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## e-Learning: an exciting initiative...

US television channel, CBS, in its well-known '60 Minutes' programme, commented: "IIT may be the most important university you've never heard of... There are cases where students who couldn't get into computer science at IIT, they have gotten scholarships at MIT, at Princeton, at Caltech," the show reported.

There is welcome recognition on the strength of India emerging a strong centre of learning. Prime minister Manmohan Singh, in his recent visit to the US, has given special emphasis to this facet: "the 21st century will be driven by knowledge-based production and India is well-placed in this area. We have a large and relatively young population with a social tradition that values higher education."

Tamil Nadu exemplifies this much more than other states. The Anna University is the largest technical university; along with the other institutes of engineering education, the state offers 75,000-80,000 seats for engineering degrees every year. This forms nearly a fourth of the total seats offered in the country as a whole. And this is nearly double the numbers offered in the United States!

However, the quality of the product turned out has not been uniformly high. The ranking by the Anna University on the basis of performance, revealed a large portion of these of mediocre quality. There is thus the urgency to upgrade quality across the board. Fortunately, this can be done by taking recourse to technology, especially in the field of communications. The Indian Space Research Organisation and Anna University attempt to make use of satellite communication technology for the EDUSAT programme.

An extension of this was witnessed in the signing of a memorandum of understanding, during the visit of the prime minister to the US, between the Indian department of space, department of science and technology, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham and six leading American universities and research centres -University of California, Carnegie Mellon University, University at Buffalo, Stanford University, California Institute for Telecommunications and Information Technology and Centre for Information Technology Research in the Interest of Society.

Microsoft Corporation and Qualcomm Inc. are the corporate partners supporting this initiative.

The agreement offers Indo-US cooperation on e-learning to enhance technical education in India along with the US universities as resource partners. The latter would encourage the faculty to participate in this programme and allow them to share their teaching material with the Indian counterparts. ISRO would

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provide the necessary transponder capacity and bandwidth in its satellite EDUSAT, dedicated to education. ISRO will also provide VSAT hubs/ teaching end infrastructure and establish the ground infrastructure at participating educational institutions. Initially, around 25 selected educational institutions are expected to participate in the programme. The Technology Information, Forecasting and Assessment Council (TIFAC) will enable the creation of e-learning contents, capture them in multimedia rich course material and archive them for continued use. The Indo-US S&T Forum will facilitate implementation of this initiative. Microsoft India has committed to defray the expenses of visiting faculty from the US institutions.

For over 30 years, a large number of Indians have been teaching in American universities and business schools. The flood of IIT undergrads and also those from dozens of other hi-tech institutions like the BITS-Pilani, has spread over several American universities. An estimated 10,000 academics of Indian origin are teaching at these institutions. There is thus a great deal of synergy and familiarity in the system of higher education between the United States and India.

Professor P Venkat Rangan, vice chancellor of the Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham at Coimbatore, deserves commendation for this initiative. Such collaborations and initiatives could pave the way for India stepping into the next phase of its evolution and emerging as a power in IT design and development. Going forward, the country needs to move beyond offering mass software engineers for routine programming expertise and move towards specialised research and design of hardware. This is an area that has been neglected so far, but holds great potential.

As F C Kohli of TCS has repeatedly stressed, "there is enormous scope for India emerging strong in the design and engineering platform for microelectronics." Happily, research and development, both at the academic and corporate levels, are finally receiving much-deserved attention. This collaboration would be an important step in enhancing the quality of higher education, taking recourse to the tools of technology. What a rich crop of institutions are involved in this exercise!

**S Viswanathan**