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The University that doesn't exist yet

IN THIS EDITION we ask a question that remains no panel discussion, keynote, or branding can successfully answer: what is the true purpose of a university? This is the central question for students selecting a college, faculty entering the classroom, and institutions allocating resources.

The lead story this month features the Successverse Higher Education Excellence Conclave. Dr Deependra Kumar Jha moderated a panel that considered a student's question: if AI can answer everything, why attend university? The panel acknowledged there is no simple answer. Dr Anbuthambi B led a discussion on the gap between industry and academia, concluding that while the gap may never close completely, institutions must carry on striving to bridge it.

Several keynote speakers offered important insights. R Bupathy, Past President of ICAI, emphasized that education should not prepare students for an outdated world. Industry is looking for individuals who can solve problems, think independently, and contribute immediately. N Lakshmi Narayanan, Chairman, Krea University, pointed out that while early education teaches students what to think, from eighth standard onward, the focus must shift to teaching them how to think. This transition fosters curiosity, critical thinking, and leadership. Without it, graduates may be knowledgeable but lack capability.

Pattabhi Ram's keynote on University 5.0 highlighted that India has expanded its higher education system rapidly, but cohesion has lagged behind. He illustrated this with the example of a journalism student who could explain the Chicago Manual of Style but could not apply its rules. This gap between knowledge and practical use characterises much of Indian higher education. So, the main challenge for universities is not expansion, but relevance.

Sudhakar Rao's branding keynote identified a different challenge: sameness. Nearly every campus claims innovation, global exposure, and distinction, which diminishes the effect of these words. He proposed the 3B Model: Being, Behaving, Broadcasting. Institutions must define their core values, demonstrate them through actions, and communicate their identity clearly.

Shyam Srinivasan, former MD and CEO of Federal Bank, offered a long-term perspective. He recalled purchasing a book by N J Yasaswy in 1984 and, forty years later, launching a book about the same individual. Yasaswy repeatedly started ventures, encountered setbacks, regrouped, and tried again. Srinivasan noted that while success is celebrated, the persistence and steadfastness behind it are often unrecognised.

That thread runs quietly through the rest of this edition. Venkatesh Athreya writes that a habit is not something you do on your best day but something you can do on your worst. Rajendran Dandapani argues that missing the target is not failure; it is education. And Ranjan Kumar reminds us that motivation is fuel, but purpose is direction.

Read on. The work is just beginning.

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THE TEAM **Successverse SPARK Vol.01 Spark 03 – 31 March 2026**

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HOBBIES

The power of small actions

Why the smallest step you take today might change your life

IN MOST of my workshops, I ask people to do one thing: touch your nose with your finger. Almost everyone does it instantly.

Then I ask: 'Why did you do that?'

The answer is always the same: 'Because it was easy.'

Exactly.

Then I say: 'Now let's do a 5-kilometre run.' People laugh, and look at each other. 'Not now, sir.'

I don't explain anything after that. The contrast is the lesson.

WHAT IS A HABIT

Your brain has a side that constantly scans for threats. Anything unfamiliar triggers caution because the mind prefers safety, certainty, and familiarity. That is why big goals feel exciting on day one and exhausting by day ten. It is why New Year resolutions collapse by end January.

But a small action battles the resistance. It's too small to fail. When asked, people usually say, 'Something done daily', 'Something automatic', or 'Something easy.'

All true. But in my definition, a habit is something you can do on your worst day, not your best. On your best day, anybody can appear disciplined. If your routine only works when you feel inspired, it is not yet a habit.

THE MISSING INGREDIENT IN CHANGE

Every meaningful change in life needs three things: awareness, action, and consistency.

Awareness helps you recognise the gap. Action gets you started. But consistency is where most people fail. People begin with dramatic plans that are impossible to sustain. Big actions create excitement, but small actions create continuity. And continuity changes lives.

So start small. Here is a simple rule: every time you go to the restroom, do two push-ups. Just two. Over time, two becomes five, then ten, then twenty. The important thing is not intensity. It is repetition.

I did something similar while writing my first book. The idea of writing 60,000 words paralysed me. For two months I did nothing. Then I realised I was already writing more than 1,000 words daily through emails, WhatsApp messages, and notes. Why not redirect 500 of those words towards the book?

I chose a café as my writing spot. The moment I entered, my brain knew: writing time. Just 500 words in about 30 minutes.

By day 85, I had a first draft. The tree grew because I focused only on watering the seed.

We use the same principle with people trying to start exercising. Sometimes we tell them: don't go to the gym yet. Just wear your gym clothes. That alone is the habit.

CELEBRATE EVERY WIN

After every small action, celebrate immediately. Say 'Hooray.' Smile. Pat yourself on the back. Have a biscuit or a cup of tea. The reward itself matters less than the emotion attached to it. Your brain begins associating the action with something positive, and that emotional loop slowly becomes habit.

And finally, start somewhere. Small actions work best when you are building something new. Start smaller than your ego wants to. The seed never looks impressive. Still, plant it every day. One morning, without quite noticing when it happened, you will realise the tree has arrived. ■

Venkatesh Athreya

A transformation consultant, and a leadership coach

REMEMBER

Awareness + Small Actions + Consistency = Change

The smallest action done consistently will almost always outperform the biggest action done occasionally.

1. Pick one new habit. Make the action so small it feels almost silly.
2. Do it on your worst days. That's when it counts most.
3. Celebrate immediately after. Every single time. Your brain is listening.

THE FUTURE UNIVERSITY

There is a building on every campus. It has high ceilings, big windows, and the smell of ambition. But walk inside on a Tuesday afternoon lecture and you will find thirty students staring at a screen while one person reads from slides that were made in 2011. Somewhere in the back row, a mind that could redesign a city is dying of boredom.

That building is not the problem. The lecture is.

THE UNIVERSITY, as we know it, was built for a world that no longer exists. It was designed to transfer information from the few who had it to the many who didn't. Professors were gatekeepers because knowledge was scarce. Grades were necessary because employers had no other way to assess you. The four-year degree was a container: fill it, fit it, and forget it. It made sense, once.

It doesn't anymore.

Today, information is cheap. You can learn thermodynamics from a YouTube channel run out of a garage. You can take a philosophy course from Yale for free. The gatekeeper model is finished.

The future university will not sell you a degree. It will measure not the hours you spent inside classrooms, but what you can actually do when you leave them. Imagine a university where you have a record of problems you solved, projects you shipped, ideas you tested and failed and rebuilt. Imagine assessments that resemble the real world: messy, collaborative, high-stakes, genuinely interesting.

And here is the uncomfortable idea: most disciplines should be dismantled and rebuilt as questions, not subjects. Climate change is not a geography problem. It is an engineering problem, a psychology problem, an economics problem, and a justice problem, all rolled in one. Packaging it into a single department is foolish.

The future university organises itself around problems, not departments. You don't major in Chemistry. You major in feeding ten billion people, or making cities breathable again. Chemistry shows up because it has to, alongside economics and urban design because real problems don't respect departmental borders.

The future university is porous. Students move in and out — spending a semester in a startup, a policy lab, a fishing village studying coastal erosion firsthand. Faculty are not tenured but rotating practitioners: the activist who is also researching, the engineer who spends three days a week in a classroom and two days on-site.

None of this is utopian fantasy. Pieces of it exist right now, in pockets, in experiments, in the universities brave enough to admit that the model is buckling. The question is whether the rest of the institution catches up before a generation of students — bored, in debt, and underestimated — simply walks away and builds something better without them.

They will, if pushed far enough.

Successverse ran a one day summit on this. Read on.

> “The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.”
>
> **– Alvin Toffler**

Rethinking Universities in the Age of AI

From AI-powered classrooms to the future of human judgement, a cross-sector panel explored how universities must reinvent themselves for the new world where knowledge is abundant, and adaptability matters more than ever.

If AI has all the answers, why should students come to universities?

DR DEEPENDRA KUMAR JHA: At a summit in Dubai, a student asked me a question that has stayed with me ever since: "If ChatGPT and AI tools can answer everything, why should we come to universities?"

I told him AI may give answers, but who will teach you what questions to ask? That remains the role of universities.

But the question reflects a deeper reality. Students are moving faster than institutions. AI-based evaluation systems, AI mentoring platforms and personalised learning models are already here. Meanwhile, many teachers are still limited to PPTs and emails when it comes to technology adoption. The challenge before institutions is not whether AI will be adopted. It certainly will. The real challenge is whether institutions can evolve faster than the habits that built them.

What happens if we remove the classroom from the equation?

DR ANBU RATHINAVEL: When Prof Jha raised that student's question, it reminded me of the film Speed, where the mentor tells the officer: "Take the hostage out of the equation."

