

## From virtual BT to reality biotech

09 March 2005 | News



Biotechnology - although an all-encompassing term - has come of age in India, both in academia and in industry. By this, I do not necessarily mean that it is successful. I just mean that it has got to the point where it has to sink or swim on the basis of its content and not because of the goodwill it has. This is not to say that the government should not offer any special encouragement or support, quite the contrary. But, it is time that we set the highest standards of performance and accountability.

India is fortunate that several cities can boast of at least a few high quality biotech industries and academic institutes. This is true of Pune, Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad and Bangalore. A country like ours needs ten times more quality industry and quality academic research.

How does one reach these goals? The simple way is to develop and demonstrate a model that can stimulate entrepreneurship and academic research and then, if it is successful, others will imitate it. And, there is no harm in starting small as long as it is started well. We need a virtual institute of biotech entrepreneurship with its feet deep in the real world.

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Here's what we can do: We need at least one short course each year by 3-4 top scientists turned successful entrepreneurs along with their CEOs, and their venture investors on how the company was started, their trials and tribulations and how they learnt swimming in the deep-end of the pool (i.e. the real- world)?

This course should be held in an academic institute. It will be wonderful if the course breeds biotech industrialists. But, even if it becomes just a talking shop for industry-academia interactions much value can come of it if there is one in each city. With luck, NCBS may well start such a course later this year. Stimulating industry is easy compared to stimulating academia.

Our universities provide us great students but have become near-bereft of research. If we are to survive, this must change soon.

Many 'solutions' have been mooted for this. One way is for private-public partnerships to create the university of the future. The private sector can run a quality administration for a quality university. Research institutes should establish themselves in this environment. The university will have a research environment and will benefit. The research institute will be stimulated by teaching and by undergraduate and graduate students and will insure itself from rapid decay. And, a small model that shows proof-of-principle will encourage both mimicry and reform. Any takers?