

Cultural Foundations of IIT Gandhinagar



Sudhir K Jain

COPYRIGHT

Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar, 2022

ISBN: 978-81-958206-0-3

Email: director@iitgn.ac.in

Website: www.iitgn.ac.in





Sudhir Jain led Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar (IITGN) to emerge as a vibrant Institution as its founding Director for 12 years.

He reflects on IITGN's distinctive culture, ethos, values and practices in this exit conversation with Achal Mehra, Visiting Professor, IITGN, on January 4, 2022.

P R E F A C E

Culture is at the core of any community to thrive with strong roots. Today, IIT Gandhinagar has made its mark in the worldwide academic and professional circles as an institution with a difference. Many have followed in our steps or approached us to get the key to it. What is this difference? What are those pillars that set IIT Gandhinagar apart and help it evolve into a dynamic institution with a global outlook and societal connection?

In this exit conversation with Professor Achal Mehra, Professor Sudhir Jain, the founding Director of IIT Gandhinagar, opens the nuanced layers of not only who we are as an institution but also what we do and how we do it. It is an effort to bring all those foundational ideas, initiatives, practices, and experiences under one umbrella that make IIT Gandhinagar unique.

It is the quintessence of the groundbreaking work done by IIT Gandhinagar under the leadership of Professor Jain in the last 12 years, which will serve as a guiding light for future generations of the Institute.

Professor Amit Prashant
Officiating Director, IIT Gandhinagar

Achal Mehra

Sudhir, you are stepping down after 12 years of leading IIT Gandhinagar. We would like to use this opportunity to explore the philosophical underpinnings as well as the values, culture and ethos that animate IIT Gandhinagar's professional and community life. Let us begin with you explaining some of the core and defining values that inform our operations.

Sudhir Jain

As an academic institution, we need the same core values and culture that any good organisation needs. In addition, there are certain nuances that are unique to academic institutions and not so for other types of organisations. Also, as a new or small institute that is going to grow, there are again some nuances compared to bigger institutions.

I would start with the very first, very fundamental thing, which is aspiration. I have often said that our academic institutions and academic leadership often could do with higher aspirations, asking more from themselves, asking more from the

institutions. That is one thing that IIT Gandhinagar was not found wanting from day one.

We never aspired to quickly become like the first generation IITs. We always said we want to be better than the first generation IITs, because we have the advantage of the first generation IITs. We can learn from the first generation IITs, we have the resources of the first generation IITs. Therefore, we were always benchmarking ourselves with the best in the world, not the first generation IITs. So, aspiration is a very fundamental thing that, I think, defined IIT Gandhinagar.

Whatever we say, we mean; whatever we mean, we say.

The second thing that we are very particular about is authenticity. Whatever we say, we mean; whatever we mean, we say. And, people should feel that if something is being said, it means that, nothing more. That leads to a certain level of transparency, where people feel comfortable that nothing is being hidden, that what is being done is what is being said, what

The interview has been edited for grammar and syntax.

is being said is what is being done. And once there is transparency, that leads to trust. People are willing to trust each other, and discussions can happen in a collegial environment, decisions can be taken and as a result, your transactions can become fast, your actions can be fast. Fast decision making and fast implementation becomes possible.

We were very particular about ensuring that we keep our aspirations high, we remain authentic, we maintain transparency and trust.

All of that has to be in the overall framework of a very high level of integrity. Integrity, not only in terms of money, but also intellectual and other areas of human endeavour. When you are talking and making a recommendation, are you doing it based on merit of that case or are you doing it based on other considerations, is as important as financial integrity.

So, that is something that we started with and we were very particular about ensuring that we keep our aspirations

high, we remain authentic, we maintain transparency, trust, and we are an institution where transactions can happen fast, actions can be taken fast, decisions can be taken fast. And we maintain the highest level possible of integrity, both in financial and non-financial matters. That is what we did for the institution, which is valid for both academic as well as non-academic organisations.

As you said, these things are applicable to all organisations. Let's talk now about ones that are particular to educational institutions.

What is the purpose of an educational institution like IIT Gandhinagar? I would say, two key missions. One is teaching and the other is research. Within teaching, the way we have defined our mission is that we are preparing our students for life. We are giving them skill sets, in addition to the knowledge of the subject. In addition to the mechanical engineering or electrical engineering that they are learning, we are also wanting to give them the skill sets to succeed in life. We have often said that at IIT Gandhinagar we are preparing our students for the last job and not the first job.

At IIT Gandhinagar we are preparing our students for the last job and not the first job.

We have said that we would like our students to have a mission, a goal in life, which is larger than just earning money and getting a job, but something that will impact society, impact the country, impact the community. And they should be motivated and they should be empowered. They should have the skill sets, they should have the preparation to be able to achieve those goals. So that is the key idea that defines our teaching mission.

The Universities have a large role in national security and national prosperity.

The research mission is that we are looking for impactful research. Research that will make a change, that will make a difference, that will impact the subject, impact society. This is becoming very critical, from my point of view, for Indian universities

to appreciate — that they have a huge role in national security and national prosperity. The future wars are not going to be fought only with soldiers and guns; they will also be fought with the technologies and the know-how that will come out of the university. The prosperity will depend a lot on the innovations and the kind of manpower that you are creating. So I would say that we defined our teaching mission and research mission in a fairly broad manner. And we have been consistently following that as our aspiration.

***How do these get operationalized in individual aspects of the institution?
Let's begin with teaching.***

When you talk about teaching, your audience is the students. Right? And quite often, the emphasis on the student tends to be diluted because of the day-to-day pressures of other things. Therefore, at IIT Gandhinagar we have a slogan: Students First. We said we are here for the students. We have to take every decision, keeping in mind how it will impact our students. We also said that if we are preparing our students for the future, then we must treat them as responsible adults and prepare them for the future by

letting them enjoy certain autonomy, letting them take decisions, and be held accountable for those decisions.

At IIT Gandhinagar we have a slogan: Students First.

As you are aware, our undergraduate students typically are 16, 17, 18 years old when they start, and they finish at the age of 20, 21, 22, 23 years. So this is a very important time when the students, especially in the undergraduate program, are transitioning from childhood to adulthood. And we have taken a position that we will treat them as responsible young adults, and we will prepare them to be able to take decisions to navigate life.

On top of that, we had to focus not only on the curriculum and what we are going to teach, how we will teach, but also on co-curricular activities. We feel that both are very important, critically important. And, both in some sense, sometimes are in fact, integrated seamlessly.

Within our system for example, the Foundation Programme that we designed for undergraduate students

or the Aarohan Programme for postgraduate students, are induction programmes that enable the students to settle down at the institute and start with a solid foundation of our expectations. The five-week Foundation Programme, and the two-week Aarohan, both of them, we would consider as curricular as well as co-curricular. We have a somewhat seamless sense of the two.

Let's take these separately, although, as you say, in many ways they are related. Let's talk about the curriculum first. What are things that we have done that reflect these ideas?