Similarly, what happens if we take the classroom itself out of the equation? That is where education is heading. For years, institutions believed online education could never work. Covid proved otherwise. Today we are making the same mistake with AI. Many faculty members still see AI merely as a glorified search engine, while students are already working with AI agents and advanced systems.

The real issue is culture. Culture is simply what institutions tolerate. If we tolerate outdated practices, they become institutional culture. The best way to make faculty embrace AI is not by presenting it as a threat, but as an enabler. Teachers are already burdened with evaluation, feedback and administrative work. AI can help them do these tasks better and faster, allowing them to focus on mentoring and creativity instead.

The question is not how to automate universities. The question is how to reimagine them.

The final decision must remain human

DR APOORVA HAREE: Healthcare is one of the highest-stakes environments for AI adoption because mistakes have immediate consequences. Today patients already come with stories about AI identifying conditions that doctors missed. At the same time, blindly trusting AI could lead to false diagnoses and unnecessary procedures.

So how do we build trust? We begin with lower-risk areas such as scheduling, administration, and documentation. Doctors today are exhausted not only by patient care but also by paperwork and reporting. AI can become an enabler in these areas.

Gradually, it can support radiology, pathology and robotic surgery. But we must remain absolutely clear about one principle: the final decision rests with humans. A doctor cannot say, 'I did this because AI told me to do it.' AI should enhance judgement, not replace responsibility.

Education is more than information transfer

DR PSS SRINIVASAN: Every technological shift has transformed education. From the gurukul system to books, calculators, computers, the internet, and now AI.

Students today can access knowledge from anywhere. If industries eventually stop insisting on degrees, universities will face a serious challenge. Yet education is not merely

about transferring information. Universities also build ethics, teamwork and social responsibility. Human interaction still matters.

The real challenge now is evaluation. The same AI tools available to teachers are available to students. So how do we know whether students truly understand concepts or are simply generating AI-assisted answers?

Leadership in institutions therefore has to become far more agile. We cannot continue saying, 'This is how things have always been done.' Academic leaders must experiment, collaborate with industry and remain willing to learn continuously.

Industry does not operate in a world of right and wrong answers

MS FEBIN MF: When academia talks about skills, the first question should be: what exactly does industry need?

The challenge is not only technical capability. Industry today operates in ambiguity. There are no perfect answers, no fixed conditions and no complete information before decisions are made. Yet academic systems still condition students to think in terms of right answers and wrong answers.

In industry, we constantly ask employees not to wait for instructions. We expect initiative, problem-solving and independent thinking. That mindset has to begin inside universities. Graduation is not the end of learning. It is only the beginning. Institutions need to prepare students not merely for jobs, but for uncertainty.

Universities must train students for ambiguity

ISHAN KAPOOR: The market today is unpredictable. Many of the roles that exist now did not exist even a decade ago. Universities therefore cannot rely on rigid curricula that remain unchanged for years.

Students need to be trained for ambiguity. They must learn through projects, experimentation, and real-world problem solving rather than one-directional classroom teaching. At the same time, institutions should not judge themselves only through placements. Long-term performance matters more. Employers return to campuses when graduates consistently perform well over time. There must also be a much faster feedback loop between industry and academia. Waiting for yearly reviews is no longer enough. Institutions need continuous interaction with industry so that curricula and teaching methods evolve in real time.

Are leaders driving change or merely managing discomfort?

DR DEEPENDRA KUMAR JHA: Everyone agrees change is necessary. The real question is whether institutions are genuinely transforming or merely managing discomfort. We understand that the future is ambiguous, yet we still try to prepare students through rigid systems. That contradiction has to be resolved.

Universities must become willing to unlearn old assumptions. Legacy becomes a liability the moment institutions continue doing something simply because 'this is how it has always been done'. The future of education will belong to institutions that remain open, agile and willing to rethink themselves continuously. ■

At the panel discussion titled **Building Future-Ready Institutions: AI, Leadership, Culture, and Change Management**. Moderated by **Dr Deependra Kumar Jha**, Vice Chancellor, Manav Rachna. University Speakers: **Dr Anbu Rathinavel**, Chief Design Officer, Intellect Design Arena, **Dr Apoorva Haree**, Chief Operating Officer, Rajalakshmi Health City, **Dr PSS Srinivasan**, Executive Chairman, Knowledge Institute of Technology, **Ms Febin MF**, L&T EduTech, Larsen & Toubro Ltd, and **Ishan Kapoor**, Co Founder, Hoping Minds.

Industry and Academia: Closing the Gap

As technology reshapes industries at unprecedented speed, educators and industry leaders discussed why universities must move beyond degrees, rethink employability and build deeper collaborations with the world of work. Titled 'Industry-Integrated Universities: Bridging Employability, Innovation, and Research,' the session looked into how industry and academia can strengthen each other in shaping the universities of the future.

Industry must move inside universities

Moderator: ***Lakshminarayanan sir, let me begin with you. From the industry side, how do you see this integration evolving?***

DR LAKSHMINARAYANAN: We are living in an extremely dynamic environment where technologies change every few months. Yet industries continue to face a shortage of talent that is immediately employable.

The challenge today is not the absence of graduates. India has a tremendous demographic advantage. The issue is the gap between what universities produce and what industry requires. This became especially visible during the digital and cloud transition around 2017–18. Entire skill sets became redundant almost overnight. Companies had to rapidly reskill employees, but even before that process was complete, technology had changed again.

That is when many of us realised something fundamental: universities and industry can no longer operate as separate ecosystems. Industry must move inside universities, and universities must move closer to industry. The glass walls between them have to break.

At our organisations, we experimented with industry-specific electives. After students build their academic foundations, industry should step in with specialised pathways aligned to real-world needs. We worked with universities to create electives, train faculty, establish labs, offer internships and involve senior professionals in teaching.

MOUs alone are not enough

Moderator: ***You work closely with large educational ecosystems. Where do you see the gaps today?***

DR SHALEESHA A. STANLEY: Many institutions have MOUs with reputed companies. But we must ask honestly: how much impact do these collaborations actually create?

Typically, students get industrial visits, guest lectures or a handful of internships. Perhaps 10 per cent of students benefit directly. Beyond that, industry and academia still operate with very different objectives, timelines and constraints.

Even industry-supported labs often train students only in narrow domains. But software companies themselves constantly change verticals and technologies. Students who train in one area may move to something entirely different within a year. So the larger question is this: are we merely training students for one immediate skill, or are we helping them develop the ability to adapt continuously?

That is why we have begun integrating industry-linked subjects directly into the curriculum semester by semester. We are also building incubation and start-up ecosystems involving students, faculty and industry professionals together. The objective should not simply be placements. It should be preparing students to navigate ambiguity and change.

Strong fundamentals still matter

Moderator: ***Much of this discussion focuses on IT. But sectors such as manufacturing, electronics and mobility are evolving rapidly too. What should institutions prioritise?***

GIRIJA S: Three areas stand out: employability, innovation and research. Industry can no longer remain at the level of advisors signing MOUs. Companies must actively participate in curriculum development, internships and

skill-building frameworks. But while we discuss emerging technologies, I think we are overlooking something equally important: fundamentals.

At TVSTS, when we work on employability programmes, we often find students struggling with the basics. Whether it is electronics, embedded systems or manufacturing processes, foundational understanding has weakened.

Technology will continue to evolve. AI and automation will expand. But even AI-generated insights require human interpretation and decision-making. Without strong basics, students cannot adapt effectively. Internships and apprenticeships also need clearer structures. They should not become checkbox exercises. Industries and institutions must define what skills students are expected to acquire and how those outcomes will be measured. And finally, faculty immersion is critical. Faculty members must spend time inside industries, understand real-world challenges and bring those insights back into classrooms.

Industry must become a co-partner

***Moderator:* Are institutions sometimes only scratching the surface when it comes to industry integration?**

DR BOMMANNA RAJA: That happens in many places. Today almost every institution has an incubation centre, industry cell or skill development centre. But the real question is whether these efforts are transforming students into productive professionals.

Universities must move beyond being degree-granting institutions. We need to develop competent individuals who can contribute meaningfully from day one. Industry should become a co-partner in education — not merely an occasional visitor. Their involvement should begin at curriculum design and continue through teaching, evaluation and certification.

At the same time, institutions also need practical approaches. We cannot always look for collaborations only with distant metropolitan companies. Local industrial clusters offer enormous opportunities.

In our region alone, hundreds of industries are available for partnerships, internships and faculty immersion. Planning and sustained engagement matter more than scale alone.

The gap may never disappear completely

***Moderator:* One recurring question is whether academia can realistically keep pace with constantly changing industry demands.**

Dr Lakshminarayanan KV: The answer lies in strong fundamentals and better aptitude mapping. Not every student needs to move into the same career stream. Institutions must help students identify their natural strengths and guide them accordingly.

Dr Shaleesha A. Stanley: Faculty remain the backbone of any institution. They need time, support and opportunities to upgrade themselves continuously. Without investing in teachers, no system can evolve.

