INDIA HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH CONFERENCE 2025

Advancing Higher Education through Research

R&I Park, IIT DELHI

IHERC Report 2025

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Executive Summary

The India Higher Education Research Conference (IHERC) 2025, held on 21–22 November at IIT Delhi's R&I Park, marked a significant milestone in India's evolving higher education research landscape. Centered on the theme "Advancing Research on Higher Education in India," the conference convened a diverse community of scholars, practitioners, policymakers, and students from across India and several international institutions.

Over two days, 175 participants, including 113 presenters, engaged with 58 research papers and 39 poster presentations across multi-track sessions. The academic program featured parallel sessions, thematic panels, poster showcases, and three insightful keynote lectures, creating a dynamic environment for exchange and critical inquiry. Discussions spanned a wide spectrum of themes—ranging from equitable access and student success, internationalization and mobility, AI, digital and online higher education, governance and financing, interdisciplinarity, research excellence, and the role of higher education in national development.

Organized by the India Higher Education Research Network (IHERN) in partnership with the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE), UK, and supported by Ahmedabad University, the Department of Science & Technology (DST), Government of India, Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) and the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA), IHERC 2025 offered a vibrant platform for collaborative thinking and community building. The presence of keynote speakers and panelists from prestigious institutions in India and abroad further enriched the intellectual depth of the event.

The conference concluded with a forward-looking dialogue on strengthening India's higher education research ecosystem, culminating in the announcement of IHERC 2026 and the formal launch of the IHERN Blog, signaling continued momentum in advancing critical and research focused scholarship in the field.

IHERC 2025 – Conference Overview

Broad Theme: Advancing Research on Higher Education in India

Venue: R&I Park, IIT Delhi

Participation Snapshot

- 175 Participants
- 113 Total Presenters
    - 58 Paper Presenters
    - 39 Poster Presenters
- 20 Volunteers

International Participation

- Delegates represented institutions including:
- Durban University of Technology (South Africa)
- Imperial College London
- University of Toronto
- University of Melbourne
- La Trobe University
- University of Denver
- World Peace University
- University of New Mexico, USA.
- University of Chicago, USA

About the Program

Opening Session Overview

IHERC 2025 commenced with a warm and thoughtful opening session that set the intellectual tone for the two-day conference. The IHERC 2025 General Chair **Prof. Pankaj Chandra**, Vice-Chancellor of Ahmedabad University, delivered the first set of welcome remarks, emphasizing the growing need for rigorous, context-sensitive research to strengthen India's higher education ecosystem. He reflected on the evolving role of universities in shaping knowledge societies and underscored the value of conferences such as IHERC in building scholarly communities.

Joining virtually, the other General Chair for IHERC 2025, **Prof. Philip G. Altbach**, Founding Director of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College, spoke about India's place in global higher education and the importance of nurturing a vibrant research culture. His remarks highlighted both the opportunities and challenges facing India as it seeks to enhance its research capacity and global engagement.

Following these welcome messages, **Prof. Pankaj Jalote,** Founding Director of IIIT-Delhi and one of the founders of the India Higher Education Research Network (IHERN), introduced the mission and vision of IHERN. He emphasized IHERN's role as a collaborative platform designed to bring together researchers across institutions, disciplines, and geographies, with the aim of strengthening evidence-based policy and practice in higher education.

The session concluded with IHERC 2025, Program Co-Chair **Prof. Camille Kandiko Howson** of Imperial College London, who provided an overview of IHERC 2025. She invited participants to approach the conference as an opportunity for deep reflection, critical engagement, and collective problem-solving. Her introduction foregrounded the importance of interdisciplinary dialogue and encouraged attendees to rethink established assumptions about higher education in India and beyond.

Through these opening reflections, the conference established a shared sense of purpose about one rooted in community, inquiry, and the aspiration to advance the field of higher education research in India.

