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Breakthrough technologies:
robotics and IP

p. 6



African entrepreneurs
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change adaptation

p. 12



Chess, films and timepieces:
a filmmaker's IP journey

p. 34

Flying cars:
transforming a
dream into reality

p. 20

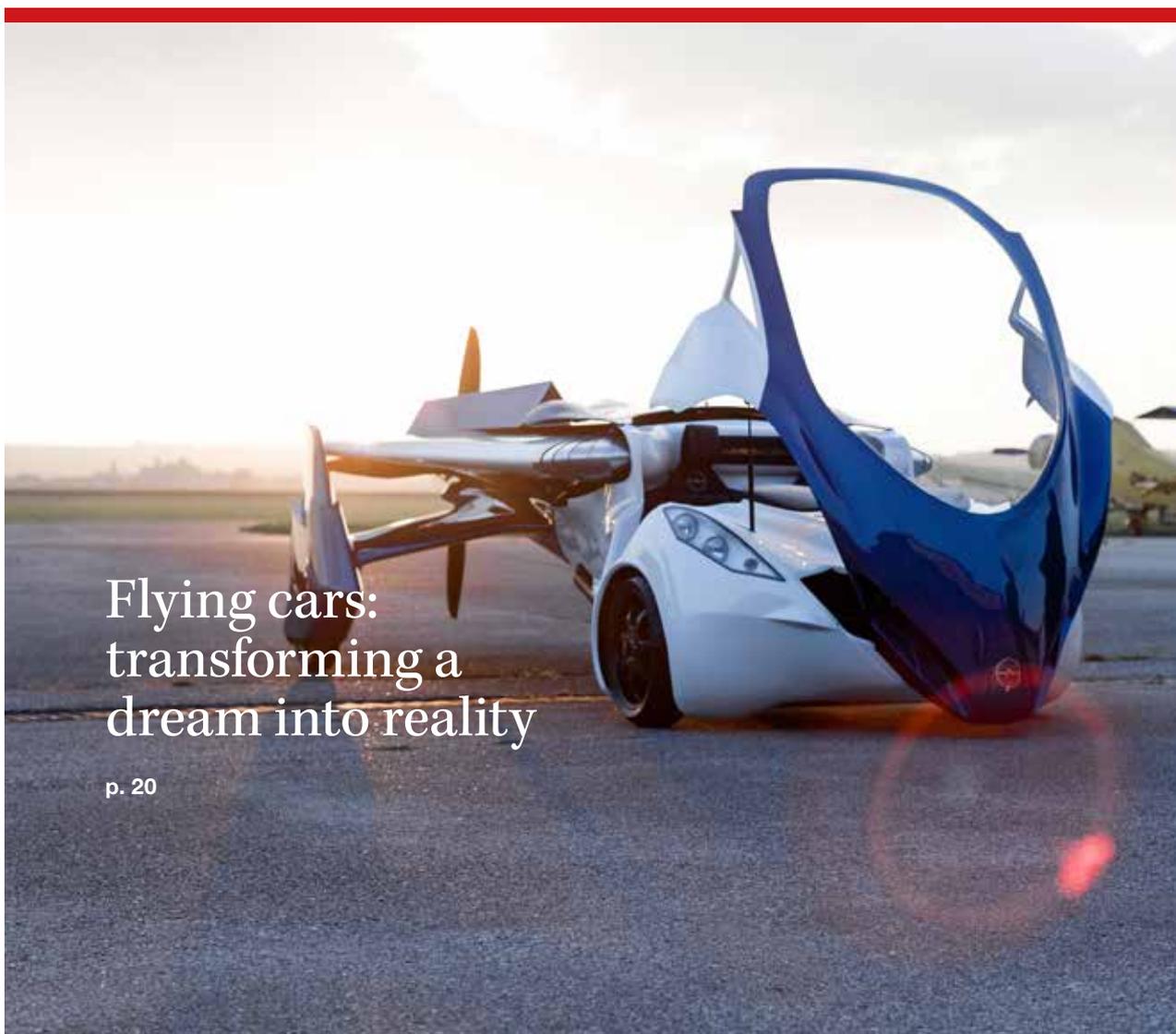


Table of Contents

2	Helping under-resourced inventors navigate the patent system
6	Breakthrough technologies: robotics and IP
12	African entrepreneurs lead the way in climate change adaptation
20	Flying cars: transforming a dream into reality
26	Making sense of IP information
30	Meet Alex - IP Australia's next-generation virtual assistant
32	In the courts: European Court of Justice: hyperlinks to unauthorized content may infringe copyright
34	Chess, films and timepieces: a filmmaker's IP journey
40	University IP policies: perception and practice

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University IP policies: perception and practice

By **Ruth Soetendorp, Mandy Haberman and Steve Smith,**

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Students are destined to be key workers in the knowledge economy. They will be dealing with intellectual property (IP) during their studies and future careers. So how well do they understand it? Recent research from the United Kingdom suggests there is much room for improvement.

In July 2016, the Intellectual Property Awareness Network (IPAN) published research which sought to achieve a better understanding of how IP policies in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are perceived and practised on UK campuses. Almost 3,000 students and 250 academics responded to the online questionnaires devised by NUS Insight, the professional research arm of the UK National Union of Students (NUS), in conjunction with IPAN.

In a foreword to the report, Nigel Carrington, Vice-Chancellor of the UK University of the Arts in London, wrote: “IPAN’s powerful survey has identified and described the lack of understanding of IP so effectively. The gap in staff and student understanding of IP may represent a failure in knowledge transfer so far, but at least we can teach our way out of it.” Considering how IP might be taught, he went on to say that “IP is as much about recognising opportunities and the nature of university business as it is about managing threats. There is a need to emphasise the positive, and encourage students to think of IP rights as something of value which they themselves produce, own and exploit.”

CHANGING ATTITUDES TO IP

