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US NGOs urge GWU to stop industry-sponsored IP summits in India

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A group of nine non-governmental organisations working in the field of health sector have appealed to the George Washington University (GWU) to stop its industry-sponsored intellectual property (IP) summits in India as these summits have become a front for a biased industry agenda.

Expressing concern over the GWU's India Project, under which the GWU has been holding annual summits in India for the last several years, the US NGOs said that the project, which should have been an academic exercise and free-flow exchange of ideas, is acting as a front for a biased industry agenda.

“We urge GWU to act responsibly with regard to its intellectual property summits. As a non-profit, academic institution, GWU should consider all issues relevant to the IP debate including access to medicines issues and public health concerns, and not allow multinational companies to lobby Indian officials and judges behind a false cover of academia”, the NGOs in an open letter to GWU dean said.

GWU ostensibly created the “India Project” with the intent to bring together academics, government officials and business leaders to discuss IP issues including the international and domestic aspects of patent law. Despite these objectives, in practice, GWU’s India Project has failed to present a balanced discussion on intellectual property, and especially the importance of protecting public health in developing countries.

Instead, the Project, which receives funding from multinational pharmaceutical corporations and software companies, has misrepresented an industry-centred perspective as an independent academic exercise. These sponsors have vested interests in an outcome where India adopts stricter intellectual property rules and their presentations are indicative of heavy industry bias. Instead of offering a true forum for discussion and debate on these critical issues, these summits are one-sided and only seek to impose a US-style IP regime on India, the NGOs said.

“We urge GWU to resist use of the university by industries interested entirely in commercial profits, and to present all the relevant aspects of IP issues—including the importance of IP flexibilities to protect public health and the patent system’s inability to induce innovation for neglected diseases”, the US NGOs said.

The nine NGOs who have signed the statement are Universities Allied for Essential Medicines (UAEM), Knowledge Ecology International (KEI), Oxfam America, American Medical Student Association (AMSA), Board of Directors of Students for Free Culture, Health Gap, Center for Policy Analysis on Trade and Health (CPATH), Public Citizen and Doctors without Borders/Medecins Sans Frontieres – USA.