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Inclusion of UG students in the research domain will strengthen it

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Advancements in technology should be accompanied by holistic training for complete growth, says **Laxmidhar Behera**, the newly appointed director of IIT Mandi. In an exclusive conversation with *Education Times*, he highlights the way forward for the institute.

Be research-oriented

The institute is focusing on becoming research oriented. "Rather than focusing only on the master's students conducting research, IIT Mandi wants to involve undergraduate (UG) students in the research infrastructure as well," tells Behera. At the IITs, India's premier Engineering institutes, research should primarily focus on areas that will have a positive societal impact, he adds.

Entrepreneurship creates jobs

"The institute's incubation cell 'Catalyst' has been working closely with students to guide them in their journey to become a start-up founder. Against the target to open seven start-ups last year, the institute has encouraged the formation of around 14 start-ups," he says. Besides, becoming an expert in their chosen domain, students need to focus on the bigger mandate of job creation, for which entrepreneurship is the key, further adds Behera.

All-round development

While Engineering students have a busy schedule, there is also the need to study the scientific aspect of rich Indian traditions through courses such as Music and Yoga. "Within the faculty at IIT Mandi, discussions have started about introducing such courses for Masters' and PhD since it correlates with mental health and stress," he tells.

"The institute plans on holding short workshops to give students a peek into our rich heritage and help them enjoy the process of education," says Behera, who has been a researcher in Music.

Girls and Engineering

While the lower ratio of girls in STEM courses is a worldwide phenomenon, in India, girls are more adventurous than boys when it comes to related fields, says Behera. "Girls face societal and financial bottlenecks. For the



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- Laxmidhar Behera, director, IIT Mandi



latter, we have made Engineering education free for girls. This has increased the percentage of girls at IIT Mandi to 35%," he tells.

Focus on rankings

Rankings have become a way of life for HEIs for aspects such as funding and to attract good quality students and teachers. "The idea should be not to give them undue importance but focus on making the institute an educational hub. Adding good and innovative programmes that improve the quality of students coming to the institute is required," tells Behera.

Improve quality of teaching-learning

"Initiating a student into a subject with extensive lab courses will increase their interaction with faculty and encourage them to delve into theoretical material to better their understanding. This kind of hands-on experience will help improve quality of teaching-learning," tells Behera.

Benefitting the society

IIT Mandi is finalising an initiative, wherein 100 school students from X and XII from Himachal Pradesh will be chosen based on an aptitude test for one-month summer training. "Faculty will train them in areas of AI and Robotics among others. Guided by UG and PG students, they will pinpoint a local problem and use our resources to find a solution. This will enable interest in Science and help serve the society," says Behera.