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Future Pathways for Campus Incubators in India

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Abstract

Campus incubators have emerged as pivotal institutions within India's higher-education ecosystem, translating the country's demographic dividend into entrepreneurial output. This article examines how university-based incubators in India have evolved over the past decade, from a handful of elite technology parks to a nationwide network spanning over 950 facilities. Drawing on institutional case studies, policy analysis, and comparative international evidence, it identifies three persistent structural challenges: chronic funding gaps, a shortage of experienced mentors, and weak academia-industry linkages. The article then explores emerging solutions, including hybrid and virtual incubation models, AI-driven mentorship platforms incorporating tools such as GPT-4 and Lean Canvas AI, and internationally informed frameworks borrowed from Cambridge Enterprise's spinout equity model, Stanford StartX's no-equity approach, and MIT's milestone-based cohort selection. A forward-looking roadmap is proposed, covering funding innovation, curriculum integration, localised ecosystem development, and performance-based accountability. The findings suggest that while India's aggregate incubation scale is impressive, short-run conversion quality remains a critical gap, with fewer than 15% of incubated ideas reaching a minimum viable product within 2 years. Sustained, evidence-driven reform is needed to transform campus incubators into genuinely productive launchpads for the next generation of Indian entrepreneurs.

Keywords: Campus Incubators, Higher Education, India, AI

Introduction

University-based incubators are increasingly recognised as vital engines of innovation and entrepreneurship. They 'provide a route for students and staff to create new ventures and develop

both the business and themselves, acting as hubs of creativity and innovation' (Advance HE, n.d.). In India's context—where the 15–29 age group constitutes over 27% of the population (The Times of India, 2022)—campus incubators are pivotal for channelling youthful energy into startups. India now hosts the world's third-largest startup ecosystem, with over 200,000 DPIIT-recognised startups as of February 2026 (Startup India, n.d.). Embedding entrepreneurship into higher education aligns with this demographic dividend and with policies like the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which encourages interdisciplinary, innovation-led learning and allows students to treat startup projects as academic credit (CXOToday, 2024). This article examines how campus incubators in India have evolved, identifies current challenges, and explores innovative models and policies to strengthen their impact.

Evolution and Current Landscape

Over the past decade, India has witnessed a rapid proliferation of incubation centres within higher education institutions. Government initiatives have been the primary catalysts: for example, the Startup India programme (launched 2016) and the Atal Innovation Mission (AIM, launched 2016) have funded technology/business incubators and tinkering labs in colleges. Other schemes like MeitY's TIDE 2.0 and Invest India's Startup India Seed Fund Scheme provide grants and mentoring to campus incubators (CXOToday, 2024). The Ministry of Education's 2019 National Innovation and Startup Policy (NISP) has also guided universities to set up innovation cells and incubation support, with guidelines on intellectual property, licensing, and equity sharing (Chauhan, 2020). As a result, more than 950 incubators have been established nationwide (as of 2023), corresponding to approximately 120,000 registered startups in India (Shasidhar & Joseph, 2024). Notably, prestigious institutions have led this growth: IIT Madras's incubator (IITMIC) has backed hundreds of ventures (477 startups by 2025) and even profited from early investments (e.g. Ather Energy) (The Economic Times, 2025). Other elite institutes like IIT Bombay (Society for Innovation and Entrepreneurship, SINE) and IIM Bangalore (NSRCEL) likewise host large incubator portfolios. For example, IIM Bangalore reports that '3,178 startups [have] emerged from the institution' through its incubation activities (The Economic Times, 2025), while IIIT Hyderabad has mentored over 400 ventures.

At the same time, campus incubators are expanding beyond premier schools. Newer tech universities and even some regional colleges are building incubation ecosystems. For instance, IIT Palakkad hosts over 60 tech startups (many in AI / robotics), and IIM Jammu's incubation lab has incubated 22 ventures since inception (The Economic Times, 2025). Private universities and state colleges (such as Bennett University, GITAM University, etc.) have also launched innovation cells and credit-for-startup policies (The Times of India, 2022). Many campuses mandate entrepreneurship courses and provide resources: Bennett University requires all undergraduates to take innovation courses and offers seed funds, while GITAM reserves about $Rs.1.5$ crore for

prototype grants and allows 10% attendance relaxation for incubated students (The Times of India, 2022). These examples show that campus incubators are now prevalent across India's higher-education spectrum, supported by a mix of institutional commitment and state/national schemes.

