Universities must redesign to stay relevant

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University innovation labs are key to innovating for the 4th industrial revolution

We now know the global economy is in the midst of a fourth industrial revolution. This revolution lies in technologies blurring the boundaries of the physical, biological, and digital worlds, as best exemplified by artificial intelligence, virtual and augmented realities, the Internet of Things (IoT), autonomous vehicles, and drones.

Driven by the exponential increases in computing power and the availability of vast amounts of data, these new technologies will change how business and society function. And these changes have big implications.

The fourth industrial revolution has the ability to unleash new frontiers of human potential and raise global living standards. But new technology also brings increasing automation, which has the potential to leave large swathes of human workers displaced and unprepared for the twists and turns of the new economy.

Unanswered questions

In light of these upheavals, critical and unanswered questions are emerging. What do these changes mean for education in, and for, the future? Universities, in particular, have a critical and dynamic role to play in educating and preparing students for what is to come. Are our educational institutions anticipating the changes ahead? Are they prepared to deliver to the students the right skill set and knowledge to adapt to unpredictable economic change?
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There is an ongoing debate among top universities about how to respond to the fourth industrial revolution. On one side are leaders advocating radical changes in teaching, reforms to curriculum and a full embrace of the latest technologies. The other side warns that tailoring universities too closely to technological developments would render institutions 'slaves to industry'.

But it’s clear that change and innovation need to take place in higher education. University leaders need to be less risk-averse in their approach, and it is their responsibility to better prepare students for the unprecedented times ahead. It will no longer be feasible to ground universities only in traditional models of education.

Reality check

Innovation within Indian higher education has long been stifled in the face of high levels of government regulation and oversight. Fortunately, the government has begun to hear the calls for change, and there have been positive developments on this front. Finance Minister Arun Jaitley, in his 2017 Budget speech, committed that ‘greater autonomy will be provided to major institutes.’ Over the summer, the University Grants Commission decided to make the top 50 ranked institutions, or those with an NAAC score of 3.5, completely autonomous. Now, without the need for regulatory approval, India’s top educational institutions will have the freedom to start new courses and departments that reflect the world to come.

However, there is still more work to be done by the universities themselves to keep up with the pace of change. A defining feature of this revolution is the convergence of the physical, digital, and biological worlds. The consequences of this convergence could narrow the distance between humanities and social science, as well as between science and technology disciplines in the future. Universities will need to be more agile and responsive in designing curricula as traditional disciplines rapidly evolve.

Innovation labs

Indian universities should work to embrace a spirit of bold experimentation and operationalise it by creating new, independent innovation labs dedicated to what MIT Media Lab director, Joi Ito, calls ‘anti-disciplinary’ research and innovation which, in his words, means ‘filling the white space between disciplines’. This approach, similar to corporate R&D units, could give university innovation labs the scope to embrace ideas built for the future and help universities keep pace with the evolution of business, technology and education.

These innovation labs could take many forms and embrace diverse approaches to the task of innovating for the future. Some might follow the model of Harvard’s i-lab, which focuses on student venture incubation and connecting students from across the university’s schools to broader start-up ecosystems. Others might direct their gaze internally, fostering innovation within the university itself. Still others might target a particular field of innovation, such as digital media technologies, or concentrate on innovative solutions to serve the university’s surrounding community.

For such university labs to flourish, they will need autonomy and innovative leadership. Positioning them outside the university’s traditional departmental structures will allow them to cross boundaries and draw on knowledge and resources that often get trapped in disciplinary silos. Labs should have the freedom to incubate new and promising ideas, the best of which could become new university initiatives or spin out into independent ventures.

The labs should also be highly collaborative with industry, government and community and,
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ideally, follow a model of open innovation and transparency to spur inclusive growth. University labs can find financial sustainability through revenue-generating activities along with a blend of financial support from the host university, government and philanthropic grants or industry sponsorships.

The fourth industrial revolution looks to bring an unprecedented pace of technological innovation. It's important for universities to engage in these rapid transformations to remain relevant. Just as businesses work to redesign products and services to meet evolving customer demands, Indian universities should redesign themselves to meet the evolving demands of the future.
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