The curriculum at any university, any college, in any degree programme, always has this tension of what to teach and what not to teach? The time is limited. The number of courses, the content you can teach, is limited. And the question is what to teach, how much to teach? And the guiding principle that we have followed is that we need students to have breadth as well as depth. We have used the slogan that our students should know something about everything, but they should also know everything about something.

Our students should know something about everything, but they should also know everything about something.

The first statement is about breadth, that they should know a little bit of many things. But the second statement is that they should have a very deep knowledge of at least some things. So our entire curriculum, whether it is undergraduate programme, master's programme, PhD programme, all of them have been designed keeping this philosophy in mind.

There are elements within that, where we give enormous flexibility to students. And that is driven partly by the Student First philosophy you were talking about. Can you speak to that?

We have a very strong emphasis on giving students the freedom to choose the path they want. We feel that it is not important that we check all the boxes that typically are expected in, let's say, a mechanical engineering curriculum. It is okay if a few boxes remain unchecked, as long as the students are doing whatever they're

doing with great interest, with passion, with enthusiasm. Therefore, we designed our curriculum in such a way that students can choose what they want to learn.

It is okay if a few boxes remain unchecked, as long as the students are doing whatever they're doing with great interest, with passion, with enthusiasm.

Therefore, all of our electives in the undergraduate programme are entirely at the discretion of students. They can take all of them in their own branch, they can take all of them outside the branch, they can take all of them in sciences, they can take all of them in humanities and social sciences. So that is the level to which we have provided flexibility and empowered students. And that leads to an interdisciplinary mindset. Now, there is a student of mechanical engineering, who says, "I want to take all my courses in electrical engineering," or "I want to take all my elective courses in computer science or in civil engineering." There's an entire mindset in the student

community that develops that it is okay to be doing a degree in mechanical engineering, but your electives can be in electrical engineering or computer science. That is the kind of flexibility that we have.

Overseas research experience has been very useful so that undergraduate students develop a global mindset, their aspirations go up, they start to look in a more holistic manner to their future.

We also have been very particular that our students should not only study their domain subjects, but they should also have a fair component of humanities and social sciences. So, whether it is our BTech, MTech, or PhD programme, we have insisted on a decent component of humanities and social science to provide a broad educational experience.

Now, when you talk about breadth, these are some of the things that we

do, but then when it comes to depth, how do you provide that depth? So, we have students who can do honours by taking extra courses in their own stream, they can do projects in their own stream, they can do summer internships. In fact, 40% of our undergraduates typically have gone to overseas universities or laboratories for a research project in the summer. The idea was that there should be enough opportunities for students to also chase depth, at least in some areas. This also has been very useful so students develop a global mindset, their aspirations go up, they start to look in a more holistic manner to their future.

One interesting element is that on the one hand we encourage students with these overseas opportunities, alongside we also have schemes institutionally such as the Explorer Fellowship, which is domestically focused. Talk about these co-curricular activities and how they feed into this approach to student development.

When a student is, for example, going to a university in Europe or United States, that student is not only doing 10 weeks or 12 weeks of research, that person is also getting tremendous experience of another

country, another culture, another university, another environment, and that is a very empowering and a growing experience for that student. We similarly felt that we also want our students to understand India, to understand the realities of India, to understand how real India is like.

Therefore, we designed a special fellowship, we call it the Explorer Fellowship, and nearly 40% of our undergraduates participate in the Explorer Fellowship, wherein the students are given Rs 38,000 to travel for 42 days in the summer, across the country, North India, South India, Northeast India. And all their expenses — travel, boarding, lodging — should all be covered within Rs 38,000, which means Rs 900 per day on average, for food, accommodation and train tickets. They are not to take money from their parents, they are not to supplement it with their own personal money, they are not to travel by air, they are not to travel by air conditioned trains.

These are life changing experiences, where the students feel very confident after undertaking this kind of journey, but they also feel that they have insight about how this country works. We've developed a number of such opportunities for our students.

We also have many opportunities for students to lead hostel management. Most of our activities in the hostels are actually managed by students. They are the ones who take decisions. We have a number of student events that are entirely driven by students. Faculty do not supervise them in the sense of traditional university systems. We also have a very strong emphasis on entrepreneurship. We have created an ecosystem where an undergraduate can learn entrepreneurship and possibly try their hands, during student life, at entrepreneurship.

These are all wide opportunities for students, but we have to recognise there is a very diverse student body, some of whom are more motivated than others, who are at different stages. How does the institute deal with this diversity within the student community?

We look at our student body, and perhaps this is true of any university student body, in three baskets. The first basket is the students who have potential for great impact, great leadership, who have potential for doing very well, being successful. That is one end of the spectrum. The other end of the spectrum are the students

who are struggling, who are struggling in their academics, they're struggling in their mental health, their physical health or financial needs, things like that. And then there are students in-between. And we have been very conscious that we need to be able to cater to all these three baskets.

And the way we have done this is that for the first basket, where students have potential, there are things like international opportunities, the Explorer Fellowship, the electives and many other things that come in handy in preparing them for greater success in life.

For the second basket of students who are struggling, we have a very strong emphasis to provide help to them through counselling services for mental health, for physical health. We have a very strong system for providing financial help to students. Some students struggle with the academic programme, and again, we have a number of activities to support students with their academic performance.

We have something called the Guided Progress Scheme (GPS), where the students falling below a certain level of performance are given extra mentoring by faculty. We have a PAL

(Peer Assisted Learning) system, where first year students who are struggling get help from second year students, and things like that. So, we have created a fairly strong system at IIT Gandhinagar, where students struggling in some aspects of mental health, whether it is relationship issues with parents or friends, whether it is physical health, whether it is their financial situation, we provide help to them. And that ensures that all students are able to graduate, and settle down in life, with reasonable comfort.

You mentioned that the institution has two broad pillars: one is the teaching component and the second is the research enterprise. Can you speak to our approach to research?

When you look at research in Indian universities, quite often, the emphasis is on publishing papers, guiding PhDs. We look at the research enterprise from two different lenses. One is research that establishes credentials. If a faculty or a student has published a good paper in a good journal, obviously, they're competent, and therefore the credentials are established. Whether that research is making a difference or not, that is not under discussion at that time.

The second aspect is the impact of that research. And to make that impact it is possible that work may not have been published in a very reputed journal. It may have been straightaway transferred from the laboratory to a company, for example.

So we look at research from two different lenses. One is the impact of that research, and the other how it helps build credentials of people. We believe that younger people, younger faculty or students, need credentials to get opportunities to move forward in life, and therefore they must build credentials, they must publish well, they must publish in good journals.

We have emphasised that in research we are more interested in the quality of research, against quantity.

But as they get established, then they should move from building credentials toward making an impact. And to us, that is very important. And for that reason, we have emphasised that in research we are more interested in the quality of research, against quantity. We would rather have our people

publish fewer, but very high quality, papers, than publish more mediocre quality ones.

One area that is obviously big now in the area of research is interdisciplinarity. Speak to our approaches toward it and the ways we encourage it?