At the state level, many governments actively support incubators. For example, the Telangana Startup Policy promises matching grants (1:1) on funding raised by incubators (Startup India, n.d.); Maharashtra's policy provides an infrastructure fund for incubators (Startup India, n.d.); Madhya Pradesh funds up to 50% of incubator capital costs (capped at $Rs.50$ lakh) (Startup India, n.d.); and Jharkhand commits Rs.50 lakh annually for 5 years to strengthen university incubation (Startup India, n.d.). These policies reflect a growing recognition that localised innovation centres (often housed in universities) can drive regional development. Thus, the current landscape is one of broad growth: nearly every major technical or management institution now hosts an incubation/ pre-incubation facility, often integrated with entrepreneurship curriculum and industry partnerships (CXOToday, 2024).

Challenges Faced by Campus Incubators

Despite this expansion, campus incubators in India face persistent challenges. Funding constraints are often cited: even with programmes like the Startup India Seed Fund, many incubators report limited resources for sustained support (Deshpande, 2024). Student entrepreneurs frequently lack access to capital (seed funding and follow-on funding) once they leave the incubator. A 2025 survey found 22–24% of student founders were concerned about funding and legal guidance (The Print, 2024). Correspondingly, financial challenges—such as erratic budgets and risk-averse investors—are a global issue identified in incubator research (Shasidhar & Joseph, 2024).

A second major hurdle is mentorship and expertise. Many incubated students report insufficient guidance from experienced entrepreneurs or industry experts. Over 35% of surveyed Indian students indicated 'lack of mentorship' as the biggest challenge in launching ventures (The Print, 2024). In-country, this is exacerbated by academia-industry divides: traditional campuses lack strong industry linkages, so incubators often operate in silos without exposure to market needs (CXOToday, 2024). Faculty leading entrepreneurship programmes themselves may have little startup experience, leaving students 'in a lurch' when it comes to building business acumen (The Times of India, 2022). The result is that incubates sometimes lack basic business and managerial skills to scale their ideas (Shasidhar & Joseph, 2024). Studies of incubation globally emphasise that inadequate entrepreneurial knowledge and strategic training remain key bottlenecks (Shasidhar & Joseph, 2024).

Resource and infrastructure issues are also common. Some campus incubators have labs and maker spaces, but underutilisation is a problem; equipment sits idle if students are unaware

or unable to access it at the right times (CXOToday, 2024). Others lack even basic facilities: insufficient co-working space can constrain startups' growth (Shasidhar & Joseph, 2024). In the post-COVID era, many incubators have turned to virtual models (see below), but this can only partly substitute for in-person prototyping labs. Finally, the institutional context can constrain entrepreneurs: rigid academic schedules, credit requirements, and exam pressures may conflict with startup work. According to a leadership summit report (2025), while nearly 75% of students want to start ventures, only 10% find existing campus incubation programs programmes '"highly effective'," signalling a gap between intent and actual support (The Print, 2024).

In summary, campus incubators in India struggle with funding gaps, mentorship shortages, weak industry engagement, and institutional rigidity. Addressing these interconnected challenges is critical for turning incubated ideas into successful enterprises.

Innovative and Future-Oriented Models

The previous sections have outlined the scale and structural challenges of campus incubation in India. Addressing these challenges requires more than incremental improvements to existing models. A new generation of incubation approaches, enabled by digital infrastructure, artificial intelligence, and global collaboration networks, is beginning to reshape what campus support for entrepreneurs can look like. The models discussed below are not mutually exclusive; the most effective incubators are increasingly blending elements of each to build responsive, resilient, and resource-efficient ecosystems.

