

## MIT Startups – The Road Ahead

Yesterday, someone asked me: “So, how many startups have we registered?”

This is an easy question to ask. Just like asking “How many marks, runs, projects – so Startups?” But it’s also a wrong question. Towards the end, we will look at how we all can participate by asking the right questions – to others and to ourselves too.

Expecting numbers from a budding startup ecosystem like AIIC is like planting mango trees and asking, “How many mangoes this year?” The answer will always disappoint us if we forget that trees take years of care before they bear fruit. The right question is not “How many mangoes?” but “Are we watering the saplings? Are we protecting them? Are we giving them the right soil to grow?”

Startups are no different. They don’t grow by counting. Startups are a long-term proposition for the founders. They grow because the environment around them — teachers, parents, peers — commits to support their growth, even when the results are still invisible and will continue to be amorphous for a few years.

### **The vital link on an educational campus - Why Teachers Matter**

As teachers, we are the first, direct and most persistent point of contact for students. When we dismiss or discourage an unconventional idea, we don’t just stop one startup — we quietly train fifty others to never try.

But when we show curiosity, ask a thoughtful question, or connect a student to someone who can help, we plant a seed that might grow years later. That small shift in our own attitude is the real beginning of an incubation culture.

### **The Real Picture – Why Startups Struggle**

#### **1. The Student-founder Mindset**

Most students today still see a job as the natural next step after graduation. For many, the idea of starting something of their own only comes up when they fear they might not get a job. Very few see entrepreneurship as a choice made of passion or purpose. Changing this mindset is our first challenge.

#### **2. The Parental Mindset**

Many parents are lifelong employees themselves. Their lived experience makes them believe that a steady job is safe and business is risky.

When their children say they want to start something on their own, parents often react with worry or even resistance — especially if the first ₹25,000 or ₹50,000 of funding has to come from home. Students, therefore, struggle not just with the market or their technologies, but also their own family’s doubts.

### 3. Idea-to-Product Journey

Engineering students are often full of excitement for technology, esp if they have done something out of the syllabus. But moving from an idea to something a customer will pay for — that’s where reality hits.

Questions like “Who will buy this?”, “Why will they pay?”, and “How much will they pay?” often come too late.

Without that customer understanding, even good ideas end up failing. Learning this journey early can save them years of frustration.

### 4. Finding the Right Partners

Startups are not solo stories. They need teams that can work together for years.

But this is also an age when students are still figuring out who they are and what they want. Relationships — personal or professional — are uncertain. Many want freedom before responsibility. In such an environment, finding dependable partners who share long-term goals is not easy.

### 5. The Environment Around Them

We become the average of the five people with whom we spend most time. If a student founder’s closest five people are employees, the chances of him turning out to be a founder are very low. Founders need to be around people who have tried, failed, built again — mentors, founders, business owners. That is why exposure to ecosystems like MAGIC or TiE Pune or similar networks is vital in creating a sense of entrepreneur’s lives and decisions.

### The Path Ahead

At AIIC, our work naturally unfolds in two directions.

- **FIRST: direct engagement with founders.**

This means working closely with students who are trying to build something — identifying problem areas, connecting them to mentors and investors, helping them understand customers, guiding their projects, and coaching them through the practical side of execution.

- **SECOND: building the environment**

This is the slower but equally important task of creating the *buzz* in the larger campus — the thought and emotional environment where entrepreneurship feels possible, normal, and respected. This involves connecting departments, involving teachers, arranging exposure visits, and simply keeping the conversation alive. It also means dreaming up tech-development projects and offer funded development plans which give students a chance to hone their skills while thinking of founding their own startup. It also includes keeping tabs on

government schemes and grants, creating small but meaningful training interventions, delivering short courses, and ensuring that the right operational support reaches the right teams at the right time.

Both fronts feed each other. When one student succeeds, the environment gains confidence. In a positive environment, more students step forward to try.

### **Hope and Momentum**

Worldwide, nearly 95% of startups fail. That means out of every 20 startups we create, maybe only one will survive.

But even that one success can change the story for the entire region.

Every campus that has produced a real, home-grown success story has seen a ripple effect — confidence grows, more students dream differently, parents slowly open up, and teachers begin to take pride in nurturing doers. That single story can reset the default mindset of a generation.

### **A Thought for All of Us**

Environment creation efforts are not merely about activities like clubs and hackathons alone. They are about creating a thought environment — an environment where young people see entrepreneurship not as a backup plan, but as a bold and dignified path.

And here, every one of us — especially teachers — have a vital role. Each conversation, each reaction, each bit of encouragement (or discouragement) shapes how a student sees the world.

So instead of asking ***“How many startups have been created?”*** let’s each ask ourselves, quietly and honestly:

- **What am I doing to make this idea grow?**
- **Am I encouraging, ignoring, or blocking it till my questions get resolved?**

Because in the long run, the real measure of success will not be how many startups we have counted, but how many minds we have nurtured.

**Do you wish to participate in MIT’s Incubation effort? Drop in for a coffee anytime!**

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