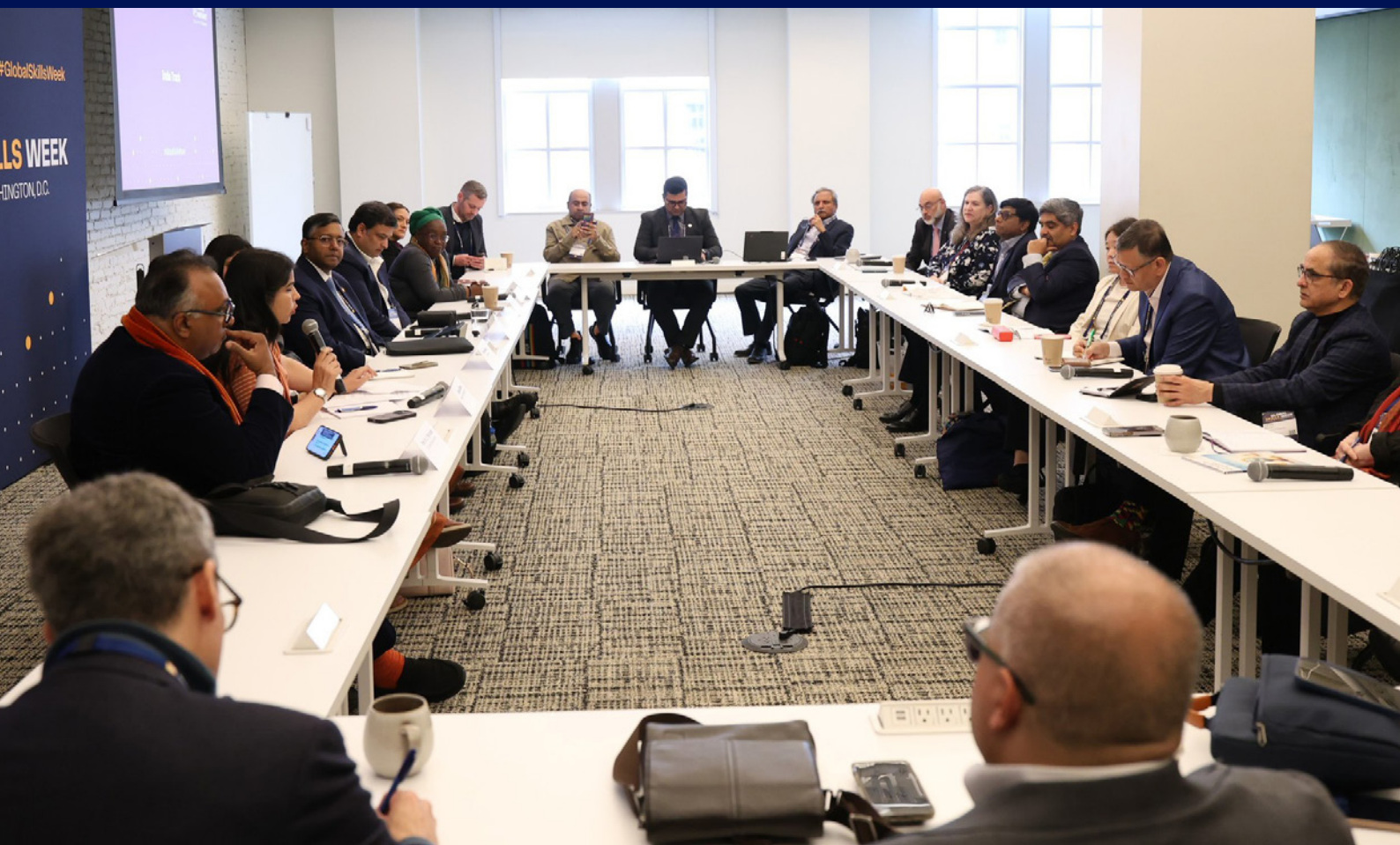
India's Rising Role in Global Higher Education and Skills Development

GLOBAL SKILLS WEEK

MARCH 25 – 26 2026
WASHINGTON, D.C.