Virtual and Hybrid Incubation Models

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of virtual and hybrid incubation models worldwide (Shasidhar & Joseph, 2024). Hybrid incubators combine online platforms with occasional in-person activities; one study found that programs programmes offering both virtual and physical engagement maintained higher levels of startup participation (Shasidhar & Joseph, 2024). In India, some institutions have launched online incubation platforms or remote mentoring to reach a wider student base (for example, IIT Delhi's virtual incubation network). The advantage of virtual incubators is greater accessibility and flexibility: startups can access mentorship and networking across geographies without relocating (Shasidhar & Joseph, 2024). However, research cautions that virtual models must compensate for missing physical presence. Incubators should build '"strong digital platforms"' and vibrant online communities to imitate some benefits of co-located facilities (Shasidhar & Joseph, 2024). For instance, building online forums for peer feedback and virtual '"demo days"' can replicate the collaborative atmosphere of a campus hub.

AI-Driven Mentorship and Support Platforms

Looking ahead, AI and data analytics promise to transform incubation support. Early prototypes of AI-based startup advisors can provide 24/7 guidance on business planning, market research, and even pitch feedback. For example, global startup platforms now offer AI-driven matchmaking between entrepreneurs and mentors, or automated legal checklists. In India, incubators could leverage AI tools (including large language models) to augment limited mentor capacity. An incubator might deploy a chatbot to answer routine entrepreneurial questions or analyse an idea's market fit using data. While this is an emerging trend with limited published research in academia, experts foresee AI mentors helping to personalise incubation. Such platforms could suggest tailored resources, connect start-ups with relevant funding sources, or conduct virtual office hours with expert systems. The key is to use AI as a force multiplier — not as a replacement for human guidance, but as a way to scale basic support and analytics. Several tools are already being piloted in campus incubation contexts: OpenAI's GPT-4 and Google's Gemini are being used by student founders for rapid market research and pitch deck drafting; Perplexity AI assists with competitive landscape mapping; and platforms such as Lean Canvas AI help teams stress-test business model assumptions in real time. Y Combinator's free Startup School platform uses algorithmic nudges to guide founders through weekly milestones, a model Indian incubators can readily adapt. NSRCEL at IIM Bangalore, for instance, has begun integrating AI-driven diagnostic tools into its pre-incubation cohort to triage ideas before committing mentor time. The principle remains consistent: AI handles the repeatable and data-intensive tasks, freeing human mentors to focus on judgement-heavy conversations around strategy, pivots, and fundraising.

Global Collaboration Networks and Internationalisation

Another forward-looking model is building international accelerator networks. In these, campus incubators partner across borders to expose student startups to global markets and expertise. For example, the Global Startup Incubator Network and other consortia connect academic incubators worldwide. Digital platforms have already made startups more adaptable and better able to access international markets (Shasidhar & Joseph, 2024). Indian campus incubators can plug into this trend by forging tie-ups with leading university programmesprograms abroad. Joint programs programmes (e.g. '"twin"' accelerator cohorts with an overseas university) or cross-border demo days would internationaliseinternationalize student ventures. Industry experts note that incubators should explicitly support startups' international ambitions, offering networking in foreign markets (Shasidhar & Joseph, 2024). By linking with Silicon Valley or European university incubators, Indian campuses can give incubatees a global runway for scaling, while also attracting foreign investment and knowledge.

Funding Innovations and Sustainability Models

Financial sustainability of incubators is crucial. Beyond government grants, campuses are innovating new funding models. A growing trend is institutional venture funds: for example, IIT Bombay's incubator SINE has announced a Rs.100 crore fund to invest in deep-tech startups (aiming to support 1,000 ventures over a decade) (IIT Bombay, 2024). This endowment-style fund will provide equity or pre-seed capital to alumni startups, addressing the financing gap for long-gestation technologies. Similarly, IIT Madras and other institutes often take small equity stakes in incubated companies (as with Ather Energy). Corporate partnerships and CSR funds are another source: companies fund campus incubators (or student challenges) that align with their R &D, creating a steady revenue flow. Crowdfunding and income-sharing models are also being piloted: some universities allow alumni to pledge returns on successful startups, essentially crowd-sourcing incubator capital. The Startup India Seed Fund itself is an innovation, channelling Rs.900 crore into eligible incubators for seed grants. Moving forward, incubators must blend public, private, and self-generated funds (e.g. space rentals, consulting projects) to remain viable.