Girija S: Faculty development should move beyond conferences and workshops. Teachers should work on live industry projects and real problem-solving assignments alongside companies.

Dr Bommanna Raja: The opportunities already exist. The challenge is creating deeper local ecosystems between institutions and industry.

We are all products of the same ecosystem

Closing the session, the moderator reflected that despite all criticisms of academia, industry itself is built by graduates produced by these very institutions. "The gap between industry and academia may never disappear completely," he observed. "But our responsibility is to reduce that gap continuously." ■

At the panel titled, moderated by **Dr Anbuthambi B**, Director, Successverse, four leaders namely, **S Girija**, CEO, TVSTS, **Dr Lakshminarayanan KV**, Vice President - HR, Data Patterns, **Dr Shaleesha A. Stanley**, Pro Chancellor, Jeppiaar University, **Dr Basavaraj Kataeri**, Pro Vice Chancellor, GITAM University, and **Dr Bommanna Raja**, Principal, Excel Engineering College discussed the industry academia gap.

India's Universities have expanded. But...

By every measurable indicator, India's higher education system looks like a success story, says **Pattabhi Ram.**

THERE ARE more colleges than ever before. More universities. More graduates. More access. Entire generations that once stood outside the gates of higher education are now entering classrooms across the country. In many ways, this democratisation of education is one of modern India's greatest achievements.

And yet, beneath this impressive scale lies a deeply uncomfortable question: are we truly preparing students for the world they are about to enter?

INDIA AT ITS MOST HOPEFUL

I have spent more than two decades teaching chartered accountancy students in large-format classrooms. Over the years, I have increasingly felt that India today is witnessing the rise of three distinct kinds of learners.

The first is the India of hope. A young woman in Jamshedpur becomes the first graduate in her family. She receives a degree in artificial intelligence while her father, a landless farmer, records the moment proudly on his Android phone. This is India at its most hopeful.

The second is the India of determination. A boy in Bihar leaves college behind but teaches himself blockchain technology online because he refuses to let circumstance define his future. This is India at its most determined.

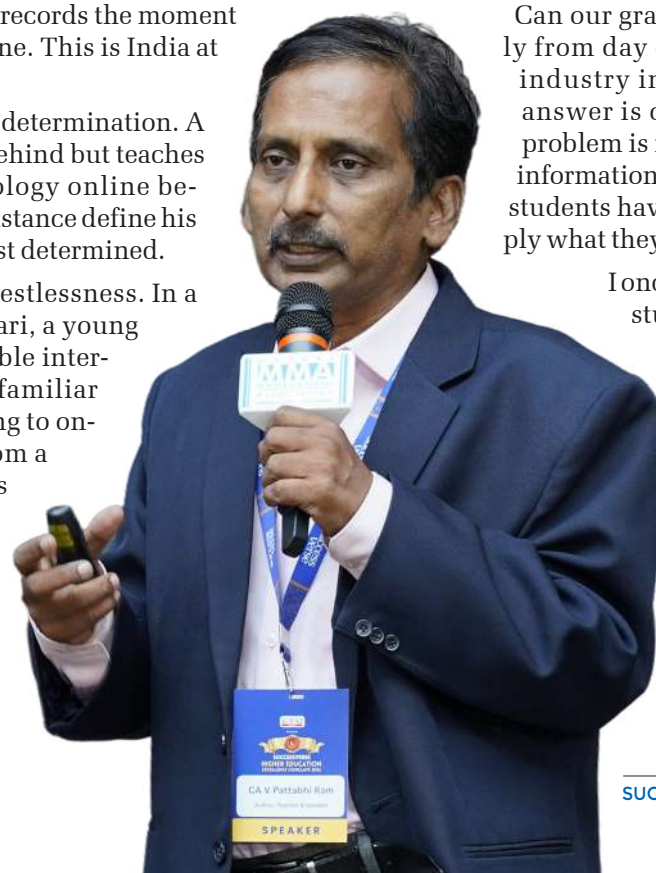
The third is the India of restlessness. In a modest home in Kanyakumari, a young girl struggles through unstable internet connections and an unfamiliar foreign accent while listening to online lectures on genetics from a Stanford professor. She does not fully understand everything she hears, but she persists anyway. This is India at its most restless.

These stories are inspiring. But they also reveal the contradiction at the heart of Indian higher education. India has achieved scale far faster than it has achieved cohesion.

We celebrate the sheer number of institutions and graduates we produce every year. But not every student receives the same quality of education, mentorship or opportunity. A student graduating from an IIT enters the workforce with a vastly different ecosystem of exposure compared to someone studying in a lesser-known college. The same inequality exists across professions, including chartered accountancy, where internships in top firms often create entirely different trajectories from those available elsewhere.

SCALE WITHOUT COHESION

This is not merely a question of access. It is a question of equity. And beyond equity lies an even more serious problem: employability.



Can our graduates function effectively from day one? That is the question industry increasingly asks, and the answer is often uncomfortable. The problem is not a lack of intelligence or information. The problem is that many students have never been trained to apply what they know.

I once interviewed a journalism student who confidently told me he knew the Chicago Manual of Style thoroughly. So I handed him a page and asked him to edit it according to those rules. He could explain the theory perfectly. He simply could not apply it.

That gap between knowledge and appli-

cation defines much of Indian higher education today.

Industry no longer wants graduates who merely possess degrees. It wants people who can solve problems, think independently and contribute immediately. Companies do not want to spend six months retraining recruits in practical workplace skills. In fact, some firms today are willing to hire students directly after Class 12 and train them internally rather than depend on graduates who remain underprepared despite years of formal education. That should force universities to confront a difficult reality.

For decades, our education system has remained excessively theory-heavy. Examinations continue to reward recall more than reasoning. Students memorise far more than they create. And this model continues at precisely the moment when the world itself is changing most rapidly.

Artificial intelligence is reshaping industries. Technology is transforming how businesses function. Jobs are evolving faster than university curricula. Yet much of higher education still operates within structures designed for another era altogether.

FROM DEGREES TO CAPABILITY

If one examines the evolution of Indian universities, the pattern becomes clear.

The earliest phase of higher education under colonial rule was largely designed to create administrative efficiency. Post-Independence education focused on nation-building and social stability. The liberalisation era of the 1990s expanded access dramatically, allowing millions to earn degrees for the first time. Later came interdisciplinary learning and flexibility in course structures.

Yet through all these phases, one challenge remained unresolved: creating graduates who are genuinely capable.

Today's generation, however, is forcing a new conversation. Young people increasingly want purpose alongside employment. They are not merely asking what salary a job offers. They are asking what contribution they will make, why their work matters, and whether learning itself feels meaningful.

That shift matters. Previous generations often accepted hierarchy without question. Today's students seek participation, context and relevance. They want to understand the larger chain of learning and contribution. In many ways, that is a healthy development.

But it also demands that universities evolve faster than they currently are.

We cannot continue testing students primarily on memory in a world where information is instantly accessible. I have even argued recently that students should be allowed to use tools like ChatGPT during examinations. This is not because technology should replace learning, but because education must move beyond testing recall and begin testing judgement, interpretation and originality.

The real challenge before universities today is not expansion. It is relevance.

THE UNIVERSITY INDIA NEEDS

Institutions must decide what they want to become. Some may choose to focus on employability and industry readiness. Others may evolve into research-driven centres. A few may become innovation ecosystems similar to Stanford University or Harvard University.

But institutions that attempt to become everything for everybody may ultimately become indistinguishable. Most importantly, universities must stop functioning merely as teaching shops. They must become engines of capability. A graduate scoring 90 per cent means very little if that student cannot solve unfamiliar problems, think independently or contribute meaningfully in the workplace.

India is expected to add more than 100 million learners over the next decade. This is not merely an educational statistic. It is one of the defining national opportunities of our time.

Handled well, this demographic wave could become one of India's greatest strengths. Handled poorly, it could create millions of frustrated and unemployable young people. That is why the future of Indian higher education is not merely an academic debate. It is a national imperative. ■

Adapted from the author's keynote address on 'University 5.0' delivered at the Conclave.

Branding the Future University

FOR DECADES, universities survived on legacy. A long history. A respected founder. Word-of-mouth reputation. A campus that had existed for fifty or a hundred years. These were enough to establish credibility. That passive reputation carried institutions forward for generations.

But the age of passive reputation is over.

Reputation belongs to the past. Relevance belongs to the future. What brought an institution here will not necessarily take it forward. Universities today are being evaluated not merely on historical recognition, but on contemporary relevance.

Students now evaluate institutions digitally before they evaluate them physically. They study websites, social media feeds, online reviews, videos and digital conversations long before they step onto a campus.

And institutions no longer compete locally. A university in Chennai is not merely competing with another university in Chennai. Students compare institutions globally. They benchmark experiences, infrastructure, culture and opportunity across cities, states and even countries. That changes everything.