Glimpse from the Conference

Keynote Session Highlights

Keynote 1: Prof. Fazal Rizvi (University of Melbourne)

Reimagining Higher Educational Futures Against the Rhetoric of Deglobalisation

On day 1, the conference's first keynote was delivered by Prof. Fazal Rizvi, a leading scholar of globalisation and education, an Emeritus Professor of Global Studies in Education at the University of Melbourne. His address offered a nuanced analysis of the shifting dynamics of globalisation, particularly as higher education systems across the world grapple with rising geopolitical tensions, nationalist policies, and the rhetoric of deglobalisation.

Prof. Rizvi argued that although global mobility and cross-border collaboration face new constraints, globalisation remains deeply embedded in the everyday functioning of universities. He encouraged Indian higher education institutions to remain outward-looking while simultaneously strengthening their own intellectual traditions and local research ecosystems. His keynote invited participants to critically examine how global discourses shape aspirations, collaborations, and institutional strategies in India.

Keynote 2: Prof. V. Ramgopal Rao (Group Vice-Chancellor, BITS Pilani)

Reinventing Indian Higher Educational Institutions: Strategic Pathways to Viksit Bharat

The second keynote was delivered by Prof. V. Ramgopal Rao, an eminent academic leader and former Director of IIT Delhi, currently serving as Group Vice-Chancellor of BITS Pilani. His address focused on repositioning Indian higher education institutions for global competitiveness while ensuring deep societal relevance.

Prof. Rao highlighted the need for universities to embed experiential learning, promote research with social impact, and cultivate robust academia–industry linkages. He emphasised that innovation does not emerge in isolation but through ecosystems that bridge research labs, industry partners, and communities. His keynote called for a systemic shift toward mission-driven research cultures, improved institutional governance, and strategic planning aligned with India's development vision of Viksit Bharat.

Keynote 3: Prof. Abhay Karandikar (Secretary, Department of Science & Technology, Government of India)

Leadership in Research, Development & Innovation

The final keynote was delivered by Prof. Abhay Karandikar, Secretary of the Department of Science & Technology (DST) and former Director of IIT Kanpur. Speaking from a national science-

policy perspective, he underscored the critical role universities must play in accelerating India's research and innovation capacity.

Prof. Karandikar highlighted three pillars essential for building a high-performing research ecosystem:

    I.   Positioning universities as catalysts for India's R&D growth
    II.   Strengthening industry-collaborative research models
    III.   Creating enabling environments for faculty and early-career researchers

He stressed the importance of investments in long-term research infrastructure, flexible funding mechanisms, and institutional autonomy. His address provided a forward-looking vision of how India can nurture talent, expand research output, and align its institutional structures with global standards of innovation.

Panel Discussions

Panel 1: India in the Global Higher Education Landscape

Speakers:

- Prof. N. V. Varghese, Former Vice-Chancellor, National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA)
- Prof. Camille Kandiko Howson, Professor of Education, Imperial College London
- Prof. Mousumi Mukherjee, Professor and Deputy Director, IIHED, OP Jindal Global University
- Dr. Sayantan Mandal, Assistant Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University

Convener / Moderator:

- Prof. Neeta Inamdar, Symbiosis Centre for Higher Education Research and Policy Advocacy (SCHERPA)

This opening panel explored India's positioning within the global higher education landscape at a time of rapid policy change and shifting international dynamics. Drawing from comparative perspectives, the speakers reflected on India's growing ambitions in internationalisation, the implications of transnational education policies, and the emerging need for institutionally grounded strategies to navigate global partnerships. The discussion also emphasised the importance of equitable mobility pathways, quality assurance in cross-border education, and India's role in shaping regional and global academic networks.

Panel 2: From Vision to Values – Leadership for Transforming Institutions

Speakers:

- Mr. Kiran Karnik, Chairperson, HelpAge India; former President, NASSCOM
- Prof. Rishikesha T. Krishnan, Director, Indian Institute of Management Bangalore
- Prof. Rupamanjari Ghosh, Former Vice-Chancellor, Shiv Nadar University

Convener / Moderator:

- Dr. Aarti Srivastava, Professor, National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA)

This panel addressed the central question of what it means to lead higher education institutions in complex and evolving environments. Speakers underscored the necessity of values-based leadership rooted in integrity, transparency, and a deep commitment to public purpose. Discussions highlighted how institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and responsive governance structures are critical to fostering innovation and research excellence. The panel also stressed the importance of nurturing faculty leadership,

redesigning organisational cultures, and supporting change processes that allow institutions to thrive in the long term.

