

# CURRENT SCIENCE

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## EDITORIAL

### Conflicts of interest

Economic liberalization has brought in its wake a host of hitherto unknown problems, in the interaction of our research institutions with industry. Consultancy work undertaken by academic faculty at Universities and research institutions was generally minimal; Indian industry clearly managing to survive in a government-controlled economy with little need for research and development. The most active 'academic consultants' were usually in the engineering disciplines; civil, mechanical, chemical and electrical engineering being amongst the most favoured. Industry-academia interactions were then largely restricted to institutes of technology and a few national laboratories. But times have changed. Several years of an 'open economy' and increasing globalization of many activities, have suddenly seen a dramatic spurt in the interest that both Indian and multinational companies have shown in our research institutions. At several national laboratories and institutes there is now a steady stream of visitors from industry, scouting around for possible collaborative arrangements. Opening out to industry has meant that our institutions have to cope with many unfamiliar situations, involving issues of consultancy arrangements, technology transfer fees, institutional overheads on research grants from industry, extent of involvement of staff, on projects unconnected with the primary mandate of the institution. While these problems are not of even passing concern to the vast majority of our Universities, which do not support major research programs, they have become important in the 'creamy layer' of academia where scientific research in areas of contemporary interest is reasonably well developed.

At the national laboratories, particularly the chain of institutions managed by the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), the external cash flow (ECF) is a parameter used to judge a laboratory's performance. The ECF represents the laboratory's earnings from sponsored projects; in a strict sense limited to the inflow of money from industry. Laboratories, whose primary mission is in areas far from the interests of local (or even international) industry, tend to show even contributions from government funding agencies as inputs to their ECF.

In most cases, such support is obtained for basic research programs, formulated by individual scientists, which have very limited potential for application, even in the long run. At the more successful laboratories, major projects are sometimes funded by multinational companies. The result is that although the infrastructure has been built by the government, which also picks up the entire salary bill, the research activities are dominated by the requirements of a few major industrial sponsors; ironically, most often these are multinationals, which view our laboratories as convenient sites for contract research. With government funding on the decline, the national laboratories have little options, but to generate resources by such arrangements.

At the academic institutions like the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) and the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) the situation is different. Here, interactions with industry have traditionally been through individual arrangements with faculty. But the situation is rapidly changing as major multinational corporations have begun to make efforts to enter into wide ranging 'collaborations'. New models have come into existence, where even research laboratories of companies have entered campuses, in a manner reminiscent of arrangements in the West. These happenings have brought in their wake many problems that need to be addressed. Very often the memoranda of understanding (MOU) signed between the academic and industrial partners are shrouded in secrecy. The lack of transparency fuels speculation on the nature of the arrangements; the general impression is that academic institutions negotiate from a position of weakness, resulting in agreements that are loaded in favour of the industrial partner.

The government has sought to promote the interactions of local industry with our academic institutions by introducing several schemes like the creation of a Technology Development Board, instituting a special program in the area of Drugs and Pharmaceuticals and in initiating the Technology Development Mission, that operates at the IITs and IISc through the Ministry of Human Resources Development and the Planning Commission. In most of these schemes, the promise of limited industry support