Localised Innovation Ecosystems

Campus incubators increasingly tie themselves to local industrial and social ecosystems. A localised model leverages regional strengths: agricultural universities nurturing agritech startups, medical colleges incubating healthcare solutions, or technology institutes focusing on regional manufacturing. This helps incubators address community-specific problems and build local stakeholder support. For example, universities in tier 2/3 cities have started incubating solutions for local needs (e.g. clean energy projects in rural campuses and water purification ventures in arid regions) (CXOToday, 2024). Local ecosystem development also means involving nearby industry players and NGOs. A college in a textile hub might collaborate with mills to co-incubate smart textile startups. This place-based approach accelerates social innovation: many campus ventures now work on sanitation, women's empowerment, or affordable education (CXOToday, 2024). Policy frameworks like the 'bottom-of-the-pyramid' innovation encourage such localisation. Going forward, Indian incubators will likely deepen these local ties, effectively turning each campus into an innovation cluster for its region.

The models and frameworks discussed above find their clearest expression in the track records of specific institutions. The following case studies draw on publicly available data to illustrate how sustained commitment, strategic funding, and a culture of entrepreneurship have enabled a small number of Indian campus incubators to achieve disproportionate impact. They also surface the practices most likely to be replicable by institutions at earlier stages of incubation development.

Case Studies and Best Practices

IIT Kanpur (SIIC): The Startup Incubation and Innovation Centre (SIIC) at IIT Kanpur exemplifies sustained impact. Founded in 2000, SIIC has now incubated over 500 startups (as of Sept 2025) (IIT Kanpur, 2025). These startups have collectively raised over Rs.12,000 crore in fundraising and generated more than 10,800 jobs across 22 states (IIT Kanpur, 2025). SIIC actively mentors deep-tech ventures in sectors from medtech to agritech (IIT Kanpur, 2025). Its success comes from comprehensive support (mentorship, lab facilities, networking) and a strategic focus on emerging technologies. SIIC's model shows that long-term investment (20+ years) in an incubator can yield significant economic and social returns.

IIT Bombay (SINE): The Society for Innovation and Entrepreneurship (SINE) at IIT Bombay, one of India's oldest technology incubators, highlights a different model. Celebrating its 20th anniversary in 2024, SINE has supported 245 startups that together raised $942 million and reached a valuation of $3.6 billion (IIT Bombay, 2024). These include major success stories such as Gupshup (a messaging platform unicorn) and ideaForge (a drone company now publicly listed) (IIT Bombay, 2024). Recognising funding gaps for deep-tech startups, SINE recently launched a Rs.100 crore venture fund to invest in 1,000 deep-tech ventures over the next decade (IIT Bombay, 2024). This shows how an incubator can evolve into a VC-like entity, recycling its successes to fund the next generation. SINE's ecosystem also includes a School of Entrepreneurship and supports intellectual property creation (300+ patents filed).

BITS Pilani (Technology Business Incubator): The BITS Pilani TBI (est. 2004) demonstrates impact in an academic setting. It has directly supported 75 startups and more broadly inspired over 300 alumni-founded startups (BITS Pilani, n.d.). The incubator's strategy is integrated into academics: it complements engineering programmes with entrepreneurship courses and seminars. The result is a vibrant culture where even students who leave without incubating still end up launching ventures. This case underlines the role of culture-building: BITS credits its incubator (and associated entrepreneurship development centre) for motivating generations of students to start companies (BITS Pilani, n.d.).

IIT Madras: As noted, IIT Madras's Incubation Cell has been a trendsetter. Its early backing of Ather Energy (2013) yielded a 100x return, motivating other campuses to create venture funds. By 2025, IITM had incubated 477 startups (103 with follow-on funding) (The Economic Times, 2025). The institute's model includes mandatory entrepreneurship courses for undergraduates and faculty incentive schemes (e.g. IP ownership rules favouring inventors). IITM's cell often co-invests seed capital and actively manages stakes, demonstrating how academic incubators can act like strategic investors.

