

'Innovation doesn't happen in silos... Our academic institutions must build structures that allow different minds to meet'

In an era when students are seeking more than just degrees, India's top academic institutions are being called to rethink their purpose. At the heart of this shift is a quiet but urgent transformation – one that places innovation, entrepreneurship, and real-world impact at the centre of higher education. V Ramgopal Rao, group vice chancellor of BITS Pilani campuses, spoke with Hemali Chhappia on why academia must evolve from being a place of knowledge creation to a platform for problem-solving.

real-world applications of their work from day one. We're also aligning faculty evaluations to include patents, prototypes, and startup impact – not just journal metrics.

issue in a village doesn't get applause if there's no publication attached. That must change.

● You've spoken about looking westward for inspiration – like Stanford or MIT. But what should we take away from their success?

Not their patent count – but how they deploy them. Less than 1% of Stanford's revenues come from patent licensing. Yet their IP, leveraged through startups and collaborations, has created over \$3tn in economic value.

● You mention culture – but surely this also ties into how our institutions are funded and governed?

Absolutely. US transformed its academic landscape with the Morrill Act in 1862, creating land-grant universities tied to national development. We need our Morrill moment. NEP 2020 can be that turning point – but only if we act on it boldly. Our institutions rely heavily on tuition or govt grants. Compare that to US, where diversified income – endowments, philanthropy, industry ties – gives freedom to dream, experiment, and fail forward.

● You've said Indian academia needs transformation. What might such a transformation look like?

It's about reimagining the core of what our institutions stand for. For too long, we've measured academic success through publications, citations, and patents.



But the world has changed – and so have the expectations from students and society. They don't just want degrees; they want to solve problems, create value, make impact. For that, we need to put entrepreneurship, innovation, and relevance at the centre of our academic DNA.

Q&A

● You're suggesting knowledge is no longer enough, that it must translate into something more tangible?

Exactly. Knowledge has to move beyond paper. It must travel, touch lives, and evolve into solutions. Think of it as a journey: a problem becomes a project, the project becomes a paper, then a patent. But why stop there? That patent must become a prototype. A prototype, after feedback, becomes a product. And when that product reaches people and solves a real-world issue – it generates not just profit, but purpose. This arc – from problem to product to public good – is what our institutions must institutionalise.

● But is that kind of translation possible in our current academic structure?

It's hard, but not impossible. We need a mindset shift – and structural support. At BITS Pilani, we're piloting a model through our PhD DRIVE programme – Deep-tech Research, Innovation, Value generation and Entrepreneurship. It encourages scholars to think about the



The lesson? Filing IP isn't enough. You need an ecosystem where ideas don't gather dust but get to work.

● What barriers hold back Indian institutions?

Two big ones: collaboration and culture. First, collaboration. Innovation doesn't happen in silos. It happens when technologists talk to economists, when clinicians brainstorm with data scientists. Our institutions must build structures that allow different minds to meet. Second, culture. We currently celebrate academic depth – Nature papers, H-indexes – but not translational breadth. A student solving a sanitation

● How do we bridge the disconnect between academia and industry?

We need to speak the same language. Industry wants results; academia wants inquiry. Industry guards secrets; we publish them. To collaborate meaningfully, we need professional tech transfer offices, flexible IP policies, faster MoUs – and most importantly, mutual trust. At BITS, we're working to streamline these processes and embed industry orientation into student and faculty mindset alike.

● And for students? How do you nurture entrepreneurial thinking?

We stop treating entrepreneurship as an extra-curricular activity. It must become an academic outcome. We tell students it's okay to fail. We celebrate the ones who build, not just those who memorise. We give them platforms – not just degrees. At BITS Pilani, we're actively fusing research, innovation, and enterprise. Because the real mark of a university isn't just how many graduates it produces, but how many changemakers it inspires.

● What do you hope to see in Indian academia in five years?

I hope to see universities that are not ivory towers but innovation platforms. That doesn't just award degrees, but solves problems. That redefines success, not by how much they publish, but by how much they change lives. It's a long road – but if institutions like ours take the first steps, I'm certain many will follow. The time to act is now.