

# Q&A

Dharmesh Raval

## **Q. *What is the Role of Higher Education Institutions in Promoting Entrepreneurship in India?***

**A.** Encouraging entrepreneurs to start new businesses is a priority for any government and is only increasing in importance as nations look to grow, become self-reliant, and overcome economic uncertainty. These are multi-dimensional objectives that can be fulfilled by promoting entrepreneurship in any economy, but in India, they take on added significance because of the size and age of the population. India's total population of 1.3 billion people ranks second only to China, and with 28% of those people aged 10 to 24 (28%), the country has 367 million young people that are either at the start of their careers or soon will be (UNFPA, 2015). Hence, it is the national interest to provide education, support, and facilities that can help guide this large and young segment of the population towards careers in entrepreneurship and to help them build and grow their businesses.

As hubs of youth populations and providers of education, educational institutions are well suited to delivering both training and opportunities to students and encouraging young people to pursue entrepreneurship as a career. The opportunity is timely, in part because many students are still unclear about the future course of their careers, but also because entrepreneurial intentions tend to decrease with age (Badal & Srinivasan, 2011.). As emphasized in the GALLUP-HOPE Index, this contexts means "it is that much more important to nurture and engage student's entrepreneurial spirit early so they are prepared to start a business or invent something that changes the world" (GALLUP, 2013).

Thus, in India, the role of higher education institutions is undergoing a fundamental change to better encourage and support young entrepreneurs. Traditionally, students in higher education institutions were exposed to that was limited to their specific domain. For example, students of engineering and technology received technology-based education and learned about common technology-focused practices, with training limited to the domain-specific skills required by industry. However, such training is not suffi-

cient for pursuing entrepreneurship. Unless domain knowledge is accompanied with knowledge and hands-on experience in the world of business, it is difficult for educational institutions to create large cohorts of entrepreneurs that will succeed in the long run.

Business schools are well suited to providing exposure to entrepreneurship given that business and related aspects are part of the curriculum. Such educational institutions must showcase their ability to enhance the major scientific and technical competences required by their students to be competitive in the future. And today's business environments demand proactiveness and an entrepreneurial spirit, even among their employees (Santos et al., 2012).

Key factors in entrepreneurial success such as motivation and willingness to take risk are difficult to implant in students in a classroom environment; however, higher education institutions can provide education in business and the processes relating to starting and running a business enterprise, as well as case studies of real-life entrepreneurs, both successful and unsuccessful. Entrepreneurship education must provide both the theoretical aspects of entrepreneurship and the necessary business skills. Students must understand that being an entrepreneur requires a different attitude than being an employee: an entrepreneur must be a visionary while also have the ability to design and implement appropriate strategies to keep the organization performing and growing. Students who wish to become entrepreneurs must also understand the important role of innovation, not only for commercialization but also for improvements in business performance.

Such learning is indeed important, but it can be difficult to assess the long-term outcomes within the contexts and timeframes of entrepreneurship courses and programs, the true test of which will be undertaken in the real world. So, beyond the classroom, higher education institutions in India also seek to play a critical role in developing an entrepreneurship ecosystem that can boost the number of sustainable startups in the coun-

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try. This ecosystem approach includes networking with industry experts for knowledge sharing and mentoring students, and the use of physical resources including the educational institution's research facilities, etc. Educational institutions are also working with industry bodies to create internships and research-related placement for their students; such relationships and arrangements can be extended and utilized to mentor young entrepreneurs in relevant business skills. Ecosystems also support a higher education institution's role in creating and disseminating knowledge of new technologies, including gathering insights about their commercial application.

### *Incubation and mentorship*

One way to connect higher education institutions with an entrepreneurship ecosystem and provide real-world training to entrepreneurs is for an institution to run an incubator in the sense of a shared facility where a combination of training, mentoring, and infrastructural facilities are offered "under one roof". Incubation is relatively a new activity within higher education institutions in India, but it has grown with the support of the National Science & Technology Entrepreneurship Development Board (NSTEDB; [nstedb.com](http://nstedb.com)), whose mandate is "to help promote knowledge-driven and technology-intensive enterprises" and "convert 'job-seekers' into 'job-generators'". India has more than 65 technology business incubators, 15 science and technology entrepreneurs parks (STEPs), 38 entrepreneurship development cells, and 35 innovation and entrepreneurship development centres actively working and supported by the central government (DST, 2016). These are the major government supported initiatives, most of which are run by private and government educational institutions in the area of entrepreneurship development.

Through incubators, higher education institutions in India can provide student entrepreneurs with infrastructure and facilities essential to launching and running their startups, including classroom arrangements, science laboratories, computer facilities, technicians, reference reading materials, and subscriptions to internationally reputed research journals. Teachers also make key contributions, both in facilitating learning and instilling confidence in students about their ability to start businesses and providing mentorship. As observed by the Danish Agency for Science, Technology and Innovation (DASTI, 2016) when examining entrepreneurship activities at Indian higher education institutions, "greater emphasis has been laid down in the recent past on benefits of entrepreneurial-focused edu-

cation at the universities, instilling the confidence in students to turn ideas into reality. These could be in the form of structured mentorship programmes, short courses or other forms of training."

Mentorship is indeed vital, particularly for acquiring knowledge of technical domains and business skills. Institutions can connect students to industry leaders and alumni as mentors, in addition to matching students with appropriate faculty mentors. There is also a recent trend across India for faculty members to collaborate directly with students to create joint startups (DASTI, 2016).

### *Challenges*

Despite the recent trend for higher education institutions in India to provide support to student entrepreneurs, there remain several challenges to overcome, some of which are social and some of which are institutional. At a social level, Indian students are accustomed to being "job seekers", and the allure of a predictable monthly income (and the need to repay student loans) discourages them from considering entrepreneurship as a potential career (DASTI, 2016). At an institutional level, offering students support and guidance in creating startups is a relatively a new model for higher education institutions in India. Despite growth in this area, India's entrepreneurial ecosystem is still in an early stage and the number of higher education institutions offering programs in entrepreneurship and incubator facilities remains limited (EY & FICCI, 2014), especially given the size of India's population. And having a new program in place to teach entrepreneurship does not necessarily translate into better outcomes in the short-term (e.g., Sharma, 2015). It will take time for higher-education institutions to develop the required capabilities to provide consistently high-quality entrepreneurship education across the country.

These and other challenges must be overcome if India's Central Government is to realize its ambitious plans to promote entrepreneurship for quick economic development of the country, and higher education institutions are set to play a key role in those plans. Through the National Policy on Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE, 2015), the government is relying heavily on higher education institutions to roll out programs and schemes for promoting entrepreneurship in the country. Also, the Finance Ministry is investing in venture capitalist funds to meet the equity requirements of startups and has set up an India Aspiration Fund to support the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

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### Conclusion

Entrepreneurship education and incubation (including mentoring) are the key areas in which higher education institutions can contribute directly to the quantity and quality of new startups and indirectly to the Indian economy. Entrepreneurship education through these institutions can help in increasing awareness of entrepreneurship as a viable career option and the support received through incubation can help student entrepreneurs overcome hurdles to starting and growing their businesses. In this way, the role of higher education institutions in India goes beyond just teaching and awarding degrees to more broadly influencing the economic development of the country.

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**Citation:** Raval, D. 2016. Q&A. What is the Role of Higher Education Institutions in Promoting Entrepreneurship in India? *Technology Innovation Management Review*, 6(5): 24–26. <http://timreview.ca/article/988>



**Keywords:** entrepreneurship education, incubation, mentoring, higher education institutions, HEI, startups