What exactly makes one institution different from another? That difference cannot be cosmetic. It must be cultural.

THE CRISIS OF SAMENESS

Artificial intelligence will democratise access to knowledge. Information alone will no longer differentiate institutions. If everybody has access to knowledge, then universities must distinguish themselves in other ways.

That is where branding becomes important. Unfortunately, many institutions still confuse branding with marketing.

Marketing is about admissions, promotions and enrolments. Branding is strategic. Branding defines what an institution stands for and how it is perceived over time. Marketing may bring students to the gate. Branding determines whether the institution remains relevant a decade later.

The greatest challenge universities face today is sameness.

Every campus has classrooms, laboratories, sports facilities, faculty members and technology-enabled spaces. Everyone claims innovation. Everyone claims excellence. Everyone claims global exposure.

So the obvious question becomes: what exactly makes one institution different from another? That difference cannot be cosmetic. It must be cultural.

BEING, BEHAVING AND BROADCASTING

Over time, I have come to think of branding through what I call the '3B Model': Being, Behaving, and Broadcasting.

The first is Being. What does the institution fundamentally stand for? What is its purpose? Why does it exist in the education ecosystem?

The second is Behaving. Institutions cannot merely claim values; they must consistently demonstrate them. Culture is not defined by slogans placed on walls. It is defined by everyday behaviour; how faculty engage with students, how leadership responds to crises, how systems operate and how consistently standards are upheld.

And the third is Broadcasting. Institutions must communicate their story clearly and consistently to the outside world. Branding therefore is not an advertising exercise. It is the cumulative outcome of identity, behaviour and communication.

BRANDING IS NOT DEMOCRATIC

One of the biggest mistakes institutions make is treating branding as a committee exercise.

Everyone has opinions about branding because everyone interacts with brands every day. But branding cannot emerge from endless consensus-building and fragmented decision-making. It requires clarity,

conviction and consistency. If an institution attempts to please everybody simultaneously, it risks standing for nothing.

The universities that will matter in the future are those that develop a clear sense of identity and execute it with discipline over long periods of time. That requires leadership.

REPUTATION IN THE DIGITAL ERA

Social media has fundamentally changed how academic reputation is built.

An institution cannot depend solely on its official social media handles. Faculty members themselves become ambassadors of institutional credibility. Every meaningful conversation, research insight, lecture clip, or professional contribution shared online collectively strengthens the academic brand of the institution.

In the digital era, visibility shapes perception. But visibility without substance is dangerous.

Institutions must also ask difficult questions about the company they keep. Whom do they invite to campuses? What values do those individuals represent? Are panels intellectually credible? Are diverse voices represented? Are institutions merely seeking visibility, or are they building intellectual seriousness?

These choices define culture far more than brochures do.

BUILD THE INSTITUTION AROUND PEOPLE

One of the most important lessons for future universities is deceptively simple: recruit the right people first.

Too often, institutions focus on infrastructure before faculty, buildings before ideas, and systems before culture. But universities are ultimately driven by people.

Who teaches matters before what is taught. What is taught matters before where it is taught. Infrastructure matters, but only after intellectual direction has been established. A timetable, a laboratory or a classroom exists for a reason. Every academic interaction must have clarity of purpose.

And institutions lose credibility not only through large failures, but through repeated small inconsistencies. Delayed sessions, broken promises, superficial execution and lack of alignment between what is promised and what is delivered. Brand erosion often begins quietly.

BIGGER THE BRAND, GREATER THE SCRUTINY

Every institution wants visibility and recognition. But larger brands also invite greater accountability. In the digital era, mistakes are amplified instantly. Institutions that aspire to become nationally respected brands must therefore also be prepared for higher levels of scrutiny and public expectation.

Branding is not a shortcut. It is not instant coffee.

It resembles agriculture more than advertising. The ground must be prepared carefully. Seeds must be planted. Systems must be nurtured consistently over time before meaningful results appear. That patience is essential.

BEYOND FAME, TOWARDS RELEVANCE

The universities that succeed in the future will not merely be famous. They will be relevant. They will be intellectually credible. Their research will matter. Their campuses will be digitally visible yet culturally rooted. Students will not merely study there; they will shape the institution's energy and identity.

Most importantly, these institutions will understand that branding is not ultimately about what universities say about themselves. It is about what society says about them. And in the years ahead, relevance will matter far more than legacy. ■

*Adapted from **Sudhakar Rao's** keynote address .*

The long game of legacy

It was a fireside chat in which Shyam Srinivasan, former MD and CEO of Federal Bank spoke with Sudhakar Rao. The occasion was the launch of the book *The Man Who Saw Tomorrow: The Untold Story of N J Yasaswy*, the founder of ICFAI. Excerpts.

"IN 1984, after engineering, I was working in Chennai and wanted to pursue management. I bought a book called Finance for Non-Finance Executives. The author was N. J. Yasaswy. I had no idea that forty years later I would be sitting in a hall launching a book on him."

That memory became the entry into a discussion on what made Yasaswy exceptional. According to the former banker, society celebrates success but rarely acknowledges the failures and recoveries that precede it. His exact words were: 'We celebrate success. But what is less celebrated is the number of failures successful people go through, and the number of times they bounce back.'

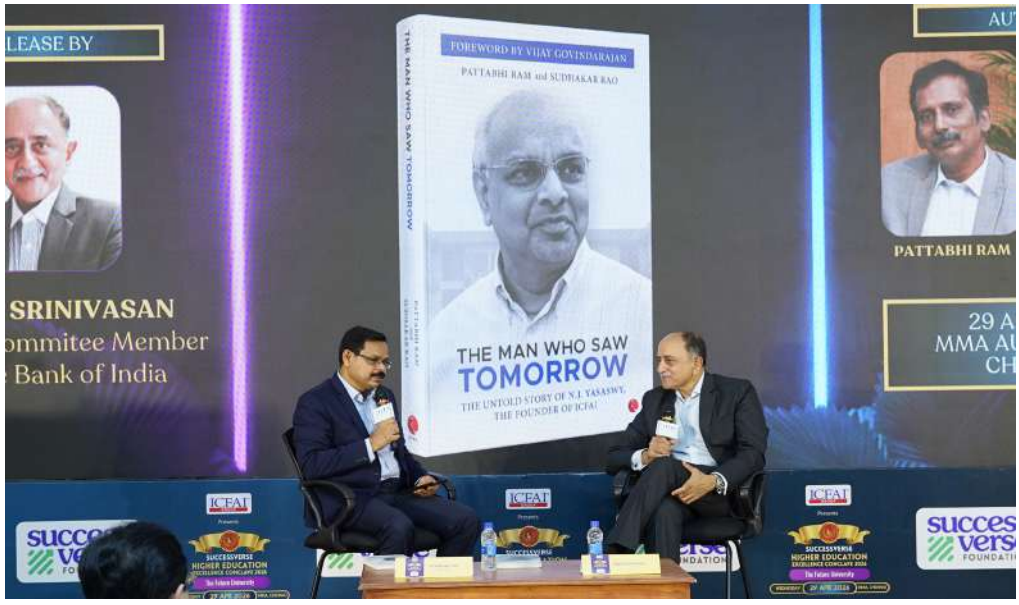
To explain resilience, he used an analogy. 'Resilience is like a rasgulla. A good rasgulla can be squeezed dry and yet bounce back when put back into syrup.' The comparison captured the essence of Yasaswy's entrepreneurial journey. Srinivasan observed that Yasaswy repeatedly started ventures, encountered setbacks, regrouped and began again.

The conversation then turned towards leadership in an age shaped by rapid technological change. One idea emerged clearly: the ability to continuously reinvent oneself.

'All learning has an expiry date today,' he said. Yet, even in an era dominated by artificial intelligence, he argued that human values remain central.

'Building institutions means taking knocks, staying the course and continuing despite setbacks,' he said, adding that one of the toughest tasks for leaders is 'making boring sexy' — sustaining discipline and consistency over long periods.

Sudhakar Rao, the co-author, added that Yasaswy's greatest quality was his ability to show up every single day with energy and clarity. In whatever he did, he inspired confidence in people around him.



The session concluded with a reflection on legacy. Great institutions, the speakers noted, eventually move beyond their founders and become owned by employees, students, alumni and society at large. In many ways, that may be the most enduring legacy of N. J. Yasaswy — not merely the institutions he built, but the sense of ownership, purpose and resilience he left behind. ■

Have this... on your coffee table

A NEW PUBLICATION brings together 101 proven ideas for building tomorrow's graduates.