Panel 3: Doing Research on Higher Education in India & Abroad – Prospects and Challenges

Speakers:

- Dr. Clare Loughlin-Chow, CEO, Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE), UK
- Prof. Dhruv Raina, Former Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University
- Prof. Sudhanshu Bhushan, Former Professor & Head, Department of Higher and Professional Education, NIEPA

Convener / Moderator:

- Prof. Saumen Chattopadhyay, Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University

The final panel brought together distinguished scholars to reflect on the methodological, conceptual, and institutional challenges of conducting higher education research in India and beyond. Speakers discussed the evolving nature of higher education as a field of study, the need for interdisciplinary approaches, and the role of theory in shaping research agendas. They also pointed to structural constraints such as data availability, funding mechanisms, and institutional recognition that often hinder emerging researchers. A strong emphasis was placed on building nurturing environments, collaborative networks, and cross-border research partnerships that can strengthen the field and amplify its policy influence.

Parallel Sessions

Across the two days of IHERC 2025, participants engaged in a series of parallel sessions that brought together a diverse array of research perspectives, methodological approaches, and disciplinary traditions. These sessions reflected the intellectual breadth of the conference and showcased emerging scholarship on higher education from across India and abroad. Each track was chaired by distinguished academics who facilitated vibrant discussions and encouraged critical engagement with the presented work.

Day 1 – Morning Parallel Sessions (Session A.3)

The first set of parallel sessions highlighted four major strands of inquiry:

- Equitable Access and Student Success
  Chair: Dr. Sayantan Mandal, Jawaharlal Nehru University
- Transnational Education (TNE) Development in India
  Chair: Dr. Rathin Biswas, IIT Delhi
- Financing and Governance of Higher Education
  Chair: Dr. Malish C.M., IIT Bombay
- Power, Participation, and Equity in Indian Higher Education
  Chair: Dr. Narendra Thakur, Delhi University

These sessions brought forward compelling work on institutional inequality, cross-border education partnerships, governance structures, linguistic identity, accreditation policies, gender imbalances in admissions, and the political economy of privatisation. The discussions illuminated both systemic challenges and emerging opportunities within India's higher education landscape.

Day 1 – Afternoon Parallel Sessions (Session A.6 & A.7)

Afternoon parallel sessions broadened the thematic scope:

- Technology Integration & Online Higher Education (Special Session)
  Chair: Prof. Pradeep Kumar Mishra, NIEPA
- Industry–Academia Relationships and Development Planning
  Chair: Dr. Gitanjali Sen, Shiv Nadar University
- Internationalisation of Higher Education
  Chair: Prof. Mousumi Mukherjee, OP Jindal Global University
- Higher Education and Development
  Chair: Prof. Saumen Chattopadhyay, Jawaharlal Nehru University

These sessions explored blended learning, AI in education, employability and entrepreneurship, institutional responses to NEP 2020, community engagement, gender and aspirations, and skill development gaps.

Later in the afternoon, Session A.7 focused on:

- Internationalisation of Higher Education
  Chair: Prof. Camille Kandiko Howson, Imperial College London
- Policy in Higher Education
  Chair: Dr. Aarti Srivastava, NIEPA

- Interdisciplinarity in Higher Education (Special Session)
  Chair: Nirved Kumar, IIM Ahemdabad
- Global Mobility and Internationalisation
  Chair: Dr. Rathin Biswas, IIT Delhi

Scholars examined higher education, state roles in international student recruitment, interdisciplinary academic practice, and international student mobility.

Day 2 – Morning Parallel Sessions (Session B.3)

The second day began with four parallel thematic clusters:

- Internationalisation of Higher Education
  Chair: Dr. Matthew Witenstein, University of New Mexico, USA.
- Policy in Higher Education
  Chair: Dr. Debananda Misra, IIT Delhi
- Research Excellence and Global Competitiveness
  Chair: Prof. Saumen Chattopadhyay, JNU
- Governance, Policy, and Institutional Development
  Chair: Dr. Malish C.M., IIT Bombay

Research presented in these sessions addressed diplomatic dimensions of internationalisation, federalism in governance, gendered academic productivity, regulation of private teacher education institutions, and the policy implications of NEP 2020's implementation across states.