If you go to any seminar or conference on education, everybody preaches about interdisciplinarity. Everybody would be aligned with the idea that the real problems are not basketed into narrow subjects and that they are interdisciplinary. Unfortunately, the way the universities are typically designed along the lines of disciplines, it becomes difficult for them to collaborate and cooperate.

Interdisciplinarity will be at the core of what we do.

That is where we had a great opportunity, because we were starting afresh, with a clean slate, that we had an advantage over the established universities. So, we said interdisciplinarity will be at the core of what we do. What that means

is that when we design buildings, we will design them so it leads to interdisciplinarity. When we hire people, we will hire them in such a manner. When we position our people, position our laboratories, all of that we will do keeping in mind interdisciplinarity.

Let's take an example of that. When we designed our academic buildings, we said we are not designing a mechanical engineering or a civil engineering building. We are not even saying the mechanical engineering floor. We are not even saying these are the mechanical laboratories. We said, our campus will have faculty offices and laboratories, meeting rooms, but they will not be clustered or basketed around a discipline. So you could have a faculty of electrical engineering sitting next to a faculty of mathematics. You could have a laboratory of mechanical engineering sitting next to a laboratory of civil engineering. So that is what we did in hardwiring our infrastructure; our buildings are designed according to that.

The second thing that we did, since we are a new institution, it was very important for us to utilise this opportunity of being a small, younger

Institute, to build a culture where the laboratories, equipment and facilities are not owned by the discipline to the extent that they deny access to them to people from other disciplines. So you could be a chemistry person who could be using the facilities in biology or in physics.

Since we are a new institution, it was very important for us to utilise this opportunity to build a culture.

The other thing that we did, we said our faculty members can ask for multidisciplinary appointments. So you could be hired, for example in electrical engineering, and you could say that I have a strong interest in mathematics or in physics, or whatever subject. And if you show that the interest is genuine, we would put you jointly in those disciplines and the website will show your name against both disciplines. That enables you to attract students not only of the parent discipline, but also other disciplines.

We also took a position on teaching, again that was something that we could do because we are a new school,

which would have been difficult at an older institution. Our faculty members are free to teach any course in any discipline, while being held accountable for the quality of what they teach. So you could be a faculty member in electrical engineering and teach a computer science course or vice versa. We also took this one step further and said you could be a teacher or faculty of one discipline, and your PhD or MTech students could be from another discipline for their thesis. All of that has paid us very rich dividends. We have today almost 13% to 14% of our PhD students whose supervisor is from outside their discipline.

You could be a faculty of one discipline, and your PhD or MTech students could be from another discipline for their thesis.

Let's talk more about PhD students, both in terms of the research points that you've been making, as well as the student approaches that you talked about earlier. Explain how we work with PhD students.

I will start with an explanation of what IIT Gandhinagar aspires from its PhD students. You know, you look at the Indian diaspora, you look at the Indian intellectual landscape, and people take great pride that today Indians are teaching in the best universities around the world. But then, if you look a little closer, you'll notice that the Indians teaching in the world's best universities, providing leadership in various subjects, they really did their undergraduate studies in India, but their doctoral studies were done at overseas universities.

Our aspiration at IIT Gandhinagar is that we will be sitting on the high table of top academic institutions only when our PhD students are able to secure faculty positions at the top institutions in the world. Now, for that to be so, we look at our PhD students' experience at IIT Gandhinagar to be not only outstanding in research, but we want to prepare them for success, for academic leadership, for positions in top institutions. So we have a fairly strong curricular and co-curricular emphasis in our PhD programme.

To begin with, for example, when the students come we have them attend a very rigorous two-week programme to prepare them for the experience they

will have at IIT Gandhinagar. Because, remember, these PhD students have already done their degree, at least undergraduate degree, maybe undergraduate and master's degree, from elsewhere. And they have come with a certain mindset of how colleges work, how universities work. Since we are a different type of institution, with different expectations, it is very important for us to align our incoming students. Our faculty members spend a fairly large amount of time to do that.

We will be sitting on the high table of top academic institutions only when our PhD students are able to secure faculty positions at the top institutions in the world.

We also require strong coursework from our PhD students, because that coursework is what gives them the strength to become faculty later. We require them to do projects as part of the coursework outside their own disciplines. So, you are a PhD student of electrical engineering, but you

have to go to faculty outside electrical engineering to do a three unit independent project.

We have humanities requirements for PhD students. We have a compulsory writing course. Unfortunately, the schooling system in India has been strongly focused on STEM courses, science, engineering, technology and mathematics courses, and there is not enough emphasis on writing skills. So we said our PhD students must go through a compulsory course on writing. We have more recently created a scientific writing certificate, so students are able to show that they are proficient in writing scientific articles.

We have a very robust programme that we developed recently called Future Faculty Programme, where we do workshops for PhD students to prepare them for a faculty position. To give them experience in teaching, we have a Graduate Teaching Fellowship programme where PhD students can independently teach a class or conduct tutorials or even lectures.

And finally, perhaps very unusually for an academic institution, our PhD programme now has a compulsory physical education requirement. They must be physically fit and they must

credit a certain number of hours by being on the playground.

So, I would say that our PhD curriculum has been designed very thoroughly, very thoughtfully, and our faculty members are spending enormous time in preparing our PhD students not just in their own subject, not just in guiding their research, not just in publishing papers, but in preparing them for success.

As you look at the holistic character of graduate education here, talk about the ecosystem within which research has been structured at IIT Gandhinagar.

The ecosystem of research at IIT Gandhinagar has several components. One, you recruit faculty who are passionate about research, who are capable of doing research. Second is to have systems in place, policies in place, to ensure that research is able to progress and high quality research is possible. Now, that requires investment, that requires effort.

So, there are several things that we do: the systems that we have put in place for helping faculty to write research proposals for external agencies, the way we mobilise faculty and support them in writing the proposals. Once

they have the research projects, the enabling environment in which faculty have fairly strong autonomy to spend money in a hassle free environment. If they want to recruit a postdoctoral fellow or a research assistant using the project money, how easy it is for them. All of that has been very carefully designed at this Institute.

We are also investing a fair amount of effort to recruit top students, because ultimately the quality of students makes a difference.

We are also investing a fair amount of effort to recruit top students, because ultimately the quality of students makes a difference. And we have created a number of programmes, like Start Early PhD Programme, Early Admit Master's programmes, and things like that, which enable us to attract outstanding PhD students. We have also created special fellowships, where if a student is not eligible for a regular fellowship for some reason, but our faculty finds that he or she is an outstanding candidate, we can support them through internal money.

We also created a strong postdoctoral culture at the Institute. As I speak to you today, the postdoctoral fellow to faculty ratio is of the order of 75%, which means that for 100 faculty members, there are 75 postdoctoral researchers at the institute. All of that has been very carefully developed by putting up resources, putting money.

We have invested fairly heavily on equipment in laboratories. We give fairly strong financial support to our faculty and students for foreign travel, attending conferences. In fact, 35% of our PhD students spend at least a semester outside India, in a laboratory, in a university outside India. All of these things add to the student's experience and add to faculty research productivity.