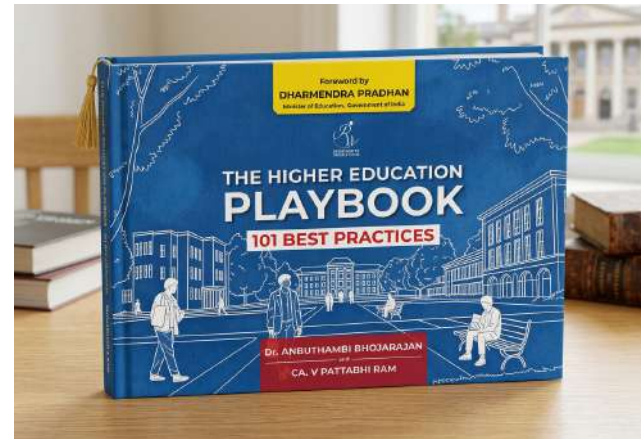
When N. Lakshmi Narayanan stepped forward to unveil the Higher Education Playbook: 101 Best Practices, everyone in the audience recognised the significance of the moment. India's higher education stands at an inflexion point, and this substantial 350-page coffee table volume, featuring a thoughtful foreword by India's Minister of Education, Dharmendra Pradhan, arrives at the right time.

Nearly 50 top colleges and five corporates contributed their most effective ideas to the book. From reimagined classroom approaches and active research ecosystems to local community engagement and technology adoption, every featured practice has been implemented and refined on the ground.

The editors are careful about what qualifies. A 'best practice' here is not simply a success story; it is a replicable and modifiable approach: something another institution can adopt, adapt, and build upon.

The timing is relevant. As the National Education Policy receives greater attention, administrators and faculty across the country are looking not for more age-old theory but for working models that demonstrate how change can be implemented. The Higher Education Playbook addresses those needs directly, offering example after example of institutions that moved from aspiration to implementation.

This book will find its place on many coffee tables. Anyone connected with education, in any form, will find something valuable in its pages.



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Teaching beyond the textbook

WHY EDUCATION must prepare students for adaptability, not just employment

One of the greatest mistakes education can make is to prepare students for a world that no longer exists. Technology, automation and artificial intelligence are rapidly changing the nature of work, especially routine and repetitive jobs. Educational institutions therefore face an urgent question: how do we ensure students remain relevant in such an environment?

A degree alone is no longer enough. If a commerce graduate is trained only in accounting or auditing in the traditional sense, industry demand for such narrowly defined capability will steadily reduce. Organisations today are looking for individuals who can adapt, communicate, manage relationships, and work across functions. A student trained in commerce should therefore also understand areas such as customer relationship management, office administration, technology tools and basic human resource functions. A broader curriculum creates professionals who are far more valuable than those confined to a single stream of expertise.

Students must also learn to present themselves. Interviews should not become exercises in merely answering questions. Young professionals should have the confidence to explain their wider interests, abilities and contributions. A candidate who can demonstrate initiative, communication skills and practical understanding will always stand out.

The startup ecosystem offers another important opportunity. Every startup may begin with innovation, but scaling a business requires much more than a good idea. Startups need people who understand finance, compliance, governance, and regulation. This creates significant opportunities for graduates from commerce and management backgrounds, provided their education prepares them for practical realities.

Educational institutions must therefore build stronger connections with practitioners from industry. Entrepreneurs and professionals working in emerging sectors can provide insights that textbooks cannot. Students need exposure to how businesses are built, how risks are managed, and how decisions are taken under uncertainty. At the same time, institutions should ensure such knowledge is documented and integrated into teaching rather than treated as one-time interactions.

ROLE OF TEACHERS

The role of teachers also needs reconsideration. In many institutions, faculty members spend significant time on administrative work. This inevitably affects classroom quality. Teachers should primarily be allowed to teach, read, learn, and improve academic content.

Teaching itself must evolve into a more personalised one. Every student learns differently. Some read quickly but struggle with retention, while others understand concepts yet fail to express them effectively. Learning can broadly be viewed through four dimensions: reading, comprehension, retention, and expression. Modern analytical and AI-driven tools can help educators identify where students face difficulty and adapt teaching methods accordingly. Used correctly, technology can strengthen education rather than weaken it.

Professional fields such as accounting and taxation already demonstrate how work is changing. Tasks that once required teams of people and several days of effort can now be completed within minutes using AI-based tools. Yet technology cannot replace judgement. Professionals must still evaluate whether outputs are accurate, relevant, and reliable. The future also belongs to those who can interpret and validate it responsibly.

Institutions must move beyond producing degree holders alone. They must create individuals who are adaptable, curious, disciplined, and capable of continuous learning. In a changing world, relevance will matter far more than reputation, and education must prepare students accordingly. ■

*From Keynote delivered by **R Bupathy**, Past President, ICAI*

Creating leaders, not just graduates

HIGHER EDUCATION today stands at an important crossroads. On one side are those questioning the relevance of universities in a rapidly changing technological world. On the other is a deeper and more important question: what kind of education do students truly need today?

The purpose of education is not merely to produce degree-holders. It is to create future leaders. Leadership is what builds companies, institutions and nations. If there is one factor that determines whether an institution succeeds or fails, it is the quality of leadership it produces.

To understand how universities must evolve, one must begin at the level of school education. One of the significant concerns in India has been foundational learning. For years, students were reaching higher classes without acquiring even basic reading and writing abilities. The National Education Policy recognised this gap and emphasised that by the third standard, children must be able to read and write effectively.

But that stage is only the beginning. Up to the middle-school years, education largely teaches students what to think. Children absorb accepted knowledge about how the world functions. They learn facts, systems and explanations that are generally unquestioned. From around the eighth standard onwards, however, education must shift towards teaching students how to think. This transition is crucial because curiosity, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities emerge during this phase. These qualities form the real foundation for leadership later in life.

By the time students enter university, they should already possess the ability to question, analyse and make informed choices. Higher education must then build on that foundation and shape individuals who are intellectually broad-based rather than narrowly specialised.

Today, it is no longer sufficient for a student to emerge from college with only technical knowledge. A programmer or engineer cannot succeed merely by understanding code or mechanical systems. Students must also develop some understanding of history, philosophy, psychology, economics, and business. Such exposure helps them understand people, institutions and society.

This is why many new universities are redesigning their curriculum structures. Alongside specialised knowledge, students are introduced to logical reasoning, analytical reasoning, communication skills, and collaborative problem-solving. The goal is to create individuals who are adaptable and capable of engaging with complex real-world challenges.

Equally important is the shift from competition to collaboration. School systems often encourage students to compete relentlessly for marks and ranks. But in professional life, collaboration becomes indispensable. The ability to work in teams, solve problems collectively and bring people together is often more valuable than individual brilliance alone.

THE ASK AHEAD

The uncertainty of the modern world makes this even more important. Technology is transforming industries at extraordinary speed. Skills that are highly relevant today may become obsolete tomorrow. In such a world, students must not only be technologically aware, but also technologically literate. They must understand data, learn continuously, and remain intellectually flexible regardless of their discipline.

At the same time, education cannot remain disconnected from society. Universities must engage deeply with communities around them. Students should work with neighbourhood businesses, small industries, and local organisations. India's MSME sector already contributes significantly to employment and economic growth. Even small improvements in productivity and scale within these enterprises can create meaningful social and economic impact.

When students participate in such community engagement, they develop a broader understanding of society and their role within it. They begin to see leadership not as authority, but as responsibility.

That, ultimately, is the direction in which higher education must move: towards creating thoughtful, curious, collaborative, and socially conscious individuals who can lead in any field. ■

Drawn from a keynote delivered by ***N Lakshmi Narayanan****, Chairman, Krea University.*

Successverse IMPACT Awards 2026

Honours High-Performing Departments from 15 Colleges Across Tamil Nadu

SUCCESSVERSE successfully hosted the Successverse IMPACT Awards 2026, a prestigious initiative recognising excellence and measurable impact in higher education. The awards celebrated 15 colleges across Tamil Nadu for their high-performing academic departments that have demonstrated exceptional contributions in student outcomes, innovation, industry engagement, research, and institutional excellence.

The event brought together academic leaders, educators, and higher education stakeholders to celebrate departments that are setting new benchmarks and driving transformation in the education ecosystem.

Speaking on the occasion, Dr. Anbuthambi B, Director, Successverse, said: "The Successverse IMPACT Awards were created to recognise departments that go beyond routine academic delivery and create measurable impact in shaping students, institutions, and society. These institutions are role models for the future of higher education."

The awards served as a platform to spotlight excellence, encourage innovation, and inspire institutions to continuously raise the bar in delivering quality education and meaningful outcomes.

The Successverse IMPACT Awards are part of Successverse's larger mission to strengthen the higher education ecosystem by recognising excellence, fostering leadership, and promoting best practices across institutions.

