

Indian tech teachers prefer hot jobs

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The deans of hundreds of technology institutes in India are spending much of their time trying to fight the flight of their teachers from classrooms for lucrative hot jobs in Indian IT companies.

"We have recently started a Ph.D. program to retain those interested in higher studies," says Professor KE Raman, dean of The Birla Institute of Technology & Science, a premier technology institute in India, adding that the problem of teachers quitting their jobs has become so acute that "we had to adopt special retention measures to encourage our young teachers to remain in teaching."

In another part of the country, Delhi, the All India Council of Technical Education, the prime regulatory body that controls the country's technical education, is also busy dealing with the same problem but with measures more drastic. In this year's approvals for technical institutions the AICTE has slashed total number of seats by 22,722 in the engineering and technology programs for the academic year 2006-07.

AICTE said that as many as 404 institutions have been asked to reduce new admissions including 45 tech institutes that were told to stop new admissions, making it "the regulator's severest clampdown yet on institutes that were unable to maintain the prescribed teacher-student ratio norm (generally 1:15)."

"These institutions were asked to reduce intake primarily because they were dramatically short of quality faculty," said RA Yadav, the AICTE vice chairman, adding that premier technical institutions in the country

are facing teacher shortages varying from 10 percent to 30 percent of their total requirements.

Indeed, even as a booming Indian economy and abundant job opportunities have resulted in exploding demand for technology professionals -- attracting record numbers of students to technical courses -- the country is facing an acute shortage of instructors that is not only affecting the country's educational standards but is also threatening to choke the future supply of technical manpower in the country.

And worried most is none other than the money-spinning IT-enabled services (back-office outsourcing or BPO) sectors, which say that in the absence of any corrective intervention these two industries could face a significant shortfall in "employable manpower."

"Significant pressure exists on the present education system to ensure steady and quality supply of appropriately skilled human resource and thus maintain its momentum and share of the global opportunity," said the National Association of Software Services Companies (NASSCOM), the IT industry lobby.

It adds that as per the current graduate output and employment-preference trends the country faces a human-resource shortfall of 500,000 (roughly 23 percent of the industry's requirements of 2.1 million) for the IT-enabled services sector alone.

"The shortage arises from the fact that youngsters are not interested in teaching any more," says Raman of BITS, "and that's because the industry pays much more these days."

For instance, the salary level in the corporate sector for a just-out-of-college engineering graduate easily hovers around \$700 per month, which is roughly twice what an assistant professor with a Ph.D. gets in

his teaching job -- after spending six years in teaching.

"It is also aggravated by the fact that top IT companies have set up their own training facilities and are luring technology teachers away from the country's tech institutes," says K. Rajanikanth, principal of Bangalore-based M S Ramaiah Institute of Technology, a privately owned tech school and one of the largest in the country.

For example, India's most famous IT company, Infosys Technologies, has one of the largest training setups in the country -- it can churn up to 4,000 IT-industry-ready professionals at a time -- and pays several times the average tech-institute salary to its teachers. "Clearly then, with their high remunerations, cutting edge infrastructure for research and other growth opportunities, training facilities of large companies have started attracting teachers from educational institutions in hordes," said R. Sethuraman, vice chancellor of SASTRA Deemed University.

However, according to Sethuraman, the biggest contributor to India's current teacher crisis is AICTE's strict teacher-recruitment guidelines, one of which allows only Ph.D.s to teach; "India produces less than 300 Ph.D.s (all streams) a year but requires 5,000 Ph.D.-qualified teachers per year," he said.

Moreover, "Whoever gets a new Ph.D. degree prefers to take up a corporate job," says K. Rajanikanth.

Most tech institutes are clamoring to the AICTE urging it to relax its norms so that "capable" non-Ph.D. holders can be employed as teachers. And that has already been done to some extent. For instance, the AICTE has recently allowed post-graduates pursuing Ph.D. degrees to be employed as assistant professors in institutions provided they complete their degrees within a stipulated time.

But that may just serve as a short-term solution, says Raman of BITS. According to him, the long-term solution lies in India creating an environment and initiating projects that lure technology post-graduates to teaching instead of joining the industry.

"And the best way to do it is not only to give new teachers higher pay but also other incentives," he added.

Raman cites the example of his institution and says that its teacher-retention policies "not only offer teachers self-improvement schemes but also allow spouses with required qualifications and abilities to take up jobs within the institute as well as encourages teachers' children to study in BITS at subsidized rates," said Raman.

However, according to K. Rajanikanth of M S Ramaiah Institute of Technology, Indian institutes need to follow the practices of the institutions in United States; that is, to provide them with remunerations and growth opportunities on par with the industry. "Otherwise India wouldn't be able to overcome its teacher shortages even in a decade," he said.

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