With a view to fostering the creative potential of engineering students, the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) has selected 49 institutions to set up the IDEA (Idea Development, Evaluation & Application) lab to boost new-age learning among students. “These institutes were chosen based on their accreditation, technical infrastructure, quality programmes and passionate faculty. Plans are on to raise their numbers to 100 and later implement the scheme across all colleges,” AICTE chairman Anil Sahasrabudhe tells Education Times.

“The idea for the lab was drawn from Vigyan Ashram located in village Pabal, approximately 70 kms from Pune. The institute had started the concept of training dropout students of classes VIII, IX, X and trained them innovatively in welding, laser cutting, etc to set them up for jobs or self-employment. The concept was picked up by MIT, USA, that collaborated with the institute to set up Fab Labs where students could engage in developing mechanical and electrical products, 3D printing and scanning, woodworking etc,” says Sahasrabudhe, who chose to implement the Fab Lab concept at the College of Engineering, Pune, as far back as in 2006 where he was the director before joining the AICTE as chairman.

Cut to the present, the IDEA lab with its 24x7 access aims to give a free reign to students’ imagination and problem-solving skills. “It will also nurture students’ ideas right from scratch as against the incubator centres and accelerator programmes which deal in the more advanced stages of entrepreneurial ideas,” Sahasrabudhe says.
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The labs will cater to not just engineering students but also those from management and other branches with an innovative streak. The facilities would be set up on a 50-50 partnership model in which AICTE will provide Rs 50 lakh funding while the balance Rs 50 lakh will be paid by the industry/respective institute. The hands-on skills at the lab will help students get familiar with the tools and consumables before they take up internships for real-world industry exposure,” Sharasrabudhe adds. Faculty at the Labs will identify problems/ projects/ internships in their own disciplines and motivate the students to showcase their ideas. AICTE will also encourage other institutions outside its ambit to join ranks and become a part of the IDEA Lab network. “The selected AICTE institutes are expected to encourage nearby schools to send their students to the lab which can inspire them to take up science or engineering as careers,” Sahasrabudhe explains.

“The lab’s training will help the students devise prototypes that would eventually become products since India is lacking in the area of product manufacturing. While the government’s ATAL Tinkering labs in 2016 inculcated experiential learning in 10,000 schools, it was time for colleges to take on a similar mission. The IDEA labs were introduced as a natural extension of this initiative, though their scope and capacity would be larger and more outcome-driven,” says Dhananjay Gadre, associate professor, ECE division, Netaji Subhas University of Technology, Dwarka, Delhi, and member of the National Steering Committee (NSC) engaged in the selection of the colleges and finalisation of the labs’ inventory and training.