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K.S.Rangasamy College of Technology (B.E. Mechatronics Engineering)

Sri Ramakrishna Engineering College (B.E. Robotics and Automation)

Justice Basheer Ahmed Sayeed College For Women (B.Sc. Electronics)

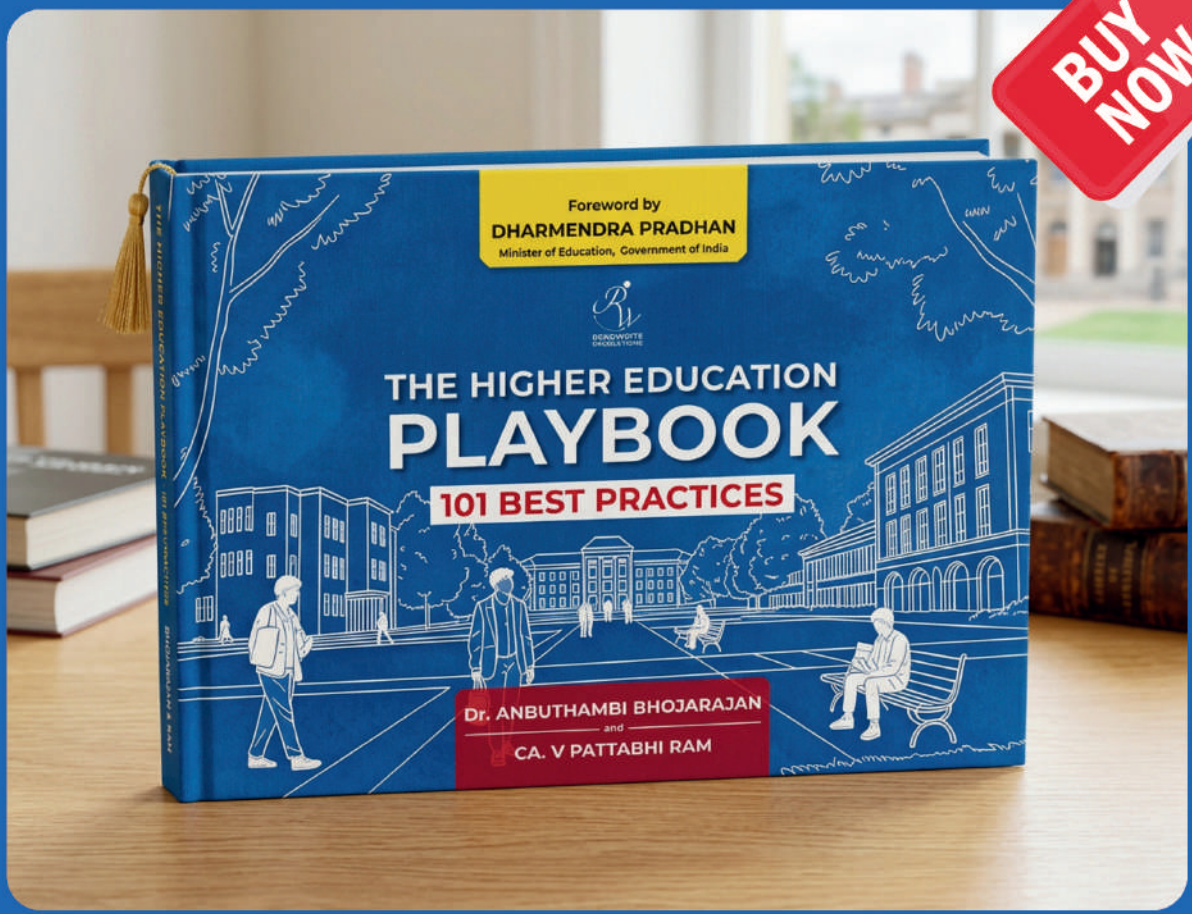
Sri Sairam Engineering College (B.Tech. Information Technology)

VIT University (Career Development Centre)

Kongu Engineering College (Technology Business Incubator)

Jeppiaar University (Social Outreach Cell)

Knowledge Institute of Technology (B.E. Electrical and Electronics Engg)



Foreward by

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Dr Pankaj Mittal
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ARCHERY

The arrow that missed

Whether a missed shot is a failure depends entirely on who is holding the bow.

AS A KID, I used to string up a stout stick bent to the hilt, and practised archery. Taking to archery was a decision driven by the stories I heard growing up.

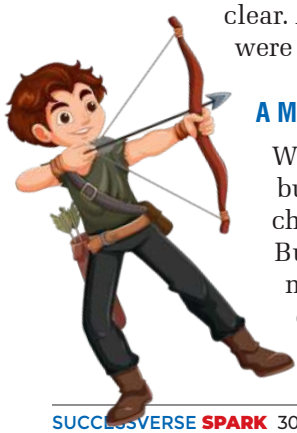
The tales of heroic Gods and warriors who were well known for hitting the bullseye. Tales of Lord Rama, who strung a bow no one could lift. Tales of Arjuna, who shot the eye of a revolving fish while looking only at its reflection in oil below. Tales of William Tell, who, without flinching once, split an apple balanced on his own son's head. These were stand-out moments that showcased heroic mastery.

Rajendran Dandapani,
Director of Engineering & Business Solutions Evangelist at Zoho Corporation and President of Zoho Schools of Learning.

As a young man, I was enamoured by these tales. They fuelled my love for archery. I kept going back to my bent stick and my chalk-marked wall, missing more than I hit.

THE FRAYED STRING

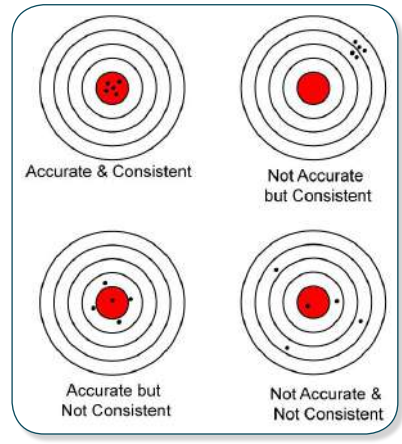
The remnants of the hours of playing in my garden were symbols of failure: a frayed string on a worn-out bow, and a target-board in shambles. But you can't fault me for not trying! This thought takes me back to another story. Adhiyamaan Nedumaan Anji, a Velir chieftain from the Sangam era, once sent poet saint Avvaiyar as his envoy to the court of the neighbouring king, Thondaimaan. Avvaiyar was no ordinary messenger. At the royal armoury, she employed sly praise remarking on how gleaming and untouched the weapons looked. The implication was clear. Adhiyamaan's arms, by contrast, were worn, dull, and battle-hardened.



A MISS IS NEVER JUST A MISS

What lessons does hitting the bullseye teach someone learning archery? Only that their aim was true. But those who miss it learn many more lessons. Every missed shot carries a debrief. The arrow that fell short tells you about the pull-back — the further you draw the bowstring behind you, the further the arrow travels forward. The one that dipped too early reminds you to aim slightly higher than where you want to reach, because gravity does not make exceptions for effort. The one that drifted sideways introduces you to the crosswind, one of many factors you have no control over. **'Missing' is a remarkably thorough teacher!**

There is a question every archer quietly wrestles with, and it turns out to be more interesting than it first appears. Look at the illustration showing four different target boards. The one that should worry you most is not the cluster that sits away from the bullseye. Your form is repeatable, your muscle memory is working, and all you need is a small correction in aim. The board that offers nothing to work with is the one where arrows are scattered everywhere. You cannot fix what has no pattern. Consistency is the thing worth building first. Accuracy, nearly inevitably, follows.



TRUST THE PROCESS

I will let you in on a secret. Many of the corporate success stories that go viral today are almost always told in reverse. The failures get edited out. They are too unglamorous, too messy, and too hard to fit into a keynote slide. What remains is the bullseye, and the impression that it was always the plan. This is what critical thinkers call the Texas Sharpshooter Fallacy. It is the habit of firing at a barn wall first and then drawing the target around the bullet holes. Every shot, in hindsight, looks deliberate. Every miss disappears.

Think about it. The bent stick, the frayed string, and the arrows that missed. They were never signs of failure. They were the education. Perhaps the wisest archers say nothing about where they are aiming until the arrow has landed. Not out of fear. But out of the quiet understanding that the work was always real, and that the result, when it comes, will be well worth it.

Ready, Shoot, Aim — as they say! ■

SUCCESS

Purpose beyond motivation

In an age overflowing with motivational content, inspiration alone is no longer enough. True growth comes from clarity of purpose, consistency of effort, and the courage to solve real-world problems rather than merely chasing success.

CA Ranjan Kumar Sahoo

Manager (Information System Audit), SBI Hyderabad

LIFE is limited by time. The quality of our life depends on the quality of how we use that time.

Motivation is available in plenty. In any field, there will be someone who has excelled despite difficulties. Today, we can reach out to YouTube for almost anything. Do you want to learn video editing? There are countless free courses available. Books are abundant, and so are experts willing to share their knowledge and insights. Finding resources for growth is no longer the challenge; there are plenty of motivators, too. However, many miss the point that motivation is not sustainable without a clear purpose in life. Before chasing success, we must first understand why we are chasing it.