International examples: Globally, many leading universities provide inspiration. Cambridge

University's commercialisation arm (Cambridge Enterprise) spun out 26 new companies in 2024, the highest among UK universities (Cambridge Enterprise, 2024). Cambridge Enterprise operates on a structured spinout model: it retains an equity stake in each spinout in exchange for commercialization commercialisation support, IP licensing, and access to the Seed Funds that bridge the gap between the laboratory and the market. The key lesson for Indian institutions is the 'structured spinout' pathway itself: a clear, standardized standardised process for IP valuation, equity negotiation, and post-spin governance, rather than ad hoc case-by-case decisions. IIT Madras's practice of taking equity in ventures such as Ather Energy is a step in this direction, but it remains inconsistent across institutions. Stanford's StartX, by contrast, takes no equity whatsoever, relying instead on the long-term benefit of an alumni network that returns philanthropically to the university. For Indian incubators with strong alumni communities, particularly the IITs and IIMs, this no-equity model can dramatically lower the barrier for reluctant founders to engage with campus incubators; removing the equity requirement is likely to attract a broader and more diverse cohort of entrepreneurs who would otherwise seek corporate employment. MIT's Martin Trust Center adds a third dimension: rigorous, competition-driven programming (the MIT $100K Competition, and the Inclusive Innovation Challenge) that forces teams to validate ideas in the market before receiving institutional support. Indian incubators can borrow this milestone-based selection filter to concentrate resources on ventures that have demonstrated early traction rather than spreading support thinly across all applicants. Taken together, these three models offer Indian campuses a menu of adaptable practices: Cambridge's spinout equity structure for IP-heavy research institutions, Stanford's no-equity ethos for alumni-driven incubators, and MIT's competition-based filtering for maximizing maximising cohort quality. Indian incubators are beginning to adopt elements of each (e.g. IIT Delhi has linked with alumni angel groups; IIT Bombay has partnered with industry for structured acceleration), but a more deliberate, institutionalized institutionalised adoption is needed.

These cases illustrate that best practices include sustained funding (through grants or internal VC funds), a broad pipeline (from ideation to acceleration), and embedding entrepreneurship in the academic fabric. Successful incubators measure impact via job creation, fundraising, IP generation, and company scaling (as seen at IIT Kanpur and IIT Bombay).

Policy and Institutional Support

Indian campus incubators operate within a supportive policy framework. At the national level, the government has instituted several flagship schemes. The Startup India mission provides tax incentives, regulatory ease, and a Rs.10,000 crore 'Fund of Funds' for VC investment. The Atal Innovation Mission (AIM) under NITI Aayog created nearly 100 Atal Incubation Centres (AICs) and 9,000+ Atal Tinkering Labs (ATLs) in schools and colleges (CXOToday, 2024). MEITY's TIDE 2.0 offers grants specifically for tech incubators in academic institutions (CXOToday, 2024).

The Startup India Seed Fund Scheme provides direct grants to eligible incubators (including campus incubators) to disburse to student startups (CXOToday, 2024). These programmes 'have not only infused capital but also ensured systemic consistency in promoting innovation at the academic level' (CXOToday, 2024).

The Ministry of Education's NISP 2019 guides academic institutions to create innovation councils and IPR policies. For example, NISP recommends allowing students and faculty to engage with startups part-time, holding equity in ventures, and granting academic credits for innovation projects (BVRIT, n.d.). Many universities have thus drafted institute-level innovation policies (e.g. 'I&E policy' at GITAM, and 'Startup Policy' at Bennett (The Times of India, 2022)). AICTE and UGC also encourage each institute to form an Institution's Innovation Council (IIC), linking colleges nationally for peer learning.

State governments often complement these by customizing customising support. Besides the examples of matching grants (Telangana) and capital subsidy (MP, Jharkhand) cited earlier (Startup India, n.d. b), states like Karnataka, Kerala, and Gujarat have robust startup policies, including grants for university incubators. For instance, Karnataka covers 50% of capital costs (up to Rs.30 lakh) and recurring costs for 3 years to set up incubators (Startup India, n.d. b). These policies are usually aligned with industrial strategies (e.g. Gujarat's iStart scheme focusing on technology startups).

