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US lessons via satellite

G.S. MUDUR

New Delhi, Dec. 7: India's educational satellite Edusat might soon relay courses designed by faculty in top American universities to engineering students in India.

Fifteen US universities ? Harvard and Princeton among them ? will allow faculty to spend time in Indian universities under an agreement they signed today with India's Amrita University, the Indian Space Research Organisation and the department of science and technology.

The US faculty will be able to spend up to a semester in Indian educational institutions to teach special supplementary courses to undergraduate or postgraduate students as well as explore possible research collaborations.

The agreement today is an addendum to a memorandum of understanding between Amrita University and five US universities, signed in Washington DC during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to the US in July.

The US faculty will teach and guide research from Amrita's Coimbatore campus via Isro's Edusat. Amrita's campuses in Amritapuri, Bangalore, and Kochi are already connected to Edusat.

"Amrita will be the catalyst. We'd like to see more universities benefit from this collaboration," said Bipin Nair, chairman at the Amrita School of Applied Sciences.

Top US faculty could help bridge the gap between what the industry wants from fresh students and what Indian educational institutions can deliver today, said Valangiman Ramamurthy, science and technology secretary. "We're not in any way substituting our own educational efforts. Such a collaboration will only enrich our own efforts," he said.

Isro officials said Edusat is already helping hundreds of engineering students in 100 colleges affiliated to the Vishweswaria Technological University. And more than 800 schools in a Karnataka forest district, what was once Veerappan territory, receive lessons in science and civics via Edusat.

India's engineering and university system would need flexibility to allow students to opt for special one-semester courses designed by US faculty. In contrast to the Indian system, where the syllabus and course content is rigid, the higher education system in the US allows students to acquire credit by picking from a wide selection of courses.

"We see this as a pilot project," Ramamurthy said.

The US universities believe such collaboration will help them tap Indian talent. "We're looking at new, multinational team approaches to address common challenges in different research areas," said Gretchen Kalonji, head of international programmes at the University of California.

A course in a branch of software engineering designed by the University of California, San

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Diego, is among the first ones to be offered to students at the M Tech level in India.

Nair said the courses to be introduced could be in a range of areas, like material sciences, manufacturing, biotechnology, nanotechnology, medical sciences, as well as management sciences and humanities.

Industry experts are also looking forward to the collaboration. "In the long run, this could increase opportunities for the generation of intellectual property in India," said Balu Doraisamy, the managing director Hewlett Packard.



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