



## Amrita vishwa vidyapeetham

From a single campus college in 1994, Amrita is now a multi-campus, interdisciplinary institution of higher learning

by B Mahesh Sarma

### Fast Fact

**Courses:** BA, MBBS, MD B.Tech, M.Sc, MBA, M.Tech, Ph.D **Three faculties** - 35 departments. **No. of Seats:** Varies between 10 and 150  
**Campuses:** Coimbatore, Kollam, Cochin, Bangalore and Mysore. **Admission:** Thorough entrance examination/UGC-NET/GRE/GMAT  
**Placement Services:** Available (claims about 90% placements) **Collaborations and Exchange programmes:** 14 Nos **Course Fees:** From 30K to 2.5 lakhs per annum **Sponsored Projects:** DST, Princeton, EU and others

Amma's Grace, Love, Divine Design' are unlikely words one expects to encounter while discussing 'patents, technology transfer, collaborations and transdisciplinary research'. But, in conversations with vice-chancellor Prof. Venkat Rangan, both sets of words come with the same level of ease. And in the course of my interactions, I realize that Amrita is a secular institution wearing its spirituality on its sleeve.



### What is on offer?

So, from a normal arts and science degree, to a PhD by research in nanosciences the university has over 100 programmes, offered in five campuses, all in south India. Set up under the auspices of Mata Amirtanadhamayi Trust, as an engineering college in 1994, the institute has grown into a five-campus, 13-discipline accredited university in the last decade-and-a-half. Situated on the foothills of the Anamalai hill ranges, Coimbatore is set in sylvan surroundings. The facilities are state-of-the-art, and some of the machines like the nanoscale fabrication facility are world class. The library and computing facilities match up to the levels of similar universities, though the institute must consider round the clock access. An overview of the disciplines and the campuses is presented alongside (see table ). Most of the degrees have joint disciplinary parents. For example, the M.Tech in nano-biosciences has inputs from the School of Biotechnology, centre for nanosciences and Amrita Research Labs, as well as the engineering school, comments Professor Venkat.

### The spiritual roots

"Education for a life" is the credo of the university and the campus takes its life-building focus very seriously. It is a 100% vegetarian campus; it does not serve even eggs. Respect to elders is an unwritten code, and removing footwear before entering the class room is a norm. Students must either be residents of the campus or stay with their biological parents and commute as day scholars. As Ramya, a student claims, "This is one campus where our parents love it more than us". Ramya has reason to grumble. As a girl student, she gets just two out passes a month (permission to go out of the campus). Security is a given at least within the Coimbatore campus (the reviewer visited just that campus), and clearly Hindu cultural values are sacrosanct in the campus. How far students imbibe them and how relevant these values are for their chosen profession is a debatable point, but as Dr. Nikhil K Kothurkar, a young faculty opines, "It is like an oasis, it establishes that excellent professional work can be combined with selfless motives and performed with a sense of service." This campus proves the possibility of such a phenomenon. Concurs Prof. Parameswaran, Dean Corporate Relations: "Even during this recessionary year, all the IT companies honoured each one of their offers. And one reason is the ability of our students to go beyond the norm and do what is required".

### Academics

Ranjit, a third year engineering student, sums it up: "Like every other university, in each semester we have two great teachers, two average, one mediocre, but the difference is everybody tries their best." Teaching, especially in a campus where many teachers are residents, happens both outside and inside the classroom. Prof. Devanathan says, "We are taught using examples of the austere life of resident swamis, and their work ethics seeps through to the students and staff." Yet another value-add, is the visiting faculty from foreign schools, but the quality, duration and level of involvement vary from school to school. While management students vouch for their value-adding inputs, students from other disciplines are not too excited about the same. But invariably, the possibility of spending a semester abroad appears to be one of the attractive features for most of the students, though the number (49 last year) is very small as of now.

### Getting onboard

Entry into the different programmes such as MBBS, BDS, B.Tech and MBA is through national-level entrance examination, for other programmes school-level entrance examinations decide the admission. A certain percentage of the seats are reserved for NRIs and PIOs. Cost of education varies from about Rs. 35,000 for a general arts or science degree to Rs. 2.5 lakh per annum for an MBBS or MBA degree, depending on the campus. Cost of living, too, varies from city to city.

### Is it a research university?

With just two PhD awards, 90+ research projects, a cumulative outlay of over Rs. 23 crores, and just over 17% of the total faculty holding PhD degrees, Amrita as of now does not present the picture of a great research school. But as the Pro Chancellor Brahmachari Abhayamrita Chaitanya says, the institute is not into the number game. He says the parsimony in award of a PhD degree according to him would go a long way in establishing the research credibility of the university in the long run. Agrees a PhD scholar I met at the engineering school. "It is difficult as hell, but where else would I get real time projects like the WINSOC (use of wireless sensors for critical applications)?"

The burgeoning international tie-ups with ivy-league universities also add to the research potential. But what tilts the balance in favor of the university is the presence of a medical school, and a band of dedicated research professors.

### Devotees turned academics

The biggest boon the university has is the dedicated band of faculty and administrators who are also ardent devotees of Amma. It translates into superior learning experience for the students.

But all great institutions all over the world, over a period of time, have outgrown their founders and their religious overtones. Amrita now presents a cozy picture of a group of people bound by the invisible thread of Amma'. Anybody who does not believe in her would feel left out as of now, not by design, but by default. And that might hinder their ability to attract talent which is secular, but could help the growth of the institution.

### Where does it all lead to?

Thankfully, the rat race still has not caught up with the university. The university has a very active placement cell, and the aggressive research tie-ups (over 90 in number) offer potential placement possibilities. The authorities agree placements are tight, but claim to

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Q. My son is 15-years-old and spends all his time behind closed doors. I am worried that he is into rags. If I question him, he becomes nasty and stops talking to family members. Please tell me what to do?

Q. I did my MBA through distance education. I am working as an executive in a small financial services firm. Will my MBA have any value when switching jobs? Please tell me what I should study if I have to work as a financial planner – CFA, CPA, or CFP?

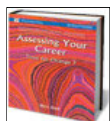
Allied Health Sciences	-	-	Y	-	-
Arts & Sciences	-	Y	Y	-	Y
Ayurveda	-	Y	-	-	-
Biotechnology	-	Y	-	-	-
Communication	Y	-	-	-	-
Dentistry	-	-	Y	-	-
Engineering	Y	Y	-	Y	-
Management	Y	Y	-	Y	Y
Medicine	-	-	Y	-	-
Nanosciences	-	-	Y	-	-
Nursing	-	-	Y	-	-
Pharmacy	-	-	Y	-	-
Social Work	Y	-	-	-	-

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