India is undergoing a transformative shift in its higher education and skills ecosystem, positioning itself as a central player in the global knowledge economy. With approximately 43 million students enrolled across more than 50,000 colleges and over 1,000 institutions, India is already home to one of the largest higher education systems in the world. Coupled with a demographic advantage — nearly 60% of its population is under the age of 35 — the country is uniquely poised to shape the future of global talent and skills.

Exploring India's Skills Transition

We convened an expert panel of speakers at Global Skills Week held in Washington D.C. to explore deepening opportunity and collaboration between the US and India:

Co Chairs:

Dr Ashwin Fernandes, QS Chair & Vice President, Strategic & International Engagement

Charu Malhotra, MD & Founder, Primus Partners

Speakers:

Shri Kaustubh Dhavse, Chief Advisor to the Honorable Chief Minister (Investments & Strategy), Government of Maharashtra, India

Sunayna Dabas, First Secretary, Embassy of India, Washington D.C.

Professor (Dr) C. Raj Kumar, Founding Vice-Chancellor, O.P. Jindal Global University

Dr Fanta Aw, Executive Director and CEO, NAFSA

PRIMUS PARTNERS®
Solutions for Tomorrow

"India is transitioning from being a global talent pipeline to a co-architect in how we are defining the skills landscape," said Dr Ashwin Fernandes as he set the scene for a discussion on how to manage the dizzying pace of transformation in the world's most populated country and fastest growing economy. From an education perspective, it is India's National Education Policy which has acted as a "catalyst" for progress in education, which, as Charu Malhotra, MD & Founder, Primus Partners said, would ultimately drive "industrial competitiveness and job creation".

The Scale of Opportunity in India

There is a "capacity issue" for higher education in India, with 14 new universities needed every week until 2035 to meet the ambitious national enrolment target. International branch campuses in India provide an opportunity to build an equitable partnership with established, research-intensive international universities. Shri Kaustubh Dhavse, Chief Advisor to the Honorable Chief Minister (Investments & Strategy), Government of Maharashtra, described the opportunity to open international branch campuses as "outstandingly large".

