



The **future** of higher education is **skills first**

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For years, higher education has been measured by the degrees it awards. Today, it will increasingly be measured by the capabilities it builds. As artificial intelligence reshapes industries, job roles and workplace expectations, the real challenge before universities is no longer simply keeping pace with technological change. It is preparing graduates who can think critically, adapt continuously and create value in an environment where change has become the only constant.

The shift is already visible in our classrooms. Students today are asking different questions than they did a few years ago. Institutional reputation still matters, but it is no longer enough. Increasingly, students want to know whether a programme will equip them with relevant skills, meaningful industry exposure and the ability to build long-term careers. They are

evaluating higher education through the lens of employability, career growth and return on investment.

This changing mindset should prompt institutions to ask themselves an equally important question: Are we preparing students for the jobs of today, or for careers that will continue to evolve over the next two or three decades?

The answer lies in recognising that the traditional approach to higher education is no longer sufficient. AI has fundamentally changed how information is accessed and applied. Universities, therefore, have a responsibility that goes beyond delivering content. Their role is to develop graduates who can analyse information critically, solve unfamiliar problems, make informed decisions and apply knowledge in meaningful ways.

One of the biggest misconceptions we continue to hold is that technical expertise alone determines employability. In reality, employers are looking for professionals who can combine technical knowledge with business understanding, communicate effectively, collaborate across teams and navigate uncertainty with confidence. These human capabilities are becoming just as valuable as technical

proficiency because they enable graduates to translate knowledge into impact.

Interdisciplinary learning has become essential. Engineers must understand business strategy and data, and professionals across sectors increasingly work alongside AI. The future belongs to those who can bridge disciplines rather than remain confined to academic silos. Institutions must therefore foster cross-disciplinary thinking while regularly updating curricula through stronger industry partnerships, live projects, internships, research and experiential learning that equips students with practical, real-world skills.

Curriculum development must become a continuous process, supported by regular engagement with industry and emerging technologies. Live projects, internships, research opportunities, innovation challenges and industry collaborations should no longer be viewed as value additions but as essential elements in helping students bridge the gap between classroom learning and workplace expectations. Preparing students for an AI-driven future is also not about introducing another AI course into the curriculum. It demands

a broader shift in how universities approach teaching and learning. Faculty development, flexible curricula, project-based learning and stronger industry partnerships are equally important if institutions are to remain relevant. The classroom itself must evolve from a space where information is delivered to one where ideas are questioned, tested and applied.

As AI becomes embedded across sectors, universities also have a responsibility to nurture responsible technology leaders. Students must understand not only what AI can do, but also its limitations and its impact on society. Adaptability, systems thinking and ethical judgement will distinguish future leaders just as much as technical competence. These qualities will help graduates build solutions that are both innovative and responsible.

Perhaps the most significant lesson higher education must embrace is that learning does not end with graduation. Career paths are becoming increasingly dynamic, requiring profes-

sionals to upskill and adapt continuously. Universities must, therefore, cultivate curiosity, resilience and a lifelong learning mindset. The greatest advantage we can give students is not mastery of a single technology, but the ability to learn, unlearn and relearn throughout their careers.

Higher education has always prepared individuals for the future, but that future is now evolving faster than ever. Institutions that focus only on awarding degrees risk falling behind. Those that prioritise capability building, interdisciplinary learning, industry relevance and responsible innovation will equip graduates to thrive — and lead — in an AI-driven world.

Publication: Pioneer (Delhi)