In 1999, *The New York Times* described IP as having “transformed from a sleepy area of law and business to one of the driving engines of a high-technology economy.” Business commitment to IP issues has grown since then, and it might have been reasonable to expect a similar mushrooming of initiatives to bring IP awareness and competence to graduates seeking careers in the knowledge economy. Sadly this has not been the case.

Globally, regionally and nationally, attempts are being made to help future generations understand the central role that IP plays in the economy and society and to equip them to benefit from it. In the UK, the Intellectual Property Office (IPO) has developed IP Tutor for self-managed student learning, and the Government’s university Quality Assurance Agency is beginning to include intellectual property awareness as a benchmark for assessing different programs.

But for “IP enthusiasts” (to borrow the epithet of IPKat founder Jeremy Phillips) that isn’t enough. Today, more universities may offer their non-law students an opportunity to become acquainted with IP, but still the majority of HEIs are content for their students to graduate without an awareness of what IP is or the impact it will have on their future careers.



Recent research from the UK shows that IP remains largely absent from students' learning journey despite the fact that students are increasingly encouraged to complement their core studies with enterprise and entrepreneurship, which require an understanding of how to protect their intellectual outputs.



Photo: iStock.com/kali9

Growing evidence suggests that, given the choice, students will opt to follow an IP module. The UK's National Union of Students is working with the UK IPO and IPAN to find ways to improve student access to IP-related information.

The concern this causes is evident in the reports of governments and international organizations, but has not been sufficient to trigger a universal upswing in courses offering IP education across faculties and campuses.

A LACK OF IP AWARENESS AMONG STUDENTS

Amid all the research surrounding IP education, the voice of one particular stakeholder has been striking in its absence: that of the student.

Recognizing this omission, in 2012, with the support of the UK IPO, IPAN began working with the NUS in the UK to investigate student attitudes to IP. A questionnaire devised by IPAN and the NUS was distributed through the NUS student database and generated some 2,200 responses. These showed that “students believe a knowledge of IP is important” and that “those who have some experience of IP education view it positively, and express a desire for more.” Responses also confirmed that the extent of IP teaching is very limited, generally focuses exclusively on plagiarism, and

“I don’t know
a lot about
IP, but I feel
I should.”

