$57 tablet: Made in S’pore, snapped up in India

Low-cost I-slate ordered for schools

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NEW DELHI: Thousands of young schoolchildren in southern Andhra Pradesh state will get to use a low-cost electronic educational tablet developed in Singapore when school reopens in June.

Called the I-slate, the tablet took the Rice-NTU Institute for Sustainable and Applied Infodynamics (Isaid) in Singapore about two years to develop. The institute is jointly set up by Singapore’s Nanyang Technological University and Houston’s Rice University.

Some 50,000 of these devices, each costing about US$45 (S$57), will be used by 10- to 13-year-old pupils over the next three years in Mahabubnagar District in Andhra Pradesh, according to a joint statement by Indian officials in Hyderabad, the state capital, the two universities, and the non-profit Villages for Development and Learning Foundation (Vi- DAL) yesterday.

The I-slate is a stripped-down version of a tablet and is seen as a replacement for the chalkboard, which is widely used in rural classrooms.

“It looks and has the feel of a tablet but it is highly optimised to do one thing very well: an interactive vehicle for education. There are lessons, animated exercises where a wrong answer gets a frowny face, and a right answer, a smiley. It is a tablet you can write into,” said Professor Krishna Palem, Isaid’s director who is the creator of the I-slate (above).

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Designers took elements from video games and social networking sites to attract students and hold their interest.

The next version is expected to have WiFi and a social networking site for the schoolchildren.

Prof Palem told The Straits Times that the research team has 20 members, some of whom are based in India. At any one time, six to seven researchers are based in Singapore.

He said the work in Singapore is focused on the hardware and engineering, such as CPU efficiency and battery life.

The software and user-experience aspects are handled by a voluntary Los Angeles-based creative content creation consortium working under the Isaid umbrella, he added.

With the number of people getting Internet access expected to double in the next three years, low-cost devices like the I-slate and the US$35 Aakash, the world’s cheapest tablet, are poised to bring about changes in college campuses and school classrooms.

They will be especially useful in rural India where infrastructure is often poor and there is one teacher for every 40 students, or more.

In the case of the Aakash tablets, some 100,000 of them will be distributed by the government to college students in the coming months.

Mr Akrillesh Prasad, the new Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, India’s most populous state, has announced that close to 2.5 million iPads and laptops will be distributed to school-leavers. This is expected to cost the state government 30 billion rupees (S$753 million) annually.

Those behind the I-slate said their idea is to take technology to where it is needed most.

“We are committed to (providing) learning opportunities backed by the latest in modern communication technology for the benefit of rural communities,” said Ms Rajeswari Pingali, VIDAL’s founding chairman.

“We will continue to upgrade but this (tie-up with the government) is one of the milestones,” she added.

A solar-powered version of the I-slate has been tested for the past 18 months by 25 pupils aged from 10 to 13 years at the Mohamed Hussainpalli Village School in Mahabubnagar District.

Designers evaluated the feedback from the children and spent thousands of hours scrutinising the placement and flow of features and the way children interacted with the I-slate both visually and by touch, according to a joint press statement yesterday.

“The 25 students were motivated and they would ask to take the I-slate home. It is a good supplement and reduces the burden on teachers,” said Ms G. Shyamala, the school’s principal. Mahabubnagar is primarily a rural district with a population of about four million people.

Based on two years of lab-to-school testing rounds, today we have a fully functional I-slate which will be adapted by the district education department,” Ms Pingali said in the press statement.

This month, 30 new and updated I-slates were delivered to a class of 10 to 13-year-olds in the same school.

After India, the device is set to make an appearance in Africa, where there is strong interest in South Africa and Rwanda, according to Prof Palem.

On the India rollout, he said: “It has been a long journey and I am very satisfied. It is a socially uplifting activity taking the right turn.”

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