In my college days, I had a friend who was extremely hardworking but had no real purpose. Every once in a while, he would listen to motivational talks and feel energised. Yet all that motivation never translated into anything meaningful. Another friend was average in his effort but had a clear purpose in mind. Today, that friend is living a deeply fulfilling life in which purpose is embedded in every choice.

Many think that having a purpose in life is unnecessary because if we fail to achieve it, we will be frustrated. But the opposite is equally true: without purpose, life becomes a rudderless boat in the ocean. Neither path guarantees success nor happiness. But what is undeniable is that a life driven by purpose brings greater meaning and value to our existence.

HERE IS A SHORT STORY:

Rohan was highly motivated during his B.Tech days. He woke up early, watched YouTube videos on success, hit the gym, posted quotes like 'Hustle beats talent', and told everyone he was destined for greatness. Yet even he did not know what that greatness actually meant.

He jumped from coding to trading to content creation. Each week brought a new obsession. Each month came a new 'plan'. His energy was high, but his direction kept changing. Meanwhile, Ranjitha appeared ordinary and quiet. No motivational videos. No public declarations. She spent long hours in the library working on rural business models. Her goal was simple: help small farmers increase their income. She was not always excited, but she was always consistent.

Three years later, Rohan was burned out with a folder full of half-finished projects. Ranjitha had built a working prototype for her startup.

At the farewell, Rohan finally asked, 'How did you stay so driven?'

Ranjitha replied, 'I wasn't always driven. I was just clear and consistent.'

Motivation is fuel; purpose is direction. Without direction, fuel eventually burns us out. What we truly need is not endless motivation, but a reason strong enough to survive when motivation disappears.

As aspiring entrepreneurs, we need to identify problems in the world and work towards solutions. At its core, entrepreneurship is about solving problems. Both theoretical and practical knowledge are essential for becoming a successful entrepreneur. Today, there is no shortage of people who can identify problems, but there are very few willing to create solutions.

Entrepreneurs are changemakers who step out of their comfort zones, walk into uncertainty, and move towards a larger purpose. The journey may not always be rewarding, but it will always be worthwhile. ■

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FINANCE

The quiet power of financial discipline

Many successful organizations are not built only on bold ideas. Quite often, they are built on 'financial discipline'.

FINANCIAL DISCIPLINE means understanding how money flows through a business and managing it carefully. For you, students, this idea can offer a useful lens through which you can see how organizations work.

CA Kavitha N
Strategist and Financial Advisor

UNDERSTANDING HOW CASH MOVES

In many business conversations, growth is the headline topic. Companies talk about increasing revenue, expanding markets, and launching new products. But growth alone does not guarantee stability. Many organizations that have grown exponentially have eventually struggled because they lost control over their financial fundamentals. Behind every successful business, there is usually a very strong foundation: clear visibility of costs, disciplined use of resources, and careful planning of investments. This is where financial discipline plays its role.

Profitability and cash flow are not the same thing. A company may report strong sales and healthy profits but still face cash flow pressure. Customers may take time to pay. Inventory may sit longer than expected. Excessive investment in long-term assets may make growth unsustainable from internal accruals. This is why experienced leaders pay greater attention to cash flow and working capital. When working capital is managed well, a business has flexibility. It can invest in opportunities, manage uncertainty, and operate with confidence.

EFFICIENCY AND TECHNOLOGY

EBITDA (Earnings Before Interest, Tax, Depreciation, and Amortization), is another key financial concept. It measures operating profitability, and reflects how efficiently a business converts its activities into earnings. This does not mean cutting resources indiscriminately; it means designing systems and processes that allow the organization to operate smoothly and sustainably. With time and consistency, these efficiencies compound.

Earlier, financial analysis depended heavily on periodic reports and manual reviews. Decisions were made using information that was months old. Today, digital tools allow organizations to monitor financial performance in real time. Enterprise systems, ERP and accounting software, data analytics platforms, and automation tools give leaders immediate voew of sales trends, cost structures, and cash flow patterns. This has drastically changed response levels. Professionals across functions can now understand how their decisions affect the company's financial health. The ability to interpret data, ask the right questions, and connect numbers to real business is becoming an essential skill.

AN IMPORTANT PERSPECTIVE

At the beginning of a career, the business world can appear fast-moving. New technologies emerge, industries evolve, and expectations change rapidly. Yet beneath this constant movement, many organizations still rely on a few enduring principles. Among them is the quiet discipline of managing resources thoughtfully and making decisions with a clear understanding of their financial impact.

Financial discipline may not always attract attention, but it often determines whether organizations can sustain their ambitions over time. Recognising this principle early can provide a useful sense of orientation. ■

Top reasons why businesses fail

Source: CB Insights

Percentage of Failed Business Citing Reason(%)

DEGREE VS SKILLS

What recruiters care about

In a fast-changing job market, recruiters increasingly prioritise practical capability, adaptability, and continuous learning over qualifications alone.

FOR DECADES, educational qualifications were the fundamental doorway to employment. However, rapid technological progress and stiff competition have rewritten the rules. Today, hiring focuses less on credentials and more on practical ability. The relevant question is how the two interact, and which truly influences hiring decisions in a competitive market.

Shivanand Pandit
Finance and Tax Adviser

DEGREES STILL MATTER

Degrees continue to matter. A university qualification still signals commitment, discipline, and basic knowledge. It demonstrates that an individual can develop subject expertise. In professions such as medicine, law, architecture, and academia, formal qualifications continue to be indispensable. Many organisations also use degrees as an initial screening tool when processing large numbers of applications.

However, a degree is no longer a differentiator. Recruiters look beyond certificates to assess who can contribute most effectively. The more important question today is not, 'Is my degree enough?' But, 'How do I prove that I can perform successfully in this role?'

WHY SKILLS ARE CENTRAL

This is where skills come in. Modern employers emphasise practical capability, especially when applicants can show it through tangible outcomes rather than merely listing skills on a résumé. Both technical and interpersonal skills matter. Technical skills reveal a candidate's ability to perform tasks, while soft skills suggest how well an individual works with others.

As technology automates repetitive work, uniquely human abilities are becoming more valuable. Communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, teamwork, adaptability, and emotional intelligence are now essential workplace competencies rather than optional strengths.

Among all these capabilities, one stands above the rest: the ability to learn continuously. What a person already knows matters, but the capacity to learn, unlearn, and relearn determines long-term career success. Employers understand that industries, technologies, and job roles evolve rapidly, and therefore seek individuals who can evolve alongside them.

WHAT RECRUITERS REALLY ASSESS

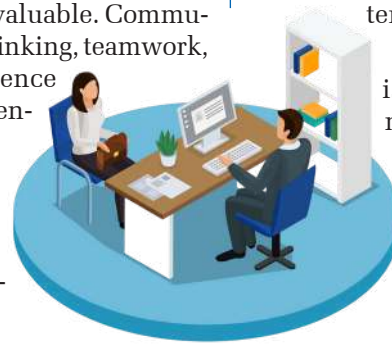
Employers increasingly want to understand how candidates think, adapt, and apply themselves in practical settings. One of the first qualities recruiters look for is whether a candidate can contribute quickly with minimal training. Practical exposure through internships, freelance assignments, part-time work, or personal projects becomes a strong indicator of readiness. Candidates with hands-on experience generally adapt faster than others.

Recruiters also pay attention to adaptability. Since job responsibilities constantly evolve, employers value individuals who are open to learning new tools, technologies, and methods of working. A candidate's willingness to adapt is viewed as a predictor of future growth. Equally important is initiative. Employers notice applicants who go beyond formal coursework to pursue independent learning, build projects, or solve problems proactively. Such efforts signal curiosity, motivation, and the confidence to learn without constant supervision.

BALANCE BETWEEN DEGREES AND SKILLS

The employment market has shifted from asking 'What qualifications do you have?' to 'What can you do, and how quickly can you add value?'

A degree still opens doors and provides foundational credibility. Yet once inside the professional world, it is skills that determine progress and long-term relevance.



Ultimately, the most valuable quality is the ability to continue learning and remain valuable in different environments. Far from being a disadvantage, this shift creates greater opportunities for capable individuals to demonstrate their potential through action rather than credentials alone. ■

Cell references vs Spill effects

Cell References are the traditional way of working in Excel. They refer to specific cells (such as A1, B2) and are used in formulas to perform calculations.

THESE REFERENCES can be: Relative (A1) – changes when copied, Absolute (A1) – remains constant; Mixed (A$1 or $A1) – partially fixed. This system allows users to build formulas step by step and replicate them across rows and columns.