We also have a very liberal visiting scholars programme, where professors and researchers and academics from around the world, from India and outside India, are able to come and spend time at IIT Gandhinagar. All of that creates an ecosystem at IIT Gandhinagar for outstanding research.

And that should lead to certain outcomes. So how do we measure outcomes or performance?

One of the standard metrics of measuring research is, of course, publications, the impact factor of those publications, the citations, the H index, and all that stuff. But we have created a more nuanced approach to measuring research. For example, when our faculty members come up for promotion and they tell us that they have supervised five PhD students, we expect them to also tell us how successful those five PhD students are. They will tell us, I guided this particular PhD student, she is now a faculty member at such-and-such University. I guided the second student, she is a postdoc at such-and-such place.

We have created a more nuanced approach to measuring research.

We are not only emphasising the publications, we are also emphasising the quality of PhD students that have graduated from your group. We are also asking questions on what is the impact of your research? Our faculty members are constantly asking themselves the question: Alright, if

I do this, how will it impact society?
How will it impact the economy? How
will it impact the country?

So my feeling is that for a new school,
new college, which is hardly 13-years-
old, these are very good beginnings
and if we continue on that track, we
would start to see significant impact of
our research.

***Any organisation obviously rests
ultimately on its people. What are our
approaches toward how we recruit,
how we manage, how we evaluate the
people that we bring on board?***

As you rightly said, people are the core
of an educational enterprise, unlike
a factory where the manufacturing
plant might make a huge difference.
Somebody who has a more advanced
manufacturing plant is advantaged
versus somebody who has a less
advanced manufacturing plant. At an
educational institution like us, it is the
people. For us, attracting top talent is
the most important thing that we do
actually. It is the most important work.

For us, every person who is working
for IIT Gandhinagar must be the best
or top quality. We are not only saying
that the faculty must be top quality, we
are saying that everybody, whether it
is a security guard, or housekeeping

staff, or clerical staff, or account staff,
everybody must be top quality. And
for that a very simple rule of thumb,
very simple principle is: False positives
are not acceptable, false negatives are
acceptable.

**For us, attracting
top talent is the most
important thing that
we do actually.**

What that means is that if we think this
person is good and we hire that person,
and the person doesn't turn out to be
good, that is a very big problem. On
the other hand, if we denied ourselves
recruiting somebody thinking that this
person is not so good, and later it turns
out that that person joined elsewhere
and turned out to be hugely successful,
that's a false negative. We are willing
to accept that.

We are willing to accept mistakes,
wherein we leave a good person
out, but we are not willing to make
a mistake where a wrong person
joins IIT Gandhinagar. And this is
something that we have done for
faculty, it is what we have done for our
staff. A very classic example is that

IIT Gandhinagar worked without a registrar for many years.

False positives are not acceptable, false negatives are acceptable.

We did not have a registrar. We had our first advertisement, we couldn't find anybody. We had a second advertisement, but we couldn't find anybody. It was only in the third round of advertisement that we were able to recruit our registrar, and until that time we managed without a registrar for almost four or five years. I think that is a reflection of the principle that we would recruit only quality manpower.

Even at the cost of programmes that may be considered important for the institution?

Absolutely! Another example I can give you is of computer science which became a very competitive area of faculty recruitment during the last many years. And we, like any other institution, had difficulty in attracting top computer science faculty.

We said, even though the computer science BTech programme is much in demand, even though the BTech programme of computer science will help us gain very good points on many fronts, like placement salary and later when NIRF ranking started, all of that. We had a very clear idea from day one that we will only recruit quality faculty in computer science. And until such time that we have quality faculty, we will not start a BTech programme. It took us again many years before we started a BTech programme in computer science. I'm not aware of any IIT or any NIT or any institution in the country that took such a long time to start a BTech in computer science.

Once we have these people on board, what is our approach toward managing them?

Well, very simple rule: We want to empower them, we want them to do well, we want them to go places. Sometimes, some of the non-teaching staff get significantly higher positions elsewhere. And initially, there used to be a discussion that our good people are leaving. Our position was, no, that is good! We are recruiting such good people, empowering them, and preparing them so well that they are

being taken by other institutions at several levels higher. That is good. It shows that we are doing well.

Our approach is to build leadership at all levels, to empower at all levels, to add value at every level, whether it is clerical staff, whether it is faculty.

Our position is that we will hire top talent, we will prepare them for the future, we will prepare them for leadership, and we would not mind if they go on to other institutions at significantly higher positions. Our approach is to build leadership at all levels, to empower at all levels, to add value at every level, whether it is clerical staff, whether it is faculty.

If you want to be selective, and as you say in some areas there is obviously difficulty in recruiting people, what efforts does the institution make on recruiting?

Recruiting faculty perhaps was the most difficult problem that I faced when I came in 2009 to IIT

Gandhinagar. We were a second generation IIT, we didn't have a campus with individual research laboratories. Top PhD students were not necessarily applying to us, and therefore not many top faculty candidates were applying to us.

We needed to solve that problem and we solved it by taking multiple approaches. On one side we provided them extra incentives. For example, we started to give top-up salaries. On top of the government salary, we gave money from donations and endowment. We also made very proactive efforts to reach out to potential faculty candidates. We did roadshows. We went to American universities, European universities, Singapore universities, Indian universities, and we talked to postdocs and PhD students, and told them what IIT Gandhinagar could provide them.

We had the backbone of transparency and trust.

We also did something very interesting. Because we had the backbone of transparency and trust, we said we will make faculty

appointments through a Standing Committee that will meet on average once a month. Which means that we had the capability to write appointment letters every month in all disciplines. This is different from what typical Indian institutions do, where selection committees are held with external experts once a year, and sometimes more than a year.

In our case, we said we will do an internal process and make quick appointments for the faculty, and later we can do a selection committee in due course. But we will make an offer quickly based on a standing committee, and that really helped us in picking very high quality faculty at IIT Gandhinagar.

The Institute also diversified in the way that it viewed talent, right?

Yes, that is again, a very interesting point where typical universities in India look at the staff and faculty with a very binary mindset, where either you are a teacher or you are not a teacher. And if you're not a teacher, you are in two streams: either a clerical stream which is clerical, accounts, things like that, or a technical stream, which is laboratories and things like that.

The university enterprise needs all kinds of people, and therefore, we brought people here with somewhat unconventional specialties.

We said that doesn't work. The university enterprise needs all kinds of people, and therefore, we brought people here with somewhat unconventional specialties. We brought people who could provide nuanced management of the campus. For example, we brought somebody who is trained in hotel management to handle our catering and hospitality operations. We brought a number of people who retired from government departments, construction departments, e.g., CPWD, PWD, who could help us in navigating the construction projects.

We brought people from industry who helped us in building industry connections, negotiating with industries. We brought people from a communication background, people from journalism background, to

help us communicate better. So, I would say that we were very aware that as a university we need a diverse set of talent, we need specialists in sometimes unconventional areas that will help in the mission of the university.

We have been talking about people and the different ways that we have approached them. The second leg essential for the institution are the resources one is working with. Can you speak about our approach toward that?

