

IIT Madras establishes Bio-Incubator to support start-ups

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The Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Madras - South India's premier engineering and research institution - has established an incubator for biotechnology start-ups to foster innovation and entrepreneurship in the southern region of India. The incubator was inaugurated on December 11, 2014 by Mr Bhaskar Ramamurthi, Director, IIT Madras.

The bio-incubator is said to be ideal for budding entrepreneurs who need a nurturing environment to help bring their product to market and for companies who need a platform for trying new processes or technologies. The bio-incubator is open to researchers with a promising idea for a product that can be commercialized as well as start-up companies seeking to scale-up and enter the market.

The IITM Bio-incubator is funded by the Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council (BIRAC), under the Bio-Incubator Support Scheme (BISS) of the Department of Biotechnology, India. IITM bio-incubator has been established with a primary objective of fostering Indian biotech innovation and entrepreneurship and it aims to enhance R&D capabilities of start-ups and SMEs in order to develop globally competitive products.

The incubator offers lab and office space, high-end equipment, scale-up facilities, technical support and centralized utilities for process development to help technologies mature and attain commercialization. It is offered to researchers with nascent ideas, who want to develop processes and to commercialize their product, and also as an R&D base for companies to try new technologies. It is a platform for entrepreneurs to gain technical advice and researchers to realize business opportunities.

The incubator can also be used to provide training and workshops to develop skills related to development and commercialization of the product.

The bio-incubator offers a slew of other advantages to its incubatees. In association with the IITM Alumni Association's Entrepreneurship Forum, IITM Incubation Cell (IITMIC) will provide mentorship from IITM Alumni who have knowledge and experience relevant to the proposed project.

Incubatees can avail the expertise in IITM in areas of biotechnology or business by consulting faculty members or research scholars. Business support is offered by IITMIC in areas of legal, accounting and company secretaryship.

This can also include IPR services like patent mapping and patent applications. In terms of funding, the incubatees can get access to funding from the Entrepreneurship Support Scheme of the IITM Alumni as well as other venture capitalists and DST.

In addition to these facilities, the incubatees can have access to a vast network of researchers, faculty, businessmen, industrialists, alumni, venture capitalists, governmental agencies and other service providers who can be tapped into via the bio-incubator.

At present, the bio-incubator has inducted four incubatees for the first phase. Vital Bio-Scientific Solutions - a spin off from the Bioengineering and Drug Design lab, Department of Biotechnology, IIT Madras - is incubated by IITM Incubation Cell.

Current focus of Vital Bio-scientific Solutions is to develop novel products and services for efficient screening of New Chemical entities (NCEs) and drugs in pre-clinical studies including ADME and toxicology.

Dr Padma Priya, Research Scholar and Founder of Vital Bio-Scientific Solutions said, "Lack of efficient analytical instrumentation is an initial roadblock faced by most of the biotech start-ups, as it is expensive to set-up even a basic research lab. In such a scenario, the bio-incubator at IITM provides us with a high-end laboratory set-up that helps us to focus on product innovation, improvisation and commercialization. Most importantly the bio-incubator provides the necessary funds to establish a fully-equipped laboratory suitable for product development."

Yaathum Biotech a start-up by four young students who have done their Masters in Biomedical field in UK, has been incubated with the aim of indigenously developing Real-time quantitative PCR (qPCR) kits for rapid/affordable diagnostic testing and research purposes.

The company's current venture is to develop and market multiplex qPCR based diagnostic test kit that would make possible the identification of full range of Drug Resistant Tuberculosis (DR-TB) at one third the present cost, taking a few hours to test and capable of identifying all MDR and XDR-TB strains in a single test which is not available at present.

FIB-SOL Life Technologies aims to develop efficient carrier systems for bio-fertilizers. Liquid bio fertilizers (LBF) and Fertilizer Carrying Membrane (FCM) are the two products developed at FIB-SOL, which, comprises of microbial formulations with improved stabilizers and carrier material. The products are aimed at improving the storage, application and logistics of bio fertilizers compared to currently available products.

The company's Director Ms Kavitha Sairam indicated that, "The bio-incubator offers all conveniences under one roof. The incubatees have access to all sophisticated equipments and devices that is necessary for evaluating and validating our research product. Mentorship is most important for any research and the incubatees here are mentored academically and legally. The bio-incubator also offers assistance in guiding us to market the product and tackle issues faced by start-ups. At the end of three years, the incubatees can enter into a technology-transfer for the product or choose another product for development and commercialization."

Purius Nanosystems Pvt. Ltd. is the fourth incubatee. The company is looking to develop point-of-care diagnostic devices for DNA-based testing that integrate semiconductor-based biosensors and microfluidics.

IITM bio-incubator is open year round for fresh applications. A screening committee will evaluate the applications on several criteria, i.e. technical merit, proof of expertise, economic viability, funding and compatibility with the incubator. The start-ups

are then incubated for a minimum period of three years.