Day 2 – Afternoon Parallel Sessions (Session B.6)

The final series of parallel sessions covered another wide spectrum of themes:

- Employability and Student Success
  Chair: Dr. Gitanjali Sen, Shiv Nadar University
- Research Excellence & Global Competitiveness / Higher Education Policy
  Chair: Dr. Matthew Witenstein, University of New Mexico
- Faculty, Research, and Academic Pathways
  Chair: Dr. Rathin Biswas, IIT Delhi
- Student Well-being, Inclusion & Empowerment
  Chair: Dr. Aparna Chakraborty, OP Jindal Global University

Presentations examined labour market outcomes for graduates, integration of research in undergraduate education, academic pathways for PhD scholars, mental health in global higher education policy, disability inclusion, and gendered experiences within assessment systems.

Engagement and Scholarly Exchange

Across all parallel sessions, presenters and attendees engaged in rich dialogue, offering constructive feedback, sharing methodological insights, and identifying areas for future collaboration. The diversity of topics and disciplinary approaches created an intellectually stimulating environment, enabling researchers to connect broader policy questions with grounded empirical contexts.

Awards and Recognition

IHERC 2025 concluded with a celebration of scholarly excellence, recognising outstanding contributions across paper and poster presentations. The awards acknowledged originality, methodological rigor, and the significance of each study to contemporary debates in higher education research. The following researchers were honored for their exemplary work:

Best Paper – Category A

<u>Paper title</u>: "Entrance-Led Gender Imbalances in Higher Education: A Study of CUET in the University of Delhi"

<u>Presenter</u>: Nikita Gupta

This paper offered an incisive examination of how centralised entrance examinations shape gendered access to higher education, contributing critical insights to ongoing policy discussions on equity and admissions reforms.

Best Paper – Category B

<u>Paper Title</u>: "Integrating Research into Undergraduate Education: Lessons from Initial Teacher Education Practice"

<u>Presenters</u>: Gunjan Sharma and Jyoti Raina

This study provided a compelling reflection on embedding research into undergraduate curricula, drawing from experiences in teacher education to highlight pathways for strengthening inquiry-based learning.

Best Paper – Special Mention

<u>Paper Title</u>: "Framing a Regional Policy Agenda: Examining the Prospects of a South Asian Higher Education Region"

<u>Presenter</u>: Priya Vijaykumar Poojary

The paper explored the possibilities of regional cooperation in higher education across South Asia, offering a timely and theoretically grounded analysis of cross-border policy frameworks.

Best Poster Award

<u>Poster Title</u>: "Digital Readiness and Learning Adaptation in Indian Universities: A Post-COVID Perspective"

<u>Presenter</u>: Deepika Sejwal

Recognized for its clarity of design and relevance, this poster presented a nuanced view of how universities navigated digital transitions and adapted pedagogical practices in the post-pandemic landscape.

Emerging Researcher in Higher Education Award

<u>Paper Title</u>: "Cultural Alienation and Academic Mobility of Indian Students in Europe: Navigating Internationalisation through a Sociological Lens"
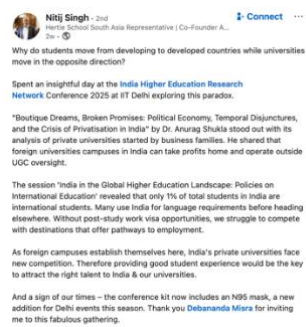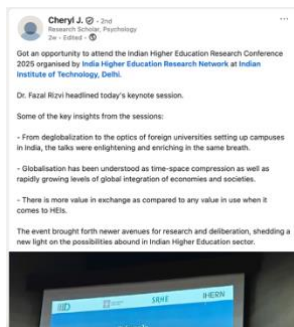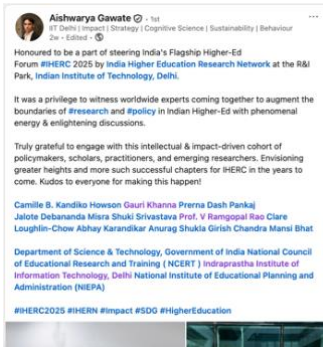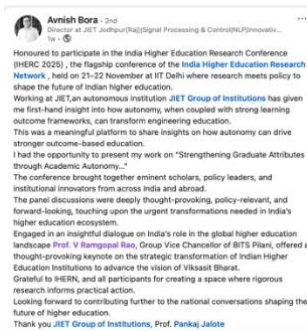
<u>Presenter</u>: Siddhi Singh