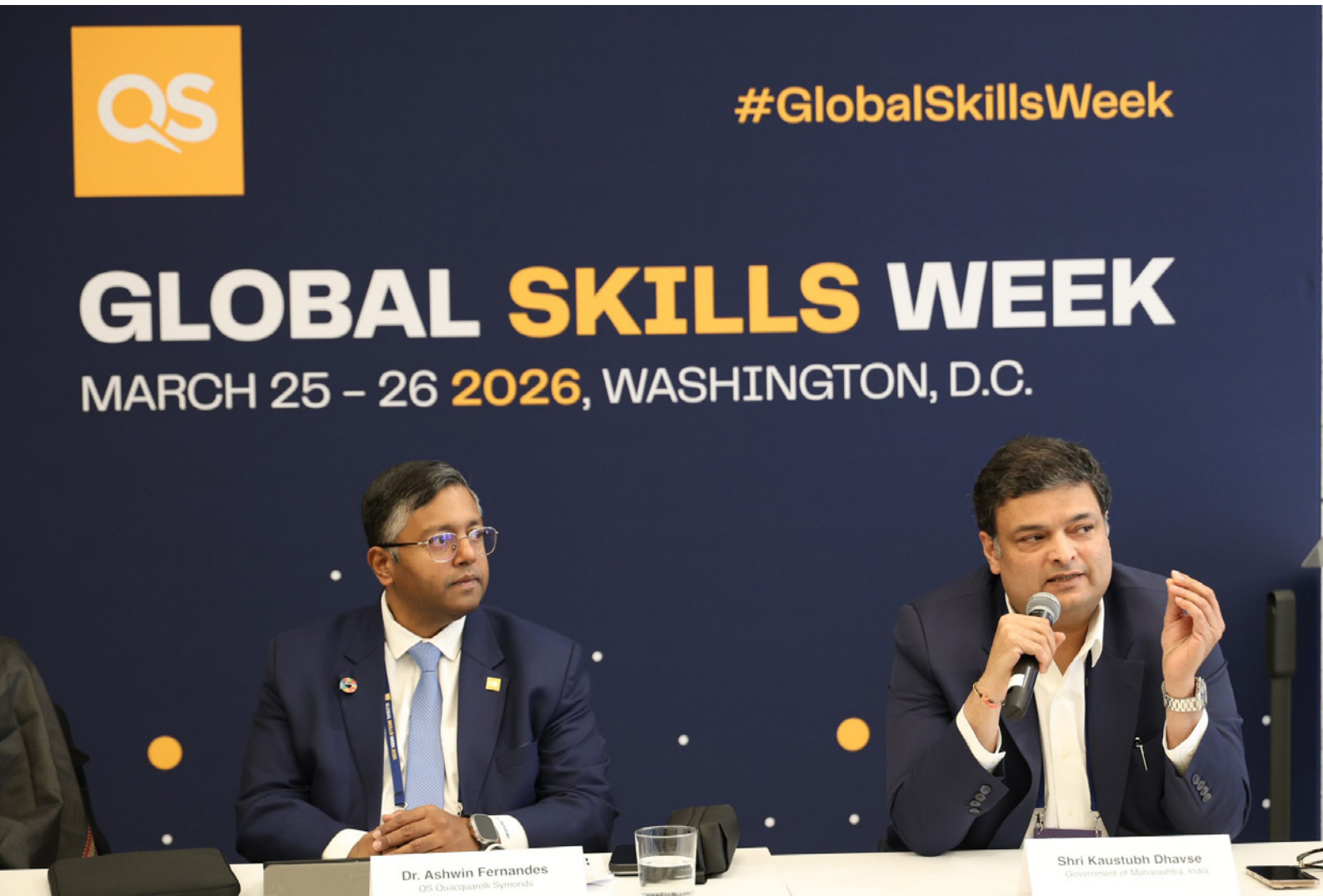
Seven foreign universities have chosen Maharashtra as their Indian campus location, including the University of York and the University of Western Australia.

The state has developed what Dhavse called a "scalable model", including a large education hub, called International EduCity, near Navi Mumbai International Airport, designed to host dozens of universities with shared infrastructure and reduced upfront capital requirements. Each of the universities which establish a campus here, he continued, can have full freedom of what programmes they run, the fees they want to charge and full freedom on every single aspect. He added: "Our goal is extremely clear, we think for students they can avail themselves of the same education they would have eventually had in the destination country. We also believe this is an opportunity to come together and develop an area which India has been weak in and that is research."

Dhavse explained that Maharashtra is India's leading economic hub, accounting for around 15% of the national economy valued at approximately $660 billion and has recorded growth of about 10.2% CAGR over the past seven years. With 65% of its population under the age of 27, the state reflects what Dhavse described as "the youngest nation on this planet." It is a leader across multiple sectors, from manufacturing and agriculture to finance, has more start-ups registered than any other Indian state and is home to a growing number of huge data centres.

Reflecting on the state's development over the past decade, Dhavse noted that these advances did not exist prior to 2014, when the Honorable Prime Minister Narendra Modi, set in motion a dedicated department focused on skills and entrepreneurship. He explained that this was a vision to ensure India is preparing to be "future ready" amid the many emerging skills as a result of continuous technological and sectoral shifts. Preparing for the future of skills, he said, remains "a constant challenge" that state and government policymakers are facing.