Within resource management, there are two types of resources: one is external and the other is internal. Within external you will say a network of well-wishers, network of friends, network of academic colleagues outside. We have developed that very strongly. Now, when it comes to internal resources, obviously, money is the first thing that you will think about. Money for an academic institution is like blood in a human body. You want plenty of it. But money is not the reason academic institutions exist. We are not here for money. Money is here for us.

What that means is that money will not govern us, we will govern the money.

Money for an academic institution is like blood in a human body.

We will not do something simply because it will bring us money. We will do things that we think should be done, and hopefully if we can also raise money in the process, very good. We have had very large opportunities, large projects, large amounts of money available to us that we declined, because we said we will not be able to do justice with it. We are not finding that the purpose of this money is aligned with how we would like to govern IIT Gandhinagar.

For us money is very important, but we have a nuanced approach toward money, wherein money is to be leveraged by us for diverse purposes. We have a need for money, there's no question about that. But we will not do things for money. Now, how do you manage money?

There are three things that come to my mind. One is that wastages are to be avoided. We don't want any money to be wasted. We don't want to do additional expenditures simply because the money would

otherwise lapse. We have avoided having unnecessarily large manpower for security, for housekeeping, and things like that. We will not allow unnecessary equipment purchase or equipment that is likely to be underutilised or duplicate equipment simply because two people are not willing to share it. So that is one aspect, wastage is to be avoided.

The second thing is: income is to be optimised. The university raises money through various means, whether it is rentals from shops, banks, post office, many other commercial and not so commercial organisations, it is collecting the fee from students, there is interest income on investments. We are very particular about proactively optimising incomes.

IIT Gandhinagar is a public-private partnership, where the government money is used for paying regular bills, and philanthropic money is utilised for supporting excellence.

The third thing that is very important for us is to raise private funds, philanthropic funds and donations. And for that, our principle has been that we at IIT Gandhinagar are a public-private partnership, where the government money, public money is used for paying regular bills, and private money, philanthropic money, donation money is utilised for excellence.

We have done very well on all three fronts. At IIT Gandhinagar, the kind of money that we have raised year after year over the last several years, has been very substantial, even though our alumni started graduating less than 10 years ago and they're still not in a position to give us large donations.

We today feel pride that we offer plenty of financial aid to our students and that has been possible because of the prudent use of money. We take pride that our faculty members are supported fairly liberally in research. Our PhD students are supported in a very liberal manner. All of that is possible because of the management of money and financial resources.

The second thing that is part of the internal resources is the campus, the buildings. And again that has been very important for us, that we would

not like our buildings to be designed by architects as they would design elsewhere. We expected them to design buildings to meet our functional requirements. For example, we said our academic area should be designed in such a way that interdisciplinary research will be encouraged. Our hostels, our academic area, our housing should be designed in a way that people will meet each other. They will socialise with each other. People will have accidental collisions with each other and they will start to talk to each other, and that will help not only in interdisciplinarity, but also building relationships.

People will have accidental collisions with each other and they will start to talk to each other, and that will help not only in interdisciplinarity, but also building relationships.

And finally the equipment, the laboratories. We would rather have less equipment, but high quality.

We have not said, alright, here is the electrical engineering lab and it should have these 10 items. It is okay to have only seven items, but those seven items should be functional, they should be high quality, and they should last. So that's how we have actually managed the resources.

I guess we have people, we have resources, and we bring them together through our culture and governance practices. What have been the drivers there?

I think of the three things, the people, the resources and the culture and governance. The last is perhaps the most important, and something that we in Indian academia don't pay enough attention to. I would start out with culture and governance where the leadership, whether it is leadership at the institute level, at dean's level, at the discipline level, at the assistant registrar, a particular unit level, the leadership is accountable for outcomes.

Leadership at any level must be held accountable for outcomes.

Leadership is not meant for only following processes and procedures. We would not like to say that, alright, I was expected to do this, I did it; if the results come or not, I will not be held accountable for results. That is not acceptable for us. We would like results, we would like outcomes. Now, that sometimes has meant that we go against conventional wisdom and against conventional practices of how institutions are run. But to us, the leadership at any level must be held accountable for outcomes.

Can you give us an example of defying convention in things that we have done?

I can give a very simple example: when you look at how the new institutions typically develop, they follow the old institutions, and they start with the appointment of heads of departments. You would have three or four faculty members in a particular department of chemistry or math or civil engineering, and one of them will be appointed as head of the department. And we don't think that such a person would be held accountable, would be able to be responsible for outcomes. If out of three young assistant professors or three new faculty members, one of them is made head of the department,

we don't see how that is providing leadership.

So, we went against the unconventional practice, and we said we will not appoint heads of departments for every discipline, like chemistry or physics or mechanical engineering or electrical engineering. Rather, we will appoint one head of the department for all engineering disciplines, and this person will be ensuring that all the engineering faculty are doing well and all the engineering programmes are doing well.

Participatory governance is what educational institutions are designed for. How are we structured there? How is it playing out?

Shared governance, participatory decision making, all of that flows from the first item that I said to you, where the leadership is accountable for outcomes. What does it mean? It means that we have a lot of discussions with concerned stakeholders, and we hopefully create a consensus. But if consensus is not developed, we will still have to take a decision. And it may take not one meeting, it may take three meetings or four meetings, but we will take a decision.

And once that decision is taken, we expect everybody who participated in that discussion to wholeheartedly support it. If five of us sat together and two of us felt that we should be going south, we would have as many meetings as necessary to convince these people to go north. But maybe we will not be able to convince them, maybe they will still believe that they should go south. We expect that once a decision is taken that we go north, these two colleagues, who are firm believers that we should go south, will now support and participate in the process of taking the Institute north. Because if they don't do so, they will be neutralising the effort of the people who are taking the Institute north. To us, shared governance does not mean people running in all directions. It does not mean people pulling the Institute in different directions. It means that we have a lot of discussions. There will be enough autonomy, enough delegation, enough freedom to take decisions. But everybody will be aligned in the end for implementation. And there will be widespread discussions.

For example, when we designed our campus, we would have students sitting, faculty members sitting, staff members sitting with the architects.

And we would have whole day meetings. We did something like 40 or 50 meetings with architects, running from morning 9:30 to 5:00 or 6:30 in the evening. Every Tuesday was blocked for campus design meetings, where in a workshop mode, students, faculty, staff would sit together with the architects. And they would share their views, share their input and together we would say this is what we want, this is acceptable, this is not acceptable. To us, this is a very important development that has happened at IIT Gandhinagar, to build that culture of discussions for decision making.

**There will be
enough autonomy,
enough delegation,
enough freedom to
take decisions. But
everybody will be
aligned in the end for
implementation.**

An educational institution obviously has several constituencies: we have staff, we have students, we have faculty. What has the institute done in engaging and creating seamlessness in

the experience of people across these groups?

