

Education Plus Kerala

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Ambitious and talented, they dream big

G. MAHADEVAN

About the unique entrepreneurial project of 13 M.Phil. students at the Centre for Bioinformatics of the Kerala University.



ENTREPRENEURS IN THE MAKING: Members of the Soorya Kiran team

What do students of university departments do when they finish their courses? They go in search of jobs right? Not everybody. At least not the 13 students who are now doing their M.Phil. programme at the Centre for Bioinformatics of the University of Kerala.

These batch-mates, led by Reshmi Suresh, a postgraduate degree holder in Botany, are looking to set up a bioinformatics company once they are done with their course in early 2006 - looking to give themselves, and a few others, gainful employment.

Advice

After several rounds of discussions with their professors and experts from the industry, including with venture capitalists and company secretaries, the students have decided to name their yet-to-be-born company 'Soorya Kiran Bioinformatics'.

Archives

- [Datewise](#)

News

[News Update](#)

[Front Page](#)

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- [Tamil Nadu](#)
- [Andhra Pradesh](#)
- [Karnataka](#)
- [Kerala](#)
- [New Delhi](#)
- [Other States](#)

[International](#)

[Opinion](#)

[Business](#)

[Sport](#)

[Miscellaneous](#)

[Index](#)

Now the students are scouting far and wide to bag some projects that will see their company through its toddler days. This scouting is taking place in a very well planned manner.

According to the director of the Centre for Bioinformatics Achuthsankar S. Nair, the students have already zeroed in on the sub-regions in bioinformatics on which they would look for projects - DNA and protein sequence annotation, sequence analysis, micro-array image processing and biological data mining.

"A study conducted by the Ministry of Information Technology and the CII has predicted impressive growth for bioinformatics in India, but there are no industries yet in Kerala.

The students feel that if at least two sizeable projects are seized, the sunrise of their dreams will commence. These are students who do not have dream of a PSC office and employment exchanges," Dr. Achuthsankar told *The Hindu-Educationplus*.

For her part, Reshmi is all fired up about her group's venture. She says she has always dreamt about giving jobs to at least five people; in this she has drawn inspiration from the speeches and writings of President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam.

Institutionalised support

However, this fledgling venture by university students has turned the spotlight on the lacunae in the State's University system to give institutionalised support to students who wish to set up entrepreneurial ventures in the State.

As things stand now, the initial success of proposed company will depend on a large measure on the speedy setting up of the business incubation facility that the University of Kerala says it is considering. This facility will ensure that the students would have basic infrastructure, at moderate costs, to float a company and nurse it to robust financial health.

However, all talk of setting up the incubation facility has remained mostly that - talk. It is true that the university has given its nod for setting up a building to act as the incubation facility. On the other hand what the students really need is seed money to set up the venture and things such as computers and advanced software.

"We can somehow get computers," says Vipin Thomas, one of those who have a bioinformatics glint in their eyes, "what we really need support for is the purchase of software." In fact some software that these students need, cost upwards of Rs.1 lakh. Of course such things would not have been a problem had there been an incubation facility.

When the Soorya Kiran team started scouting for projects they sent e-mails around the world trying to showcase their credentials to companies and asking for their support and for projects.

University cell

It was then that they realised that had the University of Kerala had a cell or an office which could forward their mails to these companies, their credibility would have been enhanced by many a factor.

Vipin points out that bioinformatics centres around the world are always

associated with the name of a university. So, if the University is seen to have thrown its weight behind a student proposal it can make that make-or-break difference in a company's response.

"No university in the State has a cell or an office that can help students with such ventures. They are absolutely on their own. Such a cell or office can enhance university-industry cooperation; something that the government and all universities say they are looking to establish and nurture. We need speedy action, not just proclamations," says a professor of the University of Kerala.

When the University of Kerala first announced that was thinking of setting up an incubation facility it received enquiries from groups of students, including from those from a couple of engineering colleges in Thiruvananthapuram, who had entrepreneurial hopes.

This is seen by many in the academic community as a pointer to the need for coordinated efforts to encourage students who wish to set up business firms of their own.

Many academicians also point out that one such company here and another there and pretty soon the unemployment graph of the State may not look the same again.

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