Moreover, recent educational reforms encourage entrepreneurship. The NEP 2020 explicitly promotes innovation-driven curriculum and interdisciplinary learning (CXOToday, 2024). Boards like the All-India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) have instituted entrepreneurship awareness programmes and allow semester breaks for startup work (The Times of India, 2022). In practice, dozens of campus incubators now report to a dedicated officer (often a Dean or Director of Innovation) and receive line-item funding in annual budgets.

Despite strong policy intent, implementation can lag. Industry observers note that many centers centres struggle to convert ideas into market-ready ventures, citing weak industry linkages, inadequate mentorship, and chronic funding gaps (Deshpande, 2024). A separate analysis reported that fewer than 15% of incubated ideas reach a minimum viable product stage within two years (CXOToday, 2024). This figure should be read alongside the cumulative headline numbers cited elsewhere in this article: the thousands of startups attributed to premier incubators such as IIM Bangalore and IIT Kanpur represent cohorts built over two decades, whereas the 15% figure captures the two-year conversion rate for an average incubated idea across the broader ecosystem. The two statistics measure different things and are not in conflict; together they underscore that aggregate incubation scale has grown impressively while short-run conversion quality remains a challenge. This gap has prompted calls for performance-based metrics, so that continued funding

is contingent on outcomes such as jobs created and follow-on capital raised, rather than on input measures such as workshops conducted (Shasidhar & Joseph, 2024).

Roadmap and Recommendations

To capitalise on the momentum and address weaknesses, a multi-pronged roadmap is needed for campus incubators: India's incubation ecosystem stands at an inflection point. The policy foundations are in place, elite institutions have demonstrated what sustained investment can produce, and a new cohort of regional and private universities is entering the space. What is now required is a shift from quantity to quality: from measuring incubation by the number of registered startups to measuring it by the depth of support each venture receives, the commercial outcomes it achieves, and the employment and innovation it generates. The roadmap that follows is organised around six interdependent priorities, each of which addresses a documented gap in the current system. Together, they are intended to serve as a practical framework for institutional leaders, policymakers, and industry partners seeking to strengthen campus-based entrepreneurship in India.

Strengthen Funding and Financial Sustainability: Expand incubator access to capital. This includes streamlining the Startup India Seed Fund disbursement to campus incubators, creating dedicated endowment or VC funds (as SINE is doing (IIT Bombay, 2024)), and leveraging CSR and alumni networks for matching grants. Incubators might also adopt 'equity-sharing' models, where institutions take a small stake in spinouts to recycle returns. Performance-linked grants (where continued funding depends on meeting milestones) can encourage results. Enhance Mentorship and Industry Linkages: Build mentor pools that combine faculty, alumni, and industry experts. Exchange programmes (e.g. hiring an entrepreneur-in-residence for a term) and partnerships with local industry clusters can inject real-world insight. Formal mechanisms—such as requiring incubator advisory boards with corporate/VC members—should be the norm. This addresses the chronic 'mentor gap' cited by 35% of students (The Print, 2024) and the reported siloing of many centres (CXOToday, 2024). Connecting campus incubators into a national network (e.g. through IIC chapters or platforms like Startup India Hub) can spread best practices and open inter-campus connections.

Leverage Technology for Scale: Adopt virtual incubation tools and AI-driven platforms to extend reach. Post-pandemic, hybrid models are essential: holding virtual seminars, online pitch days, and remote mentor matching allows collaboration across India (and globally) (Shasidhar & Joseph, 2024). At the same time, invest in building strong digital communities—Slack/Discord groups, online workshops, and live Q&A with experts—to replicate the engagement of physical incubators (Shasidhar & Joseph, 2024). AI tools (as noted) can supplement mentor advice. This technological layer makes incubators more resilient (e.g. in lockdowns) and inclusive (reaching

remote campuses).

Curriculum Integration and Cultural Change: Embed entrepreneurship into academic programmes. Several institutes already offer credit-bearing startup electives or allow thesis projects to be startup-focused (The Times of India, 2022). This should be expanded. The 'entrepreneurial campus' approach—where ideation starts from freshman year and support grows over time—is recommended (CXOToday, 2024). Culture change is equally important: success stories (like alumni-entrepreneurs) should be publicised to inspire peers, and failing fast should be destigmatised so students aren't penalised academically for pursuing startups.