This award honored an early-career researcher whose work demonstrated strong conceptual grounding and analytical depth, contributing valuable insights into the lived experiences of internationally mobile students.

Social Media Engagement

The conference saw active engagement on LinkedIn, with participants and institutions sharing reflections, session highlights, and photographs. This digital footprint amplified the conference's reach and showcased the growing interest in higher education research in India.

Participant Feedback

IHERC 2025 received overwhelmingly positive responses from attendees, with participants praising the conference's intellectual depth, organisational efficiency, and the inclusive, community-driven atmosphere that defined the event. Feedback highlighted both the strengths of the inaugural conference and constructive suggestions for future editions.

Several participants appreciated the **opportunity for meaningful scholarly exchange** and the rare space that IHERC created for early-career researchers to engage with senior academics:

"IHERC 2025 created a rare space where emerging scholars felt truly heard and valued."
— Participant, University of Delhi

"It was a very enabling conference that facilitated the interaction of young scholars with senior researchers."
— **Anirban Sengupta**, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar University Delhi

Participants also praised the **diversity of sessions** and the quality of keynote and panel discussions:

"The diversity of sessions and the opportunity to meet international scholars made this conference exceptional."
— Researcher, NIEPA

"This conference successfully convened exceptional keynote sessions and panel discussions, uniting stakeholders from across the globe to engage in meaningful discourse."
— ***Priyamvada***, *University of Delhi*

Many expressed appreciations for the conference's **organisation, hospitality, and coordination**:

"The sessions were extremely well organised and transitions were smooth. The supportive organising team ensured a welcoming environment."
— National Community Engagement Academic Network (NCEAN), Hyderabad

"I appreciated the warmth and seamless coordination by the volunteer team. It made the experience memorable."
— Faculty Member, South Asian University

The **ethos of community and intellectual openness** also stood out:

> *"There was recognition of diverse perspectives without binaries between STEM and non-STEM or public and private. This reflects the careful academic planning behind IHERC."*
> — ***Jyoti Raina**, Gargi College*

> *"The collegial ethos and coherence given the focus on higher education were particularly impressive."*
> — ***Manasi Thapliyal Navani**, Ambedkar University Delhi*

Some participants particularly valued the **professional development and exposure** IHERC enabled:

> *"The conference gave early-career scholars exposure to prominent names in the field and a clearer understanding of opportunities in higher education."*
> — ***Sabeela Siddiqui**, IIT Delhi*

> *"Information shared about SRHE journals, books, and the future of IHERN was very valuable."*
> — ***Dheeraj Soni**, IIT Delhi*

Several attendees also highlighted the opportunity for **networking and community building**:

> *"I could meet people from different domains, and the networking opportunities were excellent."*
>
> — **Divya B. Kunnath**, Madras Christian College

> *"It was a vibrant, enthusiastic environment with meaningful engagement across sessions."*
>
> — NCEAN, Hyderabad

Closing Session and Way Forward

The closing session of IHERC 2025 brought together the reflections, energy, and collective aspirations that had shaped the two-day conference. Dr. Debananda Misra (IIT Delhi), Program Co-Chair, offered thoughtful closing remarks that underscored the intellectual richness of the presentations, the diversity of perspectives shared, and the spirit of collaboration that animated each session. He highlighted the growing maturity of higher education research in India and expressed appreciation for the scholars—emerging and established—who contributed to building a vibrant academic community through their work.

Dr. Misra