The Spill Effect is a modern feature. Instead of returning a single value, a formula can return multiple values that automatically "spill" into adjacent cells. The output range is called the spill range, and it adjusts dynamically based on the result.

Vinoth Kumar R
Microsoft Certified Trainer

EFFICIENCY AND PRODUCTIVITY

With Cell References, each cell contains its own formula. For example, if you want to calculate totals for one hundred rows, you will write the formula in one cell and drag it down to the remaining 99 cells. Each cell works independently, even though the formulas are similar. In contrast, the Spill Effect uses a single formula to generate multiple outputs. For example: =SORT(A1:A100) This formula will automatically populate all sorted values in the cells below. There is no need to drag or copy formulae.

Cell References can become time-consuming when working with large datasets. Copying formulas across rows introduces risks such as: missing rows during drag, incorrect reference adjustments, and manual errors in formula editing. However, they provide a structured approach where each step is visible and controllable.

The Spill Effect significantly improves efficiency. A single formula replaces multiple copied formulas, reducing effort and increasing speed. When data changes, the output automatically updates and resizes. This makes it ideal for: reports, dashboards, and dynamic data models.

FLEXIBILITY AND CONTROL

Cell References offer greater control at a granular level. You can adjust formulas for individual cells, apply exceptions, and customize calculations row by row.

The Spill Effect is less flexible at the individual cell level. You cannot edit individual cells within the spill range. Changes must be made in the main formula cell. Custom adjustments within the output are limited.

DYNAMIC BEHAVIOURS

Cell References are relatively static. While formulas recalculate when inputs change, the structure remains fixed. If new data is added, users often need to: extend formulas manually, adjust ranges, and reapply calculations.

The Spill Effect is inherently dynamic. It automatically expands or contracts based on the data. For example: =UNIQUE(A1:A100). If more data is added, the output range updates instantly. This dynamic nature makes it powerful for real-time analysis.

Cell References are easier for beginners to understand because they follow a simple, step-by-step approach. The Spill Effect may feel unfamiliar initially. Users must understand: dynamic arrays, spill ranges, and new functions like FILTER, SORT, and SEQUENCE. However, once learned, it simplifies complex tasks.

Cell References are best suited for: financial modelling with step-by-step logic, situations requiring manual adjustments, backward compatibility needs, and detailed auditing of formulas. Spill Effect is useful for: data analysis and transformation, dashboards and reports, managing large and changing datasets, and reducing repetitive tasks.

OVERALL COMPARISON

Cell References represent control, precision, and traditional Excel usage, while the Spill Effect represents automation, scalability, and modern Excel capabilities. Cell references allow users to build logic incrementally and maintain full control over each calculation. However, they can become inefficient and error-prone with large datasets. Both approaches are important and not mutually exclusive. In real-world scenarios, the best solutions often combine Cell References for controlled calculations and the Spill Effect for dynamic outputs. Understanding when to use each method is key to becoming proficient in modern Excel. ■

THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSONAL CHOICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Beyond external influence

In India, CBSE was introduced in 1929. Later, most states across the country set up their own Boards of Secondary and Higher Secondary Education.

IN MARCH this year, approximately 8,27,475 students appeared for the Higher Secondary Examination 2026. Across India, students are now awaiting their Class 12 results next month.

I conducted a survey among students who had completed Class 12 to understand who makes decisions about their higher studies. Many students responded that their parents, siblings, and relatives were the deciding influences. Only around 2 percent said they made decisions for themselves.

Dr. Paramasivan
Assistant Professor
Takshashila University

What is the reason behind this? How can students succeed in their dreams? How can they shape their lives through the right college, course, and subject?

ADVERSE SELECTION

There is often asymmetric information coming from many sources such as relatives, neighbours, friends, and social media. If students believe such sources without cross-checking what is suitable for them and what is not, it can lead to poor decisions. We may call this 'adverse selection'. This can result in a mismatch: studies go in one direction, careers in another, and life in yet another.

This is the time to define our goals clearly and move in a focused way.

During my college days, there were two students, Tamilamuthan and Prakash, both studying B.Com (Corporate Secretaryship). They joined the course with the aim of clearing the Chartered Accountant (CA) examination. However, their journeys were different. Tamilamuthan discontinued his degree but cleared CA on his first attempt. Prakash completed his B.Com and also cleared CA on his first attempt.

Who decided their goals? Was it their parents, relatives, or siblings? Not at all. It was their own dream and determination.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT COURSE

Similarly, choosing a course of study and a college should be the student's own decision. It should not be forced by anyone, including parents. When students choose a course not for themselves but for others, they are often fulfilling someone else's dream while sacrificing their own.

How should one choose the right course? Students should spend time alone — whether in a study room, library, or any quiet place — and think deeply. Which subject do you truly enjoy? Which subject do you understand well even without guidance?

When I was studying in Classes 11 and 12 in a government higher secondary school, there was no teacher for economics, and those periods were often left free. Without a teacher, I studied economics on my own, performed well, and chose it as my path. In a way, after I chose economics, it also chose me.

In the same way, students should find a subject that they can build their life around, even independently. That can lead to a more meaningful and fulfilling life.

Focus on your decision. Listen to others, but do not surrender your choice. In the end, take ownership of your path, because a life shaped by your own decisions will always be more meaningful than one shaped entirely by others. ■

V Pattabhi Ram
CA and a Teacher

This column will share the executive summary of a book. Read it, internalise it, and you can hold conversations on it with anyone. If you are excited, read the book.

The lost art of thinking hard

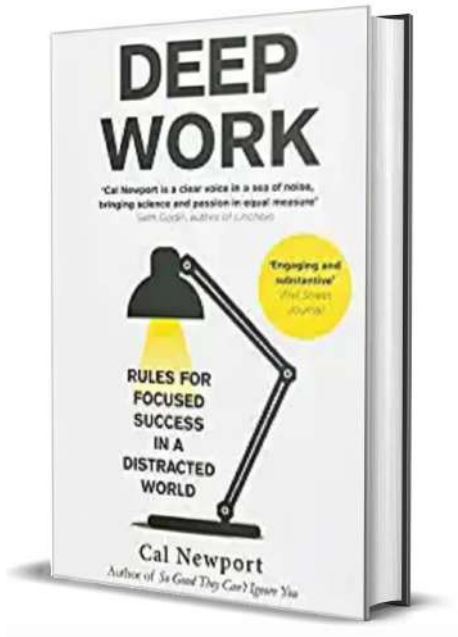
THERE IS a certain kind of exhaustion that comes not from doing too much, but from doing nothing of real consequence all day. You answered messages, scrolled through feeds, sat through lectures with one eye on your phone, and somehow reached midnight having produced nothing you are proud of. Cal Newport wrote Deep Work for exactly that feeling, and his diagnosis is uncomfortably accurate.

Newport's central argument is simple: the ability to focus without distraction on a cognitively demanding task is becoming both increasingly rare and increasingly valuable. He calls this deep work. And in the same breath, he argues that most of us, especially the hyperconnected, notification-saturated college generation are slowly losing this ability without even noticing.

For a college student, this book translates into something both obvious and radical: stop treating distraction as a reward and focus as a punishment.

THE SHALLOWS WE SWIM IN

The opposite of deep work is shallow work. The emails, the quick replies, the passive consumption, the multitasking that feels productive but produces very little of lasting value. The troubling part is that shallow work expands to fill the time available for it. A college student can spend an entire day on their laptop and genuinely feel busy, while having done nothing that required more than twenty minutes of sustained thought at any one point. Newport is pointing out a structural problem: the modern environment is designed against depth.



Open-plan spaces, constant connectivity, and the social pressure to respond quickly all erode the conditions under which serious thinking happens. The cost is invisible in the short term and enormous over a lifetime.

WHAT DEEP WORK ACTUALLY LOOKS LIKE

Newport draws on an impressive range of people — writers, mathematicians, programmers, executives — who have all structured their lives around protecting long, uninterrupted blocks of concentrated effort. Carl Jung retreated to a stone tower in Bollingen to write. Donald Knuth does not have an email address. These are not eccentrics. They are people who understood, before most, that their best work required a kind of mental environment that the world would not naturally provide. You have to build it deliberately.

For a college student, this translates into something both obvious and radical: stop treating distraction as a reward and focus as a punishment. The brain, Newport argues, is at its most satisfied when stretched by meaningful difficulty, not when it is resting in the shallow waters of a social media feed.

WHY THIS BOOK WILL STAY WITH YOU

What makes Deep Work more than a productivity manual is the philosophical undertow running beneath it. Newport is ultimately making a case for a kind of life – one organized around the production of things that matter, built on the foundation of your most concentrated mental effort.

Reading a summary of this book, including this one, can hand you the argument. But the book itself does something a summary cannot: it spends 250 pages making you feel the weight of what you are giving up every time you reach for your phone mid-thought. Read it. And gain from it. ■

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