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Focus

What Truly Counts as Research



WHAT TRULY COUNTS AS RESEARCH

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Even innovating existing products can be considered research, and incremental research serves many purposes. Scholars must resist the urge for quick results.

In a wide-ranging panel discussion on strengthening research mindsets among students, four experts from academia and industry underlined the urgent need to cultivate curiosity, realistic goal-setting, ethical judgment, and sustained mentorship right from undergraduate years. They warned that the growing reliance on artificial intelligence and the pressure of promotion-driven PhDs are diluting the purpose and quality of research, leading to superficial work and an erosion of scholarly integrity. The experts were deliberating on the topic, "Redefining Research in the AI Age" at the 125th Rajagiri Round Table Conference held online on 11th February 2026 on Microsoft Teams.

Dr. Parasuram Balasubramanian, CEO, Theme Work Analytics, Bengaluru, stressed that research should be understood not merely as scientific invention but as any pursuit that generates new knowledge, whether through technological innovation or insights gained from markets and human behaviour. He argued that exploring how existing products perform in new markets, modifying features, or refining sales strategies all constitute meaningful research because they produce fresh perspectives. According to him, the intersection of products and people still holds many unknowns, and systematic inquiry in this space is as valuable as lab-based discovery.

Narrow the Research Focus

Dr. Sailesh Sivan, Principal AI Architect, Laennac India Pvt Ltd & Assistant Professor at CUSAT, highlighted a recurring challenge among young researchers: ambitious goals that cannot be achieved within the limited time and resources of a PhD. Students, he said, often begin with enthusiasm but struggle when the scale of their chosen problem far exceeds the feasibility of a 3–5-year doctoral cycle. He urged scholars to narrow their focus and break large research questions into smaller, manageable objectives. In computational sciences in particular, he noted the usefulness of incremental research. Such research solves a problem with one technique and improves it with subsequent methods. He reminded students that the PhD should be viewed as training in how to conduct research, not as a quest to solve society's largest problems in one attempt.

AI for Accelerating Research

Dr. Jagannath Kunar, Assistant Professor at Dharanidhar University, Odisha cautioned against outsourcing the core intellectual steps of research to AI tools. Problem identification, he insisted, must emerge from the researcher's own interests, expertise, and capabilities and not from algorithms. Drawing an analogy, he said AI can suggest many tools to cut a tree, but ethical judgment and contextual understanding must guide the final choice. He emphasised that efficiency should never be mistaken for excellence and warned that choosing topics beyond one's institutional or personal limitations leads to weak, unproductive work. AI, he suggested, should accelerate research but never determine its direction.

Lack of Quality Scholars

Dr. Jayalekshmi Nair of VES Institute of Technology, Mumbai raised concerns about the systemic pressures that push faculty into PhDs solely for career advancement, resulting in "frivolous PhDs and substandard publications." She argued that genuine research orientation must begin at the PG level, with students tackling projects that cultivate curiosity and problem-solving. Citing the difficulty her institute faces in attracting quality candidates even for funded PhDs, she noted that many students now seek research topics where AI can perform the majority of the work—reducing scholars to "curators, not doers." This impatience for quick results, she said, undermines original thinking. Strong grooming from early academic stages, she added, is essential for producing industry-ready graduates capable of meaningful innovation.

The 2-hour session was anchored by Sreekumar Raghavan, Editor of Pallikkutam, The Education Observer, and 200 educators and administrators from across India took part in the event.