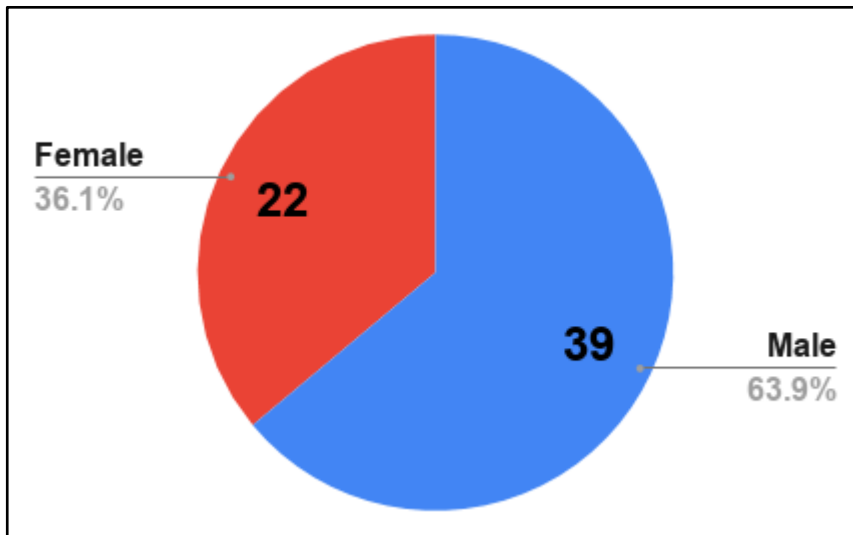
It continued for 52 days, i.e., till May 30, 2020.

Sixty-one students were involved in the initial stage of the activity.

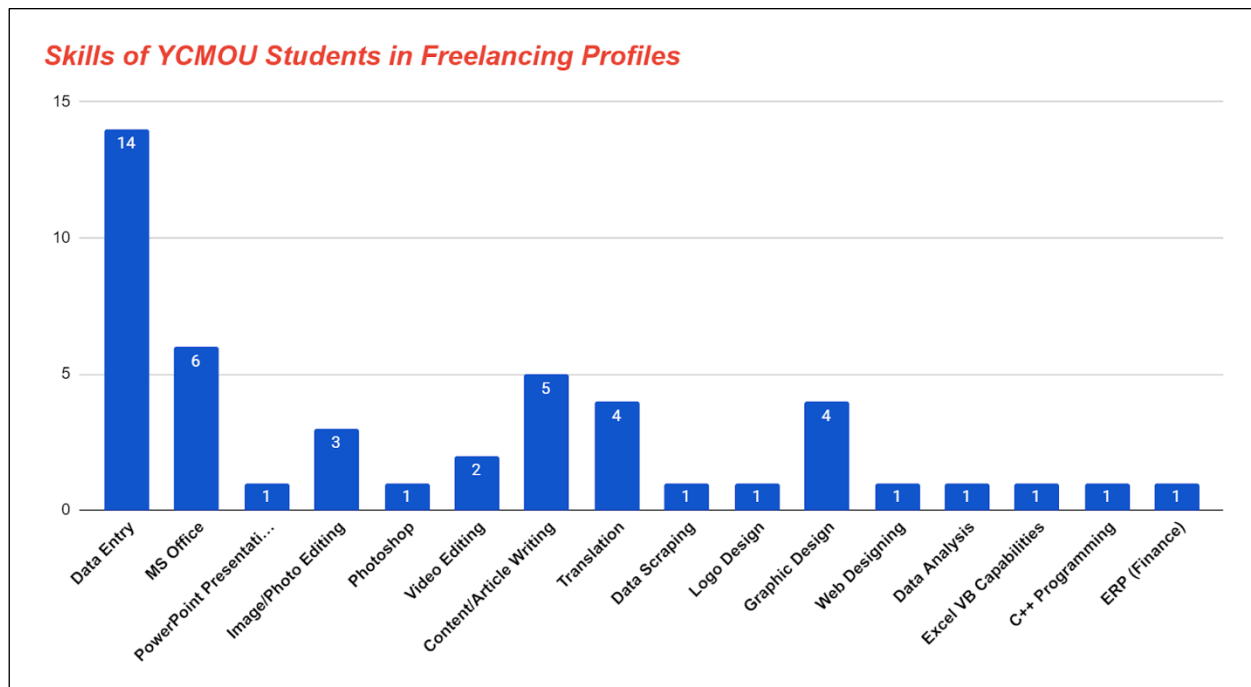
Ten percent of students continued to earn even after the scaffolding by mentors was discontinued.

