Patent or perish — new mantra in academic research

In academia, the motto for professors has long been “publish [research papers] or perish.” With the increased emphasis on industry-oriented research, professors at the Indian Institute of Technology-Madras say that the motto is becoming “patent or perish.” And this has resulted in a change in the attitude towards academic research both among professors and students at the institute, they say.

S. Ramaprabhu, professor, Physics department, who has filed for 10 patents since 2005, says that the change is palpable.

“Earlier the funding used to come for professors to conduct research in any project they liked. Now funding authorities insist on specific deliverables. There is also a closer interaction between industry and academia these days, and we are looking at patents as seriously as we look at academic papers,” he says.

This also results in changes in the way his research students work. Of the 10 patent applications that he has filed, seven have been filed along with Ph.D students, while the three others have been filed with post-doctoral assistants, he says.

Undergraduates and postgraduate students also work on similar projects but they are not able to devote enough time and effort on these projects, which makes him rely more on research scholars, he adds.

Job Kurian, who recently took charge as Dean of the Industrial Consultancy and Sponsored Research (ICSR) department, says that the change in attitude also has to do with the number of young professors recruited by the institute in the last few years.

Of the 350 or so professors, nearly 150 have been recruited in the last three or four years. These are young professors coming from abroad, where the culture towards patents is strong.

These professors are also driving the change towards industry-oriented rather than academic-oriented research, Dr. Kurian explains.

With IIT-M director M.S. Ananth reiterating the need for closer academic-industry co-operation along with heads of other technical institutions, IIT-Madras has also set up a Patent Committee with three core members, headed by the Dean (ICSR).

The members review the proposals brought before them by professors or students thoroughly and also send it for anonymous peer review by experts in similar fields. A patent attorney also advises the proposer and the application fees are also borne by the institute, Dr. Kurian says.
“I am receiving nearly 20 proposals for new patents every week these days. There have been around 130 patents registered by those affiliated to IIT-Madras. With nanotechnology, bio-technology and energy-efficient technology emerging as important research areas, along with academic papers, patent proposals are also increasing in number in these fields,” says Dr. Kurian.

Does this mean that research in pure science is de-emphasised? Dr. Ramaprabhu says no.

“There is more emphasis on applied research because we want to produce socially-relevant research output. We are encouraging students to go along this road. But we continue to do research in pure science because that is also important for many students.”

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