Localised Ecosystem Development: Incubators must actively cultivate their local innovation ecosystem. This means collaborating with municipal bodies, state industry associations, and NGOs to create challenges or co-funding opportunities on local issues. For example, agricultural universities can partner with state agri-departments to incubate farm-tech solutions. By solving local problems (sanitation in rural areas, water shortages, etc.), campus startups can demonstrate immediate impact, which in turn can rally community and government support (CXOToday, 2024). This approach also leverages the 'local innovation hub' role of colleges noted in recent analyses.

Measurement and Accountability: Establish clear metrics for success and use data to drive improvements. Incubators should track outcomes like the number of startups launched, total funding raised by alumni ventures, jobs created, patents filed, etc. These metrics should tie into institutional rankings and funding decisions. For example, the Delhi government's startup policy counts cumulative investments of incubated startups when granting benefits to universities. Regular external reviews (like annual reports by Cambridge Enterprise (Cambridge Enterprise, 2024) or IIT Bombay's alumni surveys (IIT Bombay, 2024)) can inform strategy. Importantly, reporting should be transparent: sharing success stories and failures helps other incubators learn.

Global Collaboration and Exposure: Facilitate international linkages. This can involve taking students to global entrepreneurship competitions (like Harvard's iLabs or MIT Global Entrepreneurship Bootcamp) or inviting foreign startup experts for workshops. Some Indian institutes already send teams to events like the Global Startup Competition or Innovate4SDGs challenge. Formalising such programmes into the incubator roadmap will help ventures think big and bring international best practices home.

In crafting these recommendations, one guiding principle emerges: continuous evolution and adaptation. Just as global studies note that incubators must evolve with environmental changes (Shasidhar & Joseph, 2024), Indian campus incubators must continually refine their models. This includes being responsive to student feedback (many want more corporate internships within incubators or easier credit transfers for startup work (The Times of India, 2022)) and adopting

innovations from leading peers.

Conclusion

Campus incubators in India have come far—from a handful of technology parks to a nationwide network of thousands of innovation cells and labs. Under recent policies, universities have embraced the role of startup nurseries, aligning education with enterprise. Deep-tech and student startups are now mainstream goals of premier institutions. Yet significant gaps remain: many promising ideas stall in the lab, unable to secure markets or mentorship. The future calls for an incubation ecosystem that is more inclusive, better funded, and globally connected.

By adopting hybrid and AI-enhanced models, fostering international linkages, and grounding efforts in local needs, campus incubators can be next-generation innovation engines. Policymakers and academia alike recognise this; the NEP 2020 and Startup India guidelines set out a vision of colleges as 'cradles of innovation' (CXOToday, 2024). Meeting that vision will require persistent effort—linking industry, updating curricula, and ensuring incubators operate efficiently. But as early case studies show, when done well, campus incubators can convert research into high-impact startups (as IIT Kanpur and IIT Bombay have demonstrated (IIT Kanpur, 2025)). The roadmap ahead is clear: deepen funding and mentorship, harness technology, and cultivate an entrepreneurial culture. If India succeeds, it will not only retain its talented youth but also generate the next wave of tech leaders, making each campus a launchpad for national and global prosperity (CXOToday, 2024).

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Dr. Abha Rishi, Executive Head of the Madhya Pradesh Startup Centre (MPSC), the MP state government's nodal agency for entrepreneurship, was the co-chair of the Foundation Task Force Committee from India for Startup20 in the G20. With more than 30 years of experience in industry and academia, she is a recognised leader and mentor in the field of incubation, innovation & entrepreneurship and is a speaker at many international events. She holds a PhD, a PGDIBO, and an EEC (Honours) from Stanford University and is one of the few Indians to hold two prestigious scholarships: Chevening (University of Oxford) and Fulbright (Rutgers University, USA). As a senior faculty at BIMTECH, she has established and led the Atal Incubation Centre AIC BIMTECH and the Centre for Innovation and Entrepreneurship Development, along with the Goldman Sachs 10K Women global project in UP and Orissa.

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