Number of bids during these 52 days: 500 projects.

Student Profiles



Skill Sets



Sector/Types of Tasks

1. Article/Content Writing
2. Blog Writing
3. Video Editing
4. Voiceover (Audio in Mobile App)
5. App Promotion

Earning

The total combined earnings of the students was INR 36,776.

Representative Student earning:

Amrish Singh: INR 18,800

Rutika Satpute: INR 9,866

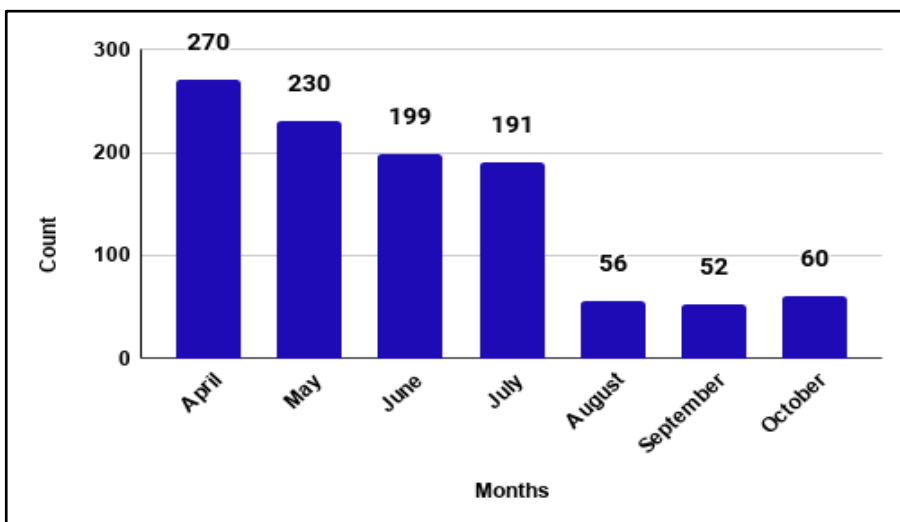
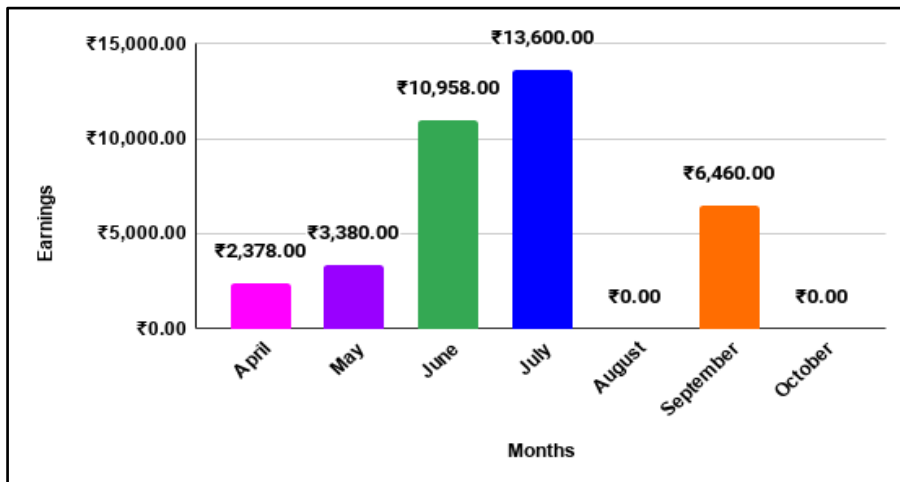
Vaibhav Mandal: INR 3,700

Amruta Khopade: INR 2,850

Geeta Panchal: INR 1,140

Bidding

Count of bids per month along with earnings per month. Initial 52 days were part of the core experiment.



Spin-offs

In view of the success of the digital freelancing activity for WBL students, the following spin-offs and future directions can be envisioned.

1. WBL Degrees for Digital Freelancers

Projects on digital freelancing platforms are awarded based on skill sets, portfolios, i.e., evidence of earlier work and ratings. Special WBL degree programmes can be launched for digital freelancers. Main streaming in higher education can be achieved through this.

The case study demonstrates its effectiveness.

2. Digital Freelancing Hubs

Digital Freelancing Hubs could be established through public-private partnerships. Such hubs could establish a network of mentors and freelancing facilitators and offer necessary IT infrastructure to budding digital freelancers. This could be an organized effort to further contribute to the global digital freelancing market.

Conclusions

1. The WBL model with digital freelancing as a mode for livelihoods is scalable and replicable.
2. Digital freelancing did help to ensure the sustainability of WBL during the pandemic by adequately addressing the pedagogic, social and community challenges.

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