Frequent survey response

is not part of assessed work. The questionnaire further indicated that students are not aware of the potential scope of IP education, and that HEIs make little use of external IP experts.

Building on these findings, in 2014 IPAN commissioned the NUS professional research unit to survey campus-level perception and the practice of IP policies at British HEIs. Their work was funded by IPAN, which includes 40 commercial, academic and professional organizations with an interest in expanding IP awareness, together with individual IPAN members and CREATE (*RCUK Centre for Copyright and New Business Models in the Creative Economy*).

This latest research shows that students and staff are confused at best, and at worst ignorant, about the IP policies of their institutions. The survey indicates that even where such policies exist, they have little or no impact on the perception and practice of IP on campus. The survey further revealed a low level of understanding of the term “intellectual property”, illustrated by a common student free-text response: “it was only while completing this questionnaire that I realised how important IP is and will be to my future career.”

CHANGING LABOR MARKET UNDERLINES NEED FOR IP EDUCATION

Students are increasingly encouraged to consider enterprise and entrepreneurship as complementary to the core discipline of their studies. They recognize that the employment options open to them involve making ideas pay, working with startups and freelancing. Each of these areas of work will require them to have an understanding of how to protect their intellectual outputs, and yet IP remains absent from their learning journey.

At the launch of the research report, Sir Rod Aldridge OBE, FRSA, a successful businessman responsible for establishing entrepreneurial Technical Colleges and Academies, said: “There is clearly a need to develop an awareness of [IP] issues in both the student and the teacher,” noting that “the objective is to improve the employability of students, where students are encouraged to be independent creative thinkers and innovators, developing the mind-set, skillsets and characteristics needed to be a pioneer. These students will create numerous situations where I can now see there are IP circumstances.”

STUDENTS WANT IP EDUCATION

There is mounting evidence that when students get the choice, they will opt to follow an IP module. It is up to HEIs to make these available to them.

Responding to the report, renowned designer Sebastian Conran said: “The reality is that surprisingly few of us in the creative industries really understand how IP works, let alone the value of content. IP policies understandably treat staff and students differently. From Plymouth to Inverness almost every university has its own IP policy yet there is no consistency as to how students are treated.”



Photo: iStock.com/monkeybusinessimages

Research by IPAN in collaboration with the UK's NUS was designed to generate insights into how students who are required to submit original work for assessment handle IP issues.

“Who owns what? How much is it worth? How do I protect it from theft? What are my rights? These are all issues that have been explored in the IPAN survey, and it is surprising how little those that are now paying for their education and those that teach them accurately know about this very significant issue that will have consequences for the future of the UK and its brightest minds.”

Sebastian Conran's comments resonate strongly with the research findings. Survey questions were designed to generate insights into how students who are required to submit original creative and innovative work for assessment handle IP issues. Sixty-eight percent of respondents said they looked to their HEI for advice, underlining how important it is for HEI staff to have an understanding of IP rights and knowledge of their institution's IP policy. Responses from staff clearly show that faculty members recognize the importance of teaching their students about IP and its relevance to their future careers.

A WELCOME FROM THE NATIONAL UNION OF STUDENTS

The UK NUS welcomed the research and its findings, stating that knowledge of IP rights “is becoming increasingly important for students to protect themselves and support their future careers.” It expressed concern about the “worrying number of both students and staff” that “are either confused about IP or have little to no knowledge of their rights.”

Noting that more than one in ten students turn to their students' union for advice on IP matters, the NUS recognized that it had an important role to play and said that was currently working with IPAN and the UK IPO to find ways to improve student access to IP-related information.

IPAN is delighted to have been the catalyst for the collaboration between the NUS and the UK IPO, which promises to lead to increased opportunities for students to have access to the IP information they need for their future careers when pursuing their studies. This fruitful collaboration may also serve to inspire similar partnerships between national IP offices and students' unions in other countries, and help foster the development of university policies that respond to the voice of students and their thirst for knowledge about how to protect their own ideas and avoid breaking rules they are unaware of.