With the International EduCity model Dhavse emphasised that the state offers international-quality education at significantly lower cost — sometimes as little as 40% of studying abroad — while also strengthening research capacity and local employment ecosystems. The broader ambition, he concluded, is to ensure students can access global opportunities at home while positioning Maharashtra as a leading centre for education, innovation, and research. He described the opening of international campuses using this model as a "win-win" for everyone.



Why India Has a Leading Role in Global Skills Development

Professor (Dr) C. Raj Kumar set out five reasons why India is a global leader in skills development:

1. Democracy is institutionalised and embedded in the country's civic and political culture.
2. India is home to the world's largest population of 1.4 billion people.
3. The low-cost access to education in India is an example of the country's frugal innovation.
4. Indian higher education is an "extraordinary collection of talent" with more than 45 million in the education system.
5. A deep commitment to excellence, with policy level intervention from the very top of government.

"India is a very complex country," he said. "The reality is that regulatory architecture doesn't always match the expectations of the people who want to make things happen. If you want to engage with India, you need to recognise that you don't only need to partner with institutions but to work towards the regulatory processes and ensure that you are engaging in the best possible way." He also listed challenges with building meaningful industry-academia partnerships, the need for a stronger apprenticeship and vocational education pathways – citing the strength of US community colleges as a world-leading example – and the need to utilize digital learning platforms to bring scale to learning opportunities.

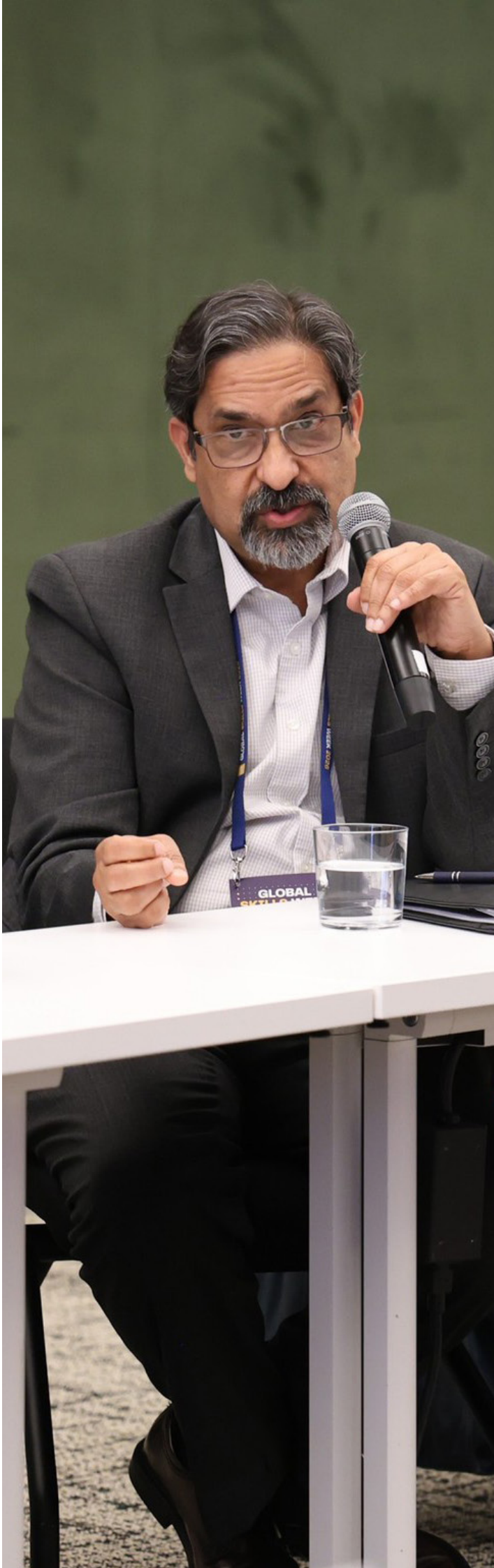
Key drivers of India's competitive advantage in the skills economy