See, institutions like us, would not grow well, if the relationships between people are not healthy and they are not contributing to the growth of the individual and growth of the institution. So for us relationship management has been an extremely important agenda. Now, relationship management means collegiality between different types of students, different groups of students, undergraduates versus postgraduate students, science versus engineering students, humanities versus science students, female students versus male students, senior students versus junior students. To us, all of those relationships are extremely important. Faculty to student relationships are very important. Faculty to staff relationships are very important. Student to staff relationships are important.

Relationship management has been an extremely important agenda.

When you start to build these

relationships, you start to communicate that we look for collegiality, we want people to be respectful of each other. They may have differences of opinion, but they cannot pull each other down, or humiliate or insult other people. That enabled us to create a seamless environment of community where the distinction between a teacher and non-teaching staff starts to get blurred. Where who is a student and who is a teacher, that difference starts to get blurred. And I believe that we have taken seamlessness to such a fine level that today you would have difficulty trying to figure out who is the staff and who is a teacher. You may have difficulty in figuring out who is a permanent staff and who is a temporary staff or a contract staff or an outsourced staff. That is something that has paid us a very rich dividend, and I think that has been a very important element of our success.

Give us some examples on the student side. You were mentioning graduate and undergraduate students or hostel life?

Well, if you go to any university in India, especially undergraduate colleges, you will see the girls' hostels

to be totally isolated from the boys' hostels. Postgraduate hostels to be totally different from undergraduate hostels. Many universities now have international hostels for international students. At IIT Gandhinagar, there are no such separations. We have different hostel blocks. And we might say, this hostel block is for girls and this hostel block is for boys. If there is a situation that requires it, we might even say that these two floors of the same block are for girls and these two floors are for boys. We have, for example, the same mess. They all eat food in the same place, whether they are boys or

The seamlessness in the student body that we have tried to inculcate has worked extremely well.

girls, undergraduate or postgraduate, seniors or juniors.

In student governance, we do not worry whether you are an undergraduate or postgraduate. I would say that the seamlessness in the student body that we have tried to inculcate has worked extremely well. The relationship between our

undergraduates and postgraduates is exemplary. Typically at institutions there is always a tension between undergraduates and graduates and we don't see that tension at IIT Gandhinagar.

We're talking about the internal community right now. Let's talk also about how we have engaged external stakeholders.

This is a very interesting question. If you look at a college, what does it have? It has a campus: it has buildings, it has laboratories, classrooms, equipment. It has people: it has teachers, staff, students. It has money and it is doing some work: teaching, research. That is the ecosystem, that is what the university consists of. Quite often, all of our effort is focused on managing this enterprise. That means we tend to be inward looking: focusing primarily on how to manage our classes better, how to manage our students better, how to manage curriculum better, how to declare our results on time, and how to conduct our exams well.

But frankly, if you think about it, all the nutrition for this internal system is coming from outside. When you recruit a PhD student, that PhD student

is coming from another university. When you recruit a faculty, that faculty member is coming from outside. When you want to bring new money for research, that is coming from outside. When you look at philanthropic money, that is coming from outside. When you look at new ideas, when you look at interesting problems to solve, when you're looking for societal impact, all of that is residing outside the university.

And therefore at IIT Gandhinagar, we have been very clear that because we have built a good culture, we have built good relationships. Therefore our effort, leadership effort, the director's effort, the deans' efforts in managing the internal system is minimised. And the time that frees up is now utilised by them for external engagement. It enables us to go outside, to well-wishers, to friends, to industries, to philanthropic organisations, to foundations, to universities in India, outside India, colleges, schools, and bring that nutrition from outside into the institute.

And we have done a lot of phenomenal work in this direction. Just to give an example, we created a leadership conclave where once every year we sit from morning till evening with a

large number of external eminent individuals to seek guidance and debate some of the critical strategic questions that IIT Gandhinagar faces.

We created a leadership conclave where once every year we sit from morning till evening with external eminent individuals to seek guidance and debate some of the critical strategic questions that IIT Gandhinagar faces.

We created an Academic Advisory Council, comprising eminent academics, which again meets once a year to discuss serious academic issues. We created Discipline Advisory Committees, where every discipline, whether mechanical engineering or biology, they have a set of colleagues, eminent colleagues from outside the institute, who come, sit here, review how well they're doing, discuss, give suggestions, give ideas.

So, we have really engaged these external stakeholders. We have engaged with individuals who have given us large donations. We have engaged with public sector companies, government organisations who have given us CSR money, for example. So all of that has been very useful to us, very important for us.

Alumni for any educational institution are a very important group. But as you know, our alumni are fairly young. They have not had enormous financial success at this stage of their lives. What has driven IITGN's approach toward engaging with its alumni and for what purpose?

Alumni engagement has multiple purposes. One of them, obviously, is that alumni will be brand ambassadors. If they do well, the Institute will do well. So by engaging with them, you can contribute to their success in some ways. But you can also look at them to contribute to IIT Gandhinagar's success by providing resources, by providing connections, by providing opportunities, by providing funds. But there are yet other very interesting aspects of alumni engagement. Alumni engagement can be a thermometer

that tells how well you are treating your students. If you have treated your students well, your alumni will be engaged. If your students are being treated shabbily, they will not be engaged. They will not give you Rs 100, forget about a lakh rupees, if they were treated badly.

Alumni engagement can be a thermometer that tells how well you are treating your students.

So to us, alumni engagement is extremely important on both counts: the alumni being a thermometer, being a measurement, a sensor of how well we are doing. And also in terms of them providing mentoring, providing opportunities to our students, providing useful connections with industry, providing us donations, and establishing scholarships, and things like that. And we have done a phenomenal job with that. In fact, in the financial year 2020-21, 55% of our alumni made a donation, an exceptional ratio. I'm not aware of any university anywhere in the world, which would have 55% of its

alumni body, undergraduate and postgraduate included, making a financial contribution. I think this is extraordinary. And it is a reflection of our alumni's engagement with the Institute, alumni's affection for the Institute, and also a reflection of the alumni's positive experience when they were students here.

Let's talk about some of the other governing practices relating to empathy and social sensitivity, which are also drivers at the institution. Can you speak to those and some non-traditional practices in this area at IITGN?

The way I would look at empathy is as individuals we have our own difficulties, we have our own problems, we all go through difficult stages in our life. Are we looking at our people as precious individuals who come with their own difficulties, who come with their own problems? Or are we just looking at them mechanically, that here is a clerk who is supposed to do this, has he done it or not? What is happening in his life is not our concern?

I think we are a very empathetic institution, where we worry about our people, about their well-being. We

go out of the way to make it easier for people to do well. If they're having certain difficulties, we try to help them. We are sensitive to their needs. There may be a mother who has to send the child to school at a certain time and may need adjustment of the arrival or reporting time at IIT Gandhinagar. We are very happy to do that. In fact, there is no fixed time at which staff, clerical staff or account staff, must report. This was done primarily thinking sensitively that we have a good number of young faculty, young staff, both male and female, who may have difficulties in maintaining a fixed schedule of coming to office at 9:00 am. Maybe the child needs to go to school at a certain time and they may be more comfortable coming at 9:30 am, while somebody else may be more comfortable coming at 10:00 am or 9:00 am. So all of that is there.

