

# Home is where opportunity is

Scaled up connectivity and career prospects attract teachers from abroad to institutes of repute in the city; heat, food and babus' ignorance remain a challenge though, they say

SIDDHARAJ SOLANKI



(From left) Mehrnaz Amiraslani, faculty member in architecture, FabLab Coordinator Henry Skupniewicz and Faculty of Architecture Dean Anne Feenstra at CEPT University

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**A**cademicians at institutes of repute in Ahmedabad have often cited geographical location and lack of quality job opportunities for spouses as factors that have discouraged the best of the talents to come to the city. But

with improved connectivity, infrastructure and career prospects, not only are teachers from other cities of India joining premier institutes here, but many foreigners too have taken up full-time jobs.

Take the case of Indian Institute

of Management Ahmedabad (IIMA). Two faculty members – Hans Huber from Portugal and Sharon Barnhardt from the USA, both in Public System Groups – joined the institute in 2014. CEPT University has three such international teach-

ers – Faculty of Architecture Dean Anne Feenstra, FabLab Coordinator Henry Skupniewicz and Mehrnaz Amiraslani, a faculty member in architecture and planning.

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Besides, there are many others from abroad who have been guiding students in various ways for a year or more at Indian Institute of Technology, Gandhinagar and Ahmedabad University.

Huber (46), who teaches aviation economics and strategy, came to IIMA on Marie Curie Fellowship and has been teaching here for a year. On what brought him here and good points of being in Gujarat he said, "As my French friend told me before leaving (from Portugal), 'No meat, no alcohol, no women'. Fortunately I found out that Gujaratis too lead quality lifestyle, though they may differ from ours. Food, too, is great," he said.

To Huber the biggest challenge in Ahmedabad is the late night flight connectivity via Mumbai when arriving from Europe. "Also, our western European metabolism is little accustomed to the climate here. But on campus, things go as if one were working in the US, for example," he said.

## HISTORY, COSMOPOLITAN CULTURE MAIN ATTRACTION

On the difference in academics in India and Portugal, he said, "The economic crisis in Portugal has led to a major drop in applications to post-graduate studies. This is true even for the country's most reputed engineering institutes. Also, candidates often struggle to find employment afterwards, so their attention span during course work is quite limited. PhD candidates were brought in from other countries (including India) under

public scholarship schemes of the European Union," he added.

While it is fellowship that brought Huber to IIMA, it is passion to study history and cultural dynamics that brought Feenstra (47) to Gujarat. He has been in South Asia since 2004.

The presence of international faculty not only adds value to students' learning but also aids cultural exchange. Feenstra said CEPT had a cosmopolitan environment where design, technology, landscape, planning and architecture merged. This is a good reason for people from all over the world to come here. "While walking on the campus you hear different languages- French, German, Nepali, Farsi, Urdu, American (accent), Korean, Japanese, Italian and a little bit of Dutch," he said.

## 'BETTER OPPORTUNITIES' BUT CHALLENGES EXIST

"Whether this trend continues or amplifies is not easy to say: those seeking high salaries or western lifestyles may not stay for long (here). New faculty should have intrinsic motivation to come and discover the Indian context or use the freedom here to advance their research agenda and complete their CV. Having children may complicate such a move," he added.

The story is different for Amiraslani (33) who came to Ahmedabad as she married a CEPT alumnus whom she met while pursuing master's at the University of Toronto. "Together we realised there were better professional opportunities in India," she said.

On the challenges for international faculty, she said legal issues such as



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visa, property ownership, officials' non-familiarity with temporary residence status were a major negative. Also, climate can be extreme, she added.

## STRESS ON DIVERSITY ON CAMPUS: BIMAL PATEL, CEPT

Bimal Patel, president and in-charge director of CEPT University, has emphasised on promoting cosmopolitan culture on the campus.

"From the very beginning CEPT has valued the contribution of internationally renowned faculty members and professionals who have international exposure but have worked in the region. They are able to understand the local context. People of foreign origin bring a different approach to learning and this stimulates the learning environment and enhances creative problem solving," he said.

Recruiting foreign faculty members is a challenge, but the benefits far outweigh the challenges, Patel added.

Skupniewicz said by bringing in experts from various fields that are used to very different educational, in-

dustrial, and cultural environments, officials invigorate these institutions and bolster their confidence to engage and think more globally.

"Additionally, it offers new avenues for international collaboration and discussion amongst students and the intellectual/cultural influencers of India," he added.

## NOT ALWAYS CAKEWALK: ASHISH NANDA, IIMA

While many institutes in the city are now getting faculty members from abroad, bringing them to the city is not always a cakewalk.

Talking about the challenges, IIMA Director Ashish Nanda said typically payscales in Indian academia are considerably lower than in many foreign universities. IIMA is addressing this issue by introducing Faculty Chair and Faculty Fellow positions. During this last one year, the institute has established 11 such positions.

"We hope to recruit world class faculty through this initiative. There have been other historical barriers to

recruiting foreign faculty in Indian universities, such as paucity of research opportunities and lack of an environment conducive to research. But these have been smaller issues for IIMA and have become even smaller over the past few years," Nanda said.

Faculty Dean G Raghuram said having faculty members with international exposure always works for management education. "It is established that if we have faculty members with exposure to different perspective and diverse background, quality of learning will improve, specially in management education."

## 'VEGETARIANISM IS A CHALLENGE'

While many institutes have managed to get full time faculty members from overseas universities, institutes of repute like IIT-Gn do not have any full-time faculty from abroad but they have couple members on the faculty who stay on campus for more than a year. Ahmedabad University is another example that welcomes foreign experts to guide students and teachers, said Registrar BM Shah.

Guo Fei (33) has been teaching Chinese language at IIT-Gn for more than nine months. "Challenge for us remains heat, language and vegetarianism. It is an elective course so the teaching style is relaxing and interesting," he said. On international faculty members in the city-based institutes, he said the trend symbolises the global scope India offers. "As a Chinese, I really hope more communication will take place between the two countries of brilliant civilizations," he said.