



FRONTLINE

Volume 26 - Issue 12 :: Jun. 06-19, 2009

INDIA'S NATIONAL MAGAZINE
from the publishers of THE HINDU

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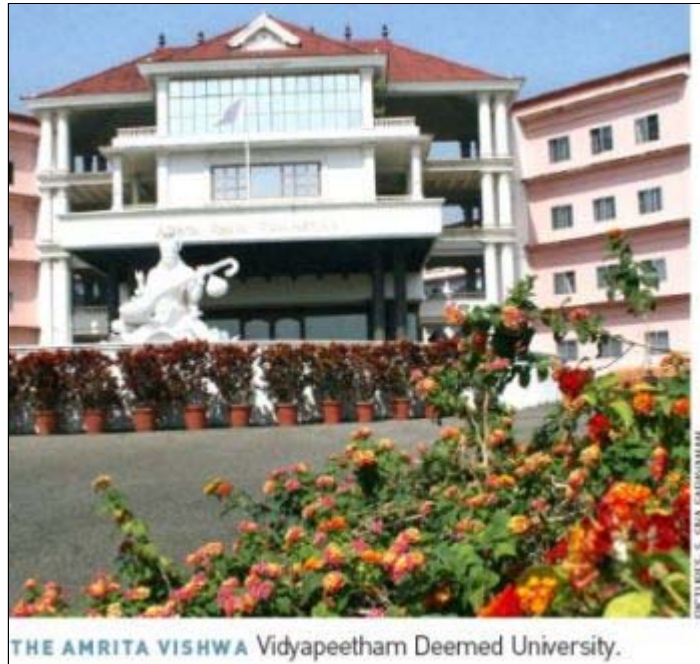
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COIMBATORE has three State universities (Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, Bharathiar University, Anna University), four deemed universities, 118 colleges affiliated to Anna University-Coimbatore and 143 colleges affiliated to Bharathiar University. Around 30,000 students pass out of these institutions every year.

The majority of them are in the various postgraduate streams in arts, science, commerce and management, followed by engineering students, and MPhil and PhD scholars.

Both State-run and private educational institutions vie with one another to ensure that the city retains its position as the hub of higher education. "Though the economic slowdown has prompted many parents and students to steer clear of IT-related courses, we

are determined to convert the challenge into an opportunity," said a representative of a reputed educational institution.



With more self-financing colleges trying to become unitary universities and deemed universities, the state agencies' role in regulating them is hotly debated in academic circles in the region.

Arguing that enterprise should not be "shackled, particularly as long as the institutions agree to be non-profitable", S.K. Sundararaman, trustee, Bannari Amman Educational Trust, says: "When you talk about self-regulation vs regulation by government agencies, it is predominantly on the question of economics rather than the academic aspects. The average cost of training a student ranges from Rs.80,000 to Rs.90,000 a year. If you cannot accept that, then there is something fundamentally wrong in your logic."

Describing regulation as a "double-edged sword", the Vice-Chancellor of Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham (AVV), P. Venkat Rangan, says that regulation provides opportunities for irregularities such as corruption and backdoor entry. He says institutions must come forward to create awareness among students and parents and provide all necessary information to enable them to take the right decision.

R. Vasanthakumar, Chancellor, Karpagam University, believes in some level of monitoring as "100 per cent self-discipline" cannot be ensured in the prevailing situation. "Let the existing statutory bodies, such as the University Grants Commission, the All India Council for Technical Education, the Medical Council of India and the National Council for Teachers Education continue with their work." He also stressed the need for simplification of procedures.

Madhan A. Sendhil, Chairman of the Rathinam College of Arts and Science, admits that having a regulatory mechanism is important but feels that the present one is "wrongly placed". The government should allow self-financing colleges to adopt innovative methods with a view to reducing the cost of education, he says. A revamp of the examination system, he suggests, will end a lot of artificially created regulations.



A shared concern of educational institutions is the declining popularity of basic arts and science courses and the need to create awareness about their relevance to society.

R. Prabhakar, Principal, Coimbatore Institute of Technology (CIT), asserts that these subjects are indispensable for higher education. If basic sciences provide the basis for technology, arts courses help students learn about their social responsibilities.

R. Nandagopal, Director, PSG Institute of Management, points out that the National Knowledge Commission (NKC) has stressed the need to develop basic science programmes.

The Vice-Chancellor of Karunya University, Paul P. Appasamy, emphasises that professional courses such as engineering and medicine cannot grow in the absence of a strong base in science. The syllabus has to be tailored to the needs of society, he says.

The Vice-Chancellor of Bharathiar University, G. Thiruvassagam, reminds parents and students that almost 68 per cent of jobs come from the services sector which gives a lot of employment opportunities to graduates in basic sciences and arts.

The quality of education and discipline are the main strengths of an institution, says Nandagopal of PSG. "The other unique factor is our alumni strength. Those who have studied in our institution also want their children to join it," he says.

Efforts are on to get private university status for PSG College of Arts and Science, which was granted autonomy in 1978. The PSG University Bill is with a select committee of the Tamil Nadu Assembly and the mandatory public hearings have also been held.

