

A doorway to an entrepreneurial university

New knowledge is always the result of interactions between disparate or competing disciplines. Whenever diverse players from different endeavours come together, institutions and organisations make gains because these joint ventures lead to the creation of a whole new body/ bodies of knowledge.

University systems have always seen this. The modern university system, which is a result of large efforts to institutionalise and scale up research and study in many disciplines, keeps evolving.

Over the years, multidisciplinary studies have seen new disciplines such as biochemistry and computing science, which in turn are spawning dozens of new sub-disciplines including the current rage, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Generative AI.

While the modern university system has accelerated the growth and the rise of new disciplines across the globe, innovations that bring together academic and industrial research work are creating economic and intellectual value for universities.

A new phase

This joint enterprise of academia and industry, for creating innovations that lead to new products, services, platforms and patents, is entering a new phase. This brings us to the next possible evolution of universities, namely, the entrepreneurial university. Of course, this is a provocative idea. One school of academia maintains that universities should be the fount of new knowledge and research, and any attempt at a commercialisation of this vision should not be allowed. But, globally, the thinking among new-age universities, and 'educational entrepreneurs' is to ensure a fine balance between education and enterprise, where learners pay an optimal price of attaining knowledge, gaining employable skills, or pursuing serious research.

While we need not get into a debate among



K. Ramachandran
is a former journalist,
and now heads
strategy for an edtech
company

The University Grants Commission's move to institutionalise the concept of a 'Professor of Practice' could help bridge the gap between academia and the professional world

these competing ideas, there is a definite need to create instruments and pathways that foster research and lead to a commercialisation of research output, so that the university system can capitalise the intellectual value of a new product or processes.

The UGC's push

In India, the University Grants Commission (UGC)'s initiative to institutionalise the concept of 'Professor of Practice' is perhaps a right pointer towards an entrepreneurial university.

The UGC's move clearly shows how universities are best positioned to foster innovation, simply because of the flow of new sets of bright minds every year, seeking to push the frontiers of knowledge further.

The UGC has said: "The objective behind introducing [the] Professor of Practice (PoP) is to enhance the quality of higher education by bringing practitioners, policymakers, skilled professionals, etc. into [the] higher education system."

The initiative wants to bring industry and other professional expertise into academic institutions through a new category of positions viz. PoP. This will help take real world practices and experiences into classrooms and also augment faculty resources in higher education institutions. In turn, industry and society will benefit from trained graduates who are equipped with the relevant skills.

A PoP is typically an individual with significant experience in their industry, appointed to a faculty position at a university to share his/her practical knowledge and skills with students. Unlike traditional academic professors, PoPs are often hired from outside academia, and may not be required to have a PhD or other advanced research degree. Based on their expertise and experience in a specific profession or industry, they are expected to bring real-world insights and perspectives to the classroom. PoPs can be found in fields that include business, engineering, law,

journalism, and the arts.

In the field of engineering, for example, a PoP can teach courses that focus on practical, real-world applications and share their insights in applied learning. They can serve as mentors for student projects; develop new courses that are more aligned to industry trends; collaborate with other faculty on research projects and point to ways of converting patents into commercial products (which they do regularly in the industry).

Innovation is the next pillar

PoPs can serve as ambassadors for their universities, building relationships with industry partners and helping to connect students with internship and job opportunities. They can also participate in professional organisations and conferences to stay up-to-date on industry trends and best practices. Thus, PoPs can reshape a university's commercial thinking and energise the actions that add vividity to a university's culture. Teaching and research were the foundational pillars of a university in the industrial era. In today's post-knowledge societies, innovation is the third pillar in universities. This should also be a continuous activity.

When this innovative culture sets in strongly, every academic will be able to synthesise ideas and spin out start-up enterprises. These university-based start-ups would not only incubate ideas but also convert ideas into patents and transform patents into commercial products. The more such ideas grow, the better the idea of an entrepreneurial university gains ground. Its fruition would be a full convergence of research, industry work and academia. The sum of this coalition will be much more than the individual parts.

Perhaps, one day, PoPs will lead to a new generation of 'entrepreneurs in residence', showing the way for bright students to create the next Google on campus.