We are a very empathetic institution, where we worry about the well-being of our people.

But, we don't lose sight of the larger mission. We will not give promotion

to somebody because she says or he says, “Oh, I went through some family difficulty therefore my performance was poor.” That we will not do. We will not give a promotion to somebody saying that I have a health problem and therefore I could not publish papers or I could not do research. So within the framework that we are not showing special concessions to individuals for their difficulties in their career progression, in their confirmation, and their status as an employee, we go all out to support our people.

You had mentioned earlier, when we were talking about students, about the confidence that you have in them. But there is a broader philosophy institutionally about trusting youth and empowering youth. Can you speak to that?

Yes, I think if there's something that defines IIT Gandhinagar very differently from other academic institutions, it is our trust in youth. We have extraordinary trust in young people. Many of my colleagues have heard me say from time to time that the older generation always underestimates the younger generation. But it is a fact that the younger generation, by principles

of biological evolution, is smarter than the older generation. And we at IIT Gandhinagar have followed that principle, where we trust young colleagues.

We have extraordinary trust in young people.

We have had people in their 20s who have chaired our faculty search committee. We had a young assistant professor as dean of campus construction. We have had young faculty on their first job, within a couple of years, holding associate deanship or deanship. So whether it is students, whether it is staff, whether it is faculty, we give responsibility to young people and not hold their lack of experience against them. We see the skill set. We see if they're capable of delivering something. We do not use seniority as the rationale or the reason for giving a responsibility to somebody; we give responsibility based on capability. And that is something that we have done very consistently and it has paid us very rich dividends in how well the institute is managed, because now we are choosing people based on their capabilities.

I can give an example: one of our deans was an assistant professor and the associate dean working with him was an associate professor. This once surprised a bureaucrat, who wondered aloud how it is that your dean is an assistant professor, but your associate dean working for him is a higher designation person? Our logic was that the deanship is based on capacity, capability, skill sets in dealing with complex administrative issues, while academic titles are meant for recognising your academic credentials, and these two need not be aligned always. So that is what our philosophy has been and we've been very consistent. We have done it well, we have not had any murmurs or disagreements with people saying, "Hey, you are not considering me even though I'm senior, and you're giving the responsibility to junior people." I think our people have accepted that very well.

You often say "Trust, but verify". So how are you managing or assessing performance?

Often I have said that people become how they are treated. If I treat somebody as trustworthy, they're likely to become trustworthy. If I don't trust

them, and I'm always looking over their shoulders, they will not become trustworthy.

People become how they are treated.

So, our approach has been that to begin with, we will trust you, unless you prove yourself unworthy of that trust. Now, when we trust somebody, it does not mean that we don't have the privilege or the right to verify whether you are trustworthy or not. Whether your actions are aligned with values and ethos of the university. So, that is how we have looked at the issues of trust.

We give fairly strong autonomy at all levels, whether it is students, whether it is staff, whether it is faculty, based on trust. And I would say that our people have responded extremely well and have not let us down. In fact, we have hardly any problems because of people abusing that trust.

You had mentioned earlier in the context of recruitment, looking at long term versus short term pressures. What are other examples institutionally of

paying a price in the short term for long term gain?

We have to remember that IIT Gandhinagar is going to be in existence for 100 years, 300 years. So, today when we are laying the foundation of IIT Gandhinagar, we have an enormous responsibility of building the ethos, culture, and foundation for hundreds of years. That sense of responsibility drives us to say, we will rather go for the long term benefit. If short term benefit is going to compromise long term benefit, we will not take it.

If short term benefit is going to compromise long term benefit, we will not take it.

We have done that in so many ways. We, for example, did not recruit mid-career faculty. It was very hard to find mid-career faculty. Why would somebody who is doing extremely well at another institution want to come to IIT Gandhinagar? Very hard. But then, conventional wisdom said that you need mid-career faculty for deans, for administrators. We said, well, in

the short term it is good, but in the long term, these people will become liabilities because they're unhappy elsewhere. They are coming here, they're bringing their unhappiness with them. So we said we would rather work without mid-career faculty. We would work with senior citizens or with younger faculty.

We have similarly taken time to design the campus. We have taken time to acquire the land. We have taken time to procure the laboratory equipment. We have not compromised our long term interests under the pressure of exigencies. Sometimes there was pressure from our own colleagues that we are not recruiting faculty fast enough. It meant that our faculty members had to teach a little more. It meant that we were understaffed. But we would not recruit faculty or non faculty under pressure.

Many times our selection committees for clerical positions, for officers positions, they draw blanks, because we would rather not have somebody who is not going to add to us in the long term, even though they may solve our short term problem.

Another value that is prized institutionally is inclusivity. Can you speak about what that means and how it is reflected?

What is inclusivity? To us, the slogan that we have at IIT Gandhinagar is: Nobody owns IIT Gandhinagar, but everybody owns it. What that means is, we are not going to deny IIT Gandhinagar access to students, faculty, staff who are outside the Institute.

Nobody owns IIT Gandhinagar, but everybody owns it.

We have a very strong belief that as a publicly funded institution, our commitment goes beyond the students who are registered at IIT Gandhinagar as our regular students. And that is how we created a special programme, called non-degree student programme, where students from other colleges can come and spend a semester or a year at IIT Gandhinagar, as if they were our own students.

We created programmes where faculty members from other colleges, other institutions can come and teach here. We made our facilities,

laboratories open to people outside the institution. To us inclusivity goes very deep as a core value of the Institute. We will engage with anybody who has something to contribute. We will engage with anybody who has something to benefit from the Institute. People from outside, they can just walk into our library, use the library and borrow books from the library.

We also have social welfare programmes, whether for our workers or in neighbouring villages. Can you speak to the driver and the thinking behind those?

This is again a very unique proposition of IIT Gandhinagar: the sense of social responsibility. Very early in the life of the Institute, if I remember correctly, it might have been 2010 or 2011, our Board of Governors approved a formal policy on social responsibility and outreach to the underprivileged sections of the community. We feel that as a publicly funded institution we must be socially responsible. We must not only contribute to the underprivileged sections of the community as well as people in the neighbouring communities, but also train and sensitise our students to

the challenges that communities and people face.

A very unique proposition of IIT Gandhinagar is the sense of social responsibility.

We run a number of social welfare activities. One of our very important activities is the Centre for Creative Learning (CCL), where our colleagues work proactively to teach science and math to school students and teachers. It has been a hugely successful program. We run, as mentioned earlier, a non-degree programme where students from other engineering colleges can come and study. We, in fact, just developed an arrangement with the Government of Gujarat under which government colleges of Gujarat can send their students to study at IIT Gandhinagar. We have programs for teachers from other Indian colleges to come to IITGN.

