IITs, IIMs introduce entrepreneurship courses to script success stories in student-led startup ecosystem

Students work on real-world problems which equip them with skills to address market demands effectively

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To significantly contribute to the growth of the startup culture in India, several IITs and IIMs have integrated entrepreneurship into their curricula. This includes specialised courses on entrepreneurship, innovation management, and business strategy. By providing practical skills, business knowledge, mentorship, networking opportunities, and financial support, these courses are nurturing a new generation of entrepreneurs to scale new ventures.

With student-led startups rising, there is a new hope for diversity in the business and the creation of new job roles. Besides the regular curriculum, several technical universities including the IITs and NITs are introducing courses in entrepreneurship to help students acquire business acumen and entrepreneurship skills.

Satvasheel Ramesh Powar, associate professor, School of Mechanical and Materials Engineering, IIT Mandi, says, "The students get a chance to enhance their skills and understand how startups and businesses work. This also gives them a perspective of firms and corporations, helping them understand the companies' expectations, which prepares them well for job interviews. During the courses, students are exposed to practical experiences, opportunities to interact with startup founders, and network that helps them to understand the process."

Expecting further rise

While teaching the basics of entrepreneurship to students since 2015, Powar has noticed a remarkable increase in student-led startups. "The number of startups in India has increased; we already have over 1,20,000 startups in India. The student-led startups have increased by 2.5 to 3 times in the past few years, which confirms their rising interest in the startup ecosystem. With the introduction of Startup Practicum (Young Innovator Fellowship) at IIT Mandi where students are offered 22 credits and a
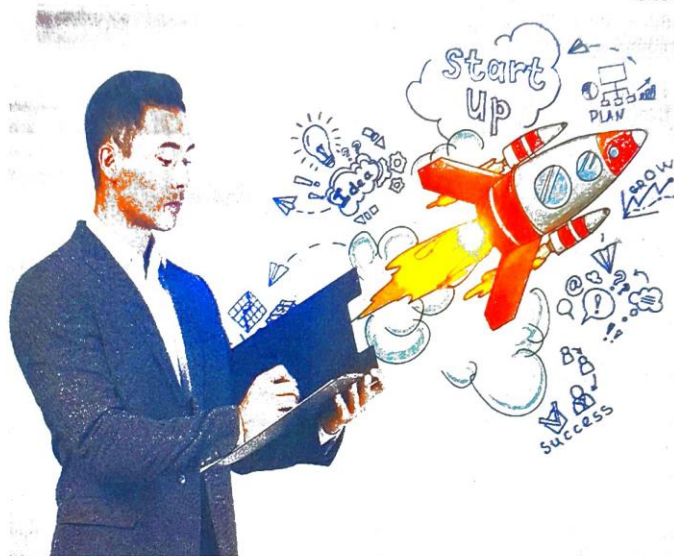
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monthly stipend of Rs 15,000 for three semesters. Under the guidance of both - a faculty and a business mentor - we are expecting a further rise. Based on their risk appetite, a few students move to the startup journey after clearing off debts, while others start their venture while they are completing BTech. The students can make informed decisions after pursuing these courses."

Not all students may turn into entrepreneurs, but taking up the entrepreneurship course gives a perspective on leadership skills and entrepreneurial thinking. "First-year BTech take up several flagship courses, including Reverse Engineering and Foundations of Design Practicum. The Foundations of Design Practicum course teaches students how to design and develop products using a holistic, solution-oriented approach. In the second year, groups of six students create a proof of concept based on problem statements provided by industry, the Indian Air Force, state government sectors, faculty members, or their concepts for which they are given Rs 30,000 by the institute. This hands-on experience enables them to create prototype solutions," adds Powar.

Funding issues

Corporates and government agencies have come forward to fund the promising projects in the last few years. "Raising

funds, whether through grants or investments, becomes much easier if a startup has a strong idea combined with a capable team. Investments slowed in 2023-24 as the corporates were drawn towards mature startups having a focus on startups that demonstrated market validation, penetration, and revenue generation. Despite this, the startup culture is expanding, which is fuelled by government funding, success stories, and increased awareness through courses and media," he says.

Startups that are based on elaborate technical testing that adds to the cost, continue to struggle for funding. "In contrast, simple ideas based on an e-commerce model have more takers. Deep tech startups face challenges in funding, customer engagement, and infrastructure support. Extensive research and development requirements make funding difficult, with long wait times for funds, and little interest from venture capitalists during the development stage. Current funding options, which typically last one year, are insufficient for deep tech startups that require long-term support, particularly for clinical trials in health technology. The deep tech ecosystem in India also requires more specialised incubators, accelerators, and expert mentors that are linked to centres of excellence," adds Powar.

Pioneers in fostering innovation

IIMs have helped shape the entrepreneurship trend in India. They have emerged as pioneers in fostering innovative startups through their dedicated incubation centres. These centres, such as IIM Bangalore's NSRCEL, IIM Nagpur's InFED, IIM Kozhikode's IIMK LIVE, and IIM Kashi-

pur's FIED, are instrumental in shaping the success stories of aspiring entrepreneurs. Many IIMs also collaborate with government initiatives and corporate partners to bolster their funding capabilities. Programmes like the Atal Innovation Mission and various state-specific startup policies provide additional funding to supplement what the IIMs offer directly.

"The IIM Nagpur Foundation for Entrepreneurship Development (InFED) has been selected to become an Atal Incubation Centre under the Atal Innovation Mission, NITI Aayog. This will enable it to open its facilities for the external student community, researchers, faculty members, and MSMEs for rapid prototyping," says Bhimaraya Metri, director, IIM Nagpur.

Mahadeo Jaiswal, director, IIM Sambalpur, says, "To provide a platform for budding entrepreneurs, the institute set up I-Hub Foundation, a dedicated incubator and accelerator, which plays an important role in nurturing student-led startups by providing crucial resources and support. The foundation is also well-networked with both government and corporate entities, which provides an authentic funding source. Nowadays, many students prefer startups over traditional job placements. The slowdown in placements might push them to consider starting their businesses or joining startups, fostering a more entrepreneurial mindset. A significant number of students have launched their own startups and were also invited to present their ideas at the 100 Cube Startup Conclave in Odisha."

"IIM Sambalpur has successfully incubated six startups, with an average of 10 student startups emerging annually. Additionally, the institute runs an entrepreneurial training programme that has empowered 25 master weavers from Sambalpur, handicraft workers with the skills necessary to scale their businesses. We help them connect with Flipkart and other platforms and teach them key elements of marketing and finance," says Prof Jaiswal.

Industry-ready graduates

Meanwhile, IIM Bangalore recently introduced an online UG programme focusing on Digital Business and Entrepreneurship. The programme will be available online, with classes commencing in September. Professor Suresh Bhagavatula, programme director, BBA DBE and professor of Entrepreneurship, IIM Bangalore, says, "We expect not only startups but existing businesses to benefit from having trained undergraduate students who enter the workforce as freshers, who get training at the workplace. We want our graduates to fit into the existing culture quickly because of their entrepreneurial mindset."