The PSG institutions introduced new ideas and concepts in higher education even four decades ago. Today it offers many inter-disciplinary programmes, such as the five-year integrated M.Sc. programmes in software engineering, mathematical computing and biotechnology.

The industry-institute interface at the PSG institutes gives students a competitive edge, says Nandagopal. He notes that the practical exposure gives students better understanding of real-world situations and workplace environment.

Venkat Rangan highlights AVV's efforts to use technology in order to have access to the best teaching material. "Now we have a network that reaches out to 42 different colleges and universities all over India."

Another successful technology-driven initiative of AVV relates to extending health care, entrepreneurship training and vocational training to village communities through village resource centres. Initially, students were reluctant to participate, but once they realised the importance of the service, they involved themselves with dedication, says Venkat Rangan.

On the research side, AVV has launched projects funded by the European Commission to set up wireless sensor networks to detect landslides.



The Amrita Nano Biomedical Engineering Institute, Kochi, is a unique inter-disciplinary centre where engineers get to interact with medical personnel.

Venkat Rangan commends the usefulness of the inter-university collaborative programmes for students as also the steps taken by the NKC and the National Knowledge Network to improve higher education in India.

The AVV has 15 constituent schools on five campuses across three States. These schools have 70 U.G. and P.G. programmes in areas such as engineering, management, medicine, dentistry, Ayurveda, pharmacy, nursing, biotechnology, education, journalism, and arts and sciences.

CIT saga

The CIT, with over 50 years of standing, offers seven U.G., eight P.G., and a number of research programmes in engineering, apart from programmes in applied sciences-computer technology and computer applications.

R. Prabhakar, Principal of CIT, says the biggest challenge is to maintain the quality of education. According to him, students must be trained in communication and social skills at the school level itself so

that they gain self-confidence.

He says CIT has brought in changes in the method of learning; in the examination system, where a student's knowledge rather than his/her capacity to learn by rote is tested; in industry-institute interaction; and in providing knowledge beyond what is prescribed in the syllabus. We believe this is what innovation means, and not giving new names to old courses."

Karunya University

According to Paul P. Appasamy, problems related to employability arise because of the candidate's inability to communicate, as the industry wants people who are fairly articulate and who have the confidence to respond to management challenges.

The university has programmes in soft skills, which begins in the second year. A total of 6,300 students, including 2,516 girls, reside on campus in 13 hostels. It has a faculty strength of 450 and a support staff of 220. Appasamy feels that the government can extend financial support to competent private institutions to promote research work, especially in the light of the NKC's call for a 30 per cent increase in the number of candidates joining higher education.

Karpagam University

Vasanthakumar of Karpagam University advises students to do their postgraduation and PhD if they do not land jobs immediately after completing their graduation. He says deemed universities and private universities must improve their infrastructure and human resource so as to accommodate more students as desired by the NKC.

In this regard he points to the online examinations of Karpagam University. "The system helps students to face examinations such as TOEFL [Test of English as a Foreign Language] and GRE [Graduate Record Examination]," he says.

The Shri Nehru Maha Vidyalaya, run by the Coimbatore Welfare Association, has a unique slogan: "No donation, No capitation fee."

B. Balchand, president of the group of institutions, says the functionaries of the association, mostly belonging to the trading community, have taken a pledge not to sell education. According to him, SNMV wants to cater to the educational requirements of students belonging to all sections, including the poor. Started as a small school in 1964, it is now an institution that provides education from kindergarten to the PhD level, he says.

In its silver jubilee year, in 1989, the association launched the SNMV College for Arts and Science. The college offers nine U.G. courses and five P.G. courses, besides MPhil and PhD programmes. The college has a strength of 1,653 students, 88 teaching and 63 administrative staff. The National Assessment and Accreditation Council has awarded an 'A' grade to the college, he says.

The college has well-equipped science laboratories, three fully air-conditioned computer laboratories, a seminar hall, and well-stocked libraries. The SNMV institutions attract students from Tamil Nadu,

Bihar, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh and Kerala, says Balchand.

Clinical Research

The Consortium Clinical Research, according to its Director P. Anandapadmanabhan, is the first and only clinical research organisation in Coimbatore. The institute has been functioning for the past two years and has signed an MoU with Xpression Biotek, a Kanyakumari-based nanobiotechnology company, to cater to the needs of the clinical research industry. The institute, which expands the career scope of life-science students, focusses on training and recruitment in the sector. Its one-month P.G. course in clinical research has received good patronage, he says and points out that it has already trained 10 batches of students, all of whom have got placements.

Consortium and Xpression Biotek have jointly planned a six-week P.G. diploma course in clinical trial management, regulatory affairs and biostatistics in Coimbatore and in Marthandam in Kanyakumari district. Diploma holders; graduates; postgraduates in medical sciences, health and allied sciences, life sciences, bio-science, pharmacy and biomedical engineering; and students with B.Tech., M.Tech. (biotechnology) and IT or computer science degrees are eligible to join this programme. •



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