

Bridging the gap between the industry and private universities through research

There is a higher percentage of academicians in private universities today who have an industry background, run a business before, experience in the public service domain or applied for patents, among others. Furthermore, their numbers are increasing. As more private universities seek to hire industry-experienced academics to nurture their students to ensure that they are more employable, the perception that has haunted the academic world for years — of not having these experiences and skills — is slowly fading away.

Universities in the US, the UK and many other developed nations around the world have a close relationship with the corporate world, and that has brought about significant developments in the economies. Many schools in the universities are named after corporate leaders or companies, since funding comes from endowments. In Southeast Asia, this trend is gradually shifting the landscape of how business is done, especially the role of R&D. More research centres are being established by private universities now in Malaysia, and we have just launched our very own research centre under the School of Hospitality, Asia Pacific Centre for Hospitality Research.

Increasingly, companies recognise that to attract the best and brightest talent, they must create purpose-driven organisations with values such as meaningful work and social efficiency. Similarly, universities see their role extending beyond teaching and pure research to taking on social challenges and contributing to economic growth.

What can be done to narrow this gap or foster this relationship between private universities and the industry, including government entities?



Research Mindedness

BY
DR DAISY GAYATHRI
School of Hospitality
Sunway University

Perhaps a simple relationship model could be created to put in place a durable, cooperative model that enables companies to partner academia in a fashion that allows them to stay continuously connected to early stage research and to accelerate the transition of that research to new products that drive economic growth.

Here are some thoughts in that direction:

1. Accessing research journals

There are many research journals published around the world by researchers in specific areas of interest, which are categorised by subject or by rating. There is a vast wealth of wisdom that will answer most questions, justify most expenditures, explore more interest and reveal gaps in the market but sadly, it is waiting for someone to pick it up and implement it. In other words, these researches should be put to good use by the industry and government. The current users of these research journals are mostly from academia. But if the industry and government access these published works, then the findings could be adopted and implemented to improve the economy, social and cultural aspects, politics and the environment.

2. Attending seminars

The perception that seminars are for nerds and are boring no longer holds water. Richard Saul Wurman, who conceived the TED Talks series, taught us that short, powerful talks are great to spread ideas. Now, many private universities hold seminars frequently in their campus and they invite the private sector as well as other academicians. This is an excellent opportunity for the industry to send their employees to learn about what is going on. The presentations are vibrant and straight to the point like the TED Talks, which have many

takeaways for practitioners, executioners and implementers.

3. Applied research

Companies can directly approach research centres at universities to conduct specific research into problems or explore ideas. Many companies and governments carry out feasibility, justification or exploratory studies in areas of concern and this could be a stepping stone to forge a working relationship among themselves. Often, the perception is that these research centres charge astronomical fees similar to consultancy companies; on the contrary, their work is affordable and justifiable.

Instead of merely monitoring early stage research at universities and pouncing when something of interest emerges, smart companies are increasingly seeding research in areas of interest to them. In the US and the UK, some large companies ran their internal post-doctoral programmes without any real connection to an academic research group, or they sponsored PhD students for humanitarian reasons but without getting directly involved in the students' progress.

Both industry and academia stand to benefit from long-term cooperation. Companies will gain greater access to cutting-edge investigation and scientific talent at a time when corporate R&D budgets are increasingly under pressure. Universities will gain access to financial support and partners in research at a time when government funding is shrinking. More importantly, society will benefit from a stream of previously unimaginable advances — in life sciences, biomedical engineering, communications, environmental sciences, artificial intelligence and more — that will vastly improve everyone's life. Well, the next step is then to get in touch. E