



UNIVERSITY NEWS

A Weekly Journal of Higher Education

Association of Indian Universities

Vol. 63 • No. 30 • July 28–August 03, 2025

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Breaking the Silos: Reimagining Universities without Subjects for the AI Era

Neeraj Saxena*

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 Published by the Association of Indian Universities

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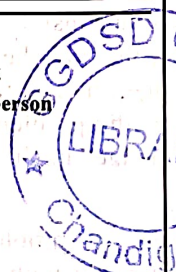
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The architecture of modern higher education has been fundamentally shaped by an organisational principle that once served humanity well but now constrains our potential: the division of knowledge into distinct, isolated subjects. This compartmentalisation emerged during the Industrial Revolution when the primary challenge facing educational institutions was how to systematically organise and transmit vast bodies of accumulated human knowledge to successive generations. Mathematics, physics, literature, economics, biology, and dozens of other disciplines became separate kingdoms, each with its own methodologies, terminologies, and gatekeepers.

This subject-based approach represented a rational response to the information scarcity that characterised pre-digital civilisations. When books were rare and expensive, when libraries were accessible only to the privileged few, and when knowledge transmission depended entirely on human memory and oral tradition, the systematic categorisation of information into teachable chunks made perfect sense. Universities developed as repositories of specialised knowledge, with professors serving as human databases who had devoted their lives to mastering specific domains.

The pedagogical model that emerged from this context was built around what we might call “just-in-case” learning. Students were required to memorise extensive catalogues of facts, formulas, dates, and procedures on the assumption that they might someday need to recall this information in their professional or personal lives. The emphasis was on knowledge accumulation rather than knowledge application, on information storage rather than information synthesis. This approach proved remarkably effective during the industrial age, when most careers followed predictable patterns and required relatively stable skill sets that could be acquired once and applied throughout a working lifetime.

However, the cognitive ecosystem of the 21st century bears no resemblance to the world for which this educational model was designed. We now inhabit an environment of unprecedented information abundance, where virtually any fact, formula, or procedure can be accessed instantly through devices that fit in our pockets. The revolution in information technology has not merely made knowledge more accessible; it has fundamentally altered the nature of human cognition itself. We no longer need to serve as biological storage devices for information that can be retrieved more quickly and accurately through digital means.

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