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TESTING GROUND As college labs go commercial, campus life is set to change. Expect more sophisticated lab technology and real-world projects

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When you're studying science and engineering, hands-on is the only way to learn, and so colleges have labs, but they're nothing like what you'd be working with out in the field. Some colleges are now trying to fill this gap by setting up commercial labs on campus, with some help from the NABL or National Accreditation Board for Testing and Calibration Laboratories.

An NABL tag means universities and institutions can have labs formally recognised as competent third-party assessors, allowing them to accept commercial projects and offer services directly to industry. Among the institutes that have set up such labs over the

past two years are Allahabad University, the Pondicherry Institute of Medical Sciences, Lovely Professional University (LPU), NorthCap University and the Vellore Institute of Technology. "The industry now comes to us and we work hand-in-hand on research projects," says Archanaa Dongre, director of NorthCap, accredited by the NABL in 2017 for the testing of building materials. "Students get to assist industry researchers on actual commercial projects at our labs now, and leave the institute better equipped for the real world."

Getting the NABL certificate itself is no mean feat. It's a necessarily rigid process; costs are high; and even after following all protocol, the accreditation is valid only for two years.

"It's rare for an institute to get an NABL tag. Most educational institutes in India simply lack the wherewithal and will to man-

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age their labs professionally and hence fail to produce technically competent and authentic test results," says Amit Srivastava, professor of civil engineering at LPU. "Balancing academics and a commercial laboratory can be difficult too," Dongre adds

ADDED BENEFITS

One hidden market for such labs can be, other college students. Allahabad University has a testing facility for food and water called the Food Analysis and Research Laboratory (FARL), where students from other col-

leges, working on course projects, can drop by to get samples tested, and get a 10% student discount.

"We also provide testing services to food business operators, government agencies, packers and consumers," says professor Neelam Yadav, director of the lab.

And it makes Allahabad University's MSc Food Technology graduates market-ready for hire by industry regulators such as the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI). "Every student who is inducted to work in the lab is given operations training as mandated by

NABL," says Yadav. Amardeep Kaur, 25, a research scholar in the geo-technical engineering field who worked on her thesis out of LPU's lab for mechanical testing of building and construction materials, says one of the best parts about working there was the time she saved by working with newer and safer technology.

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