We have a very strong commitment to the welfare of our construction workers. If you go to a typical construction site in our country, you will see shanties and very

pathetic housing conditions for construction workers. We thought it is not acceptable or dignified for an institution to have its construction work done by people whose hard work will make the buildings, but who themselves will live in such pathetic conditions. We put special emphasis and worked with CPWD to make sure that our construction workers live in dignified housing, with proper sanitation, toilets, water supply, electricity, and gas connection. That is something we are very proud of. We provide medical help. Our health centre runs medical camps in construction workers' colonies. We have arrangements so that construction workers can walk into our health centre and ask for medical check-ups or medicine.

We make sure that our construction workers live in dignified housing, with proper sanitation, toilets, water supply, electricity, and gas connection.

We have engaged with neighbouring villages and provided special attention to them during the COVID crisis. We sometimes run medical camps in these villages. For us, all of that has been very important, both because it is a good thing to do, but also because it enables us to prepare our students to play a more positive role in their lives.

Social engagement enables us to prepare our students to play a more positive role in their lives.

You just mentioned the pandemic and that has created circumstances for a real life test of the values and ethos and community that you have been speaking about. How did they get reflected in the way the COVID crisis was managed on campus.

My colleagues and students have often heard from me, “If you want to know how strong a family is, how good a family is, watch their behaviour when a child is born, when a wedding takes place, or when a death takes place.” The worst and best

of human beings comes out during stressful conditions: positive stress or negative stress. I would say that the COVID crisis was one such test for IIT Gandhinagar. It brought the best out of IIT Gandhinagar. It brought out all the things that we discussed as the values and culture of IIT Gandhinagar.

COVID crisis brought the best out of IIT Gandhinagar. It brought out all the things that we discuss as the values and culture of IIT Gandhinagar.

How did we start? We started with telling students, before the lockdown, that “We have always treated you as adults, we will continue to treat you as adults. Which means that we will not tell you to go home, we will not tell you to vacate the hostels”. We were among the very few, very rare institutions that took a bold step that we will not force our students to leave. We will not even advise them to leave, forget about forcing them to leave. I have told you

many times that we have extraordinary trust in our youth.

We had trust in our students. We had trust in our young wardens and deans who were managing student affairs and were able to manage it all. We had a lot of community spirit, where the students ran the Control Room 24/7, not only for themselves but for the entire community. The construction workers could call the control room and say that I am having this difficulty.

We had a lot of volunteerism, whether you are a professor or staff, or a parent or spouse of staff, who volunteered their time to ensure that everybody is safe and comfortable, that their needs are being met. When the second wave came, we had a huge number of infections on campus, as many other campuses did. We ran a large isolation facility for mild and moderate cases of Covid infections. We treated almost 240 patients in-house on campus, of which about half of them (120+) were students. We received tremendous appreciation from parents and students, saying how well we handled them. All that was possible because of the values and culture that we have built. We had at that time no full-time doctor at the Institute. We only had two nursing

staff when we started to handle the second wave. By the time we finished the second wave, we had three nursing staff, one full-time contract doctor. We still managed it. Our classroom staff members volunteered. They worked there because the classrooms were not being used.

I would say that the COVID crisis management on the campus is a very fine example of a community coming together and showing its best side, and is a strong endorsement of what we have developed at IIT Gandhinagar.

We are still 13 years young. So there remains unfinished business for us as an institution.

As an academic institution, you will always have an unfinished agenda. I feel very uncomfortable if I am at an academic institution whose leadership makes a presentation which has only positive things to say and doesn't have unfinished items. That doesn't say, "We need help here, we need resources there. We need to do this, we are trying to do this." So I would hope and wish that as I speak to you Achal after 13 years, my successors who will talk to another Achal after 30 years or 60 years or 140 years, will always have an unfinished agenda.

They should have an unfinished agenda, because there is no upper limit to quality. There is no upper limit to the heights to which academic institutions can reach. So, it is in that context that I say that we have a huge unfinished agenda. We have to be the Taxila and Nalanda of 21st century India, where people from around the world will aspire to come and learn and teach and work.

We would like to be the future top-tier institution in the world. We would like to be the best in the world, and for that we have a lot of work to do. My hope and wish and desire is that the IIT Gandhinagar community does not become complacent by its success and remains hungry for the future and for doing better.

Now, if I have to still put my finger on a few things that I think are more urgently unfinished, more urgently requiring the attention of my immediate successors, I would say that it is very easy to take things down, but very difficult to take them up. To move things up requires a lot of pain and hard work. If you have a boulder and you wish to move the boulder up the mountain, it is a lot of hard work. But if you want to move the boulder down, it is very easy. You can just slip

the boulder a little bit, and it will come tumbling down.

I would say that it is most important to preserve the core values of the institute, what it stands for. We have departed from our peer institutions so much that there will always be temptation to emulate other institutions and compromise our core values. That will be very unfortunate. If we were to lose our focus on quality, the quality of experience of people, the quality of the enterprise in every aspect, it would be unfortunate. So that would be one.

**We have been working
with moving targets.
We will never be
satisfied.**

The second, as I alluded already, is that we have been working with moving targets. We will never be satisfied. We cannot be satisfied. If we have set a certain target and have achieved it, our target has to go up. We have to do even better.

We also have to have a stronger framework for feedback collection, data collection, and data analysis.

Because to me, data speaks. Somebody says we are doing well, I am very happy. Give me the data. Why do you say that you are doing well? Somebody says that my department is top. I am very happy. Show me the data that your department is top. I think that we have done some work, but we have to do a lot more work on data collection, data management, and data evaluation. Let the data speak on where we are and how well we are doing.

Having invested so much emotion, time, and effort of young faculty, young staff, senior citizens, the effort that people have put into IIT Gandhinagar is extraordinary. The young people in their late 20s, 30s, they have really worked very hard and with a positive frame of mind. We must now start to see some results of that.

I expect to see something very tangible come out, because all this is not a reward in itself. If we have created a collegial environment, if we have created a good mechanism for interdisciplinary research, then now that interdisciplinary research should show something worthwhile, that became possible because we created this environment.

I am hoping to see in my lifetime, IIT Gandhinagar showing many singular successes, because we have laid a very strong foundation.

I am hoping to see in my lifetime, IIT Gandhinagar showing many singular successes, because we have laid a very strong foundation. I would like to see our faculty members being recognised with top awards, top fellowships, not just nationally but internationally.

I would like our students to show successes in public service, in entrepreneurship, in academia, in industry. I would like IIT Gandhinagar to be able to say that, “Here is the product that we have developed that 1 billion people in the world are using.” IIT Gandhinagar should be able to say that the technology we developed has changed the game in such-and-such field.

I think today, IIT Gandhinagar is at an important juncture. We have laid a very strong foundation and have collected an extraordinary set of people. We have the seed for making

IIT Gandhinagar reach a point where we would all look back and say, “We all worked for it, and we have been successful.”

Finally Sudhir, can you share your vision for IIT Gandhinagar?

My vision for IIT Gandhinagar is that its transformative academic experience and governance practices will help reshape the higher education landscape of India.

My vision for IIT Gandhinagar is that its transformative academic experience and governance practices will help reshape the higher education landscape of India.



INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY GANDHINAGAR

PALAJ, GANDHINAGAR 382 055

www.iitgn.ac.in