Dr Fanta Aw, CEO of NAFSA, invited the room to consider the potential breadth of transnational education opportunities and urged them to think about the value of putting joint research initiatives at the front and center. She said: "We need to identify and be very specific about the five most prominent areas of shared research interest between the US and India. There are institutions here in the US who I think will be very open to those conversations." Dr Aw – echoing the same sentiments as Professor Kumar – advocated 'tripling efforts' on the engagement of a community college model in India. She also talked about the power of the Indian diaspora, which she described a 'bridge' to enabling India-US partnerships at scale and a way to improve understanding in the US of how fast India is undergoing transformation at scale.

Summary of Roundtable Discussions

- Universities globally are facing a common challenge of staying relevant, with a clear shift from delivering knowledge to ensuring graduates are employable through practical skills, critical thinking, and problem-solving capabilities.
- There is a growing need to redesign curricula toward a "T-shaped" model that combines deep specialisation with broad interdisciplinary exposure, particularly integrating AI across fields like law, healthcare, agriculture, and governance.
- Traditional degree pathways are being questioned as learners increasingly prefer flexible, short-term, skills-focused options such as micro-credentials that lead more quickly to employment outcomes.
- The profile of learners is diversifying, with countries like the US focusing heavily on reskilling non-traditional, mid-career learners, while India faces the challenge of educating a large, young population at scale.
- Employability and alignment with industry needs are now pivotal, requiring universities to work closely with industry and communities to ensure graduates can directly contribute to economic development.
- Rapid technological change, especially AI, is driving both job losses and job creation, creating an urgent need for large-scale upskilling and reskilling, particularly for mid-career professionals who risk being left behind.
- Research collaboration is seen as essential but remains difficult due to funding constraints, intellectual property concerns, and the challenge of building sustainable, long-term partnerships across institutions and countries.
- International collaboration models are evolving beyond branch campuses toward joint degrees, credit transfers, co-teaching, and hybrid engagement, though barriers like bureaucracy, faculty shortages, and regulatory differences persist.
- Scaling education, especially in India, is a major constraint due to limited faculty and infrastructure, pushing institutions toward online and hybrid models as a way to expand access efficiently.
- Governments are increasingly recognizing the importance of education and research, with initiatives like large-scale funding programs, but investment levels still lag behind global averages and need further consideration.

- Skills development must be multi-layered to address diverse societal needs, ranging from vocational training to advanced scientific research, as a single uniform approach cannot meet the demands of a complex economy.
- There is a strong emphasis on building internal capacity within countries like India rather than relying heavily on diaspora or external support, while still engaging in global partnerships, where beneficial.
- Significant opportunities exist in areas such as executive education, vocational models, AI-driven learning, and industry-integrated programs, particularly when supported by targeted funding and collaboration frameworks.
- Ultimately, institutions that adapt to a more flexible, skill-oriented, and industry-aligned model of education will remain relevant, while those that fail to evolve risk losing their value in the eyes of students and employers.



Pledges from the India Track

- Invest in sustainable research funding and support long-term, high-impact partnerships between academia, industry, and government.
- Promote flexible and scalable education models that respond to evolving workforce demands, including digital and lifelong learning pathways.
- Embed skills within curricula and prioritize interdisciplinary education that builds critical thinking, problem-solving, and adaptability.
- Co-design academic programs with industry to ensure relevance, practical application, and stronger employability outcomes.
- Strengthen collaboration between academia and employers through expanded apprenticeships and work-integrated learning opportunities.
- Support continuous upskilling and reskilling initiatives to address rapid technological and workforce changes.
- Advance international collaboration through joint research initiatives, community college models, and expanded micro credentialing systems.
- Engage global networks, including diaspora communities and industry leaders, to bridge knowledge gaps and foster innovation.
- Encourage learners to pursue emerging fields such as artificial intelligence and green skills.
- Promote interdisciplinary learning approaches and a commitment to lifelong skill development.