

THE AUSTRALIAN

India's lab for higher education

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WORLD literature, the psychology of counselling, and gender are not courses that outsiders immediately associate with the famous Indian Institutes of Technology.

After all, IITs are synonymous with engineering.

But Uday Desai, director of Hyderabad, one of the newer of India's 16 IITs, stresses the need for a broad education.

"A lot of our graduates will become chief executive officers or chief technology officers, they will have to mix with people on many levels," Professor Desai says.

At Hyderabad, as at other IITs, it is the engineering departments that dominate. There are nine, reflecting the various specialisations, compared with three science departments and the lone liberal arts department, which offers M.Phil and PhD programs.

But Professor Desai also has in short courses in fields such as photography, music and theatre as he seeks to expand study options for students.

The vehicle is what he calls the "fractional credit" course.

A standard three credit course involves 42 hours of lectures over a semester, so shorter, more nimble offerings include a 0.5 credit course (7 hours) or 1.5 credit course (21 hours).

The idea is to make it feasible for busy entrepreneurs and industry figures to find the time to give cutting-edge lectures.

"An industry person, if he wants to come and teach something he can come for seven hours, at best 14 hours -- he cannot come for 42 hours," Professor Desai says.

So far, Hyderabad has had guest lectures on subjects such as cloud computing, mobile applications and data management.

Academics and industry people have come from elsewhere in India, as well as from France, the US and Canada.

And Professor Desai, who last week finished a four day tour of institutions in Perth and Sydney, extends the offer to busy Australian researchers too.



Professor Uday Desai heads up the Indian Institute of Technology at Hyderabad. Picture: James Croucher Source: The Australian

"In two weeks he can easily have a 14 hour course or a seven hour course on some cutting edge research that he is doing, and our students can benefit," he says.

"(At Hyderabad) we are focusing on research very heavily, our thrust is invention and innovation.

"We want our graduates to be job creators, not simply job seekers."

Engineering students can take a minor in entrepreneurship, teaching them about business plans, finance, marketing and risk managements.

Hyderabad has grown quickly and is keen to try new things.

In 2009, when Professor Desai became director, he was the only permanent member of faculty and there were just over 100 students with mentoring from IIT Madras.

"In less than three years I have recruited about 94 faculty members, and we have 1063 students," he says.

There are about 200 PhD students, 250-plus masters by research students, and the rest are undergraduates.

Unlike India's universities, the IITs are autonomous, and this gives directors such as Professor Desai the freedom to experiment.

"We believe we are the source of innovation in higher education," he says.

And although the IITs were modelled on the US academy, Professor Desai believes IITs have reached the point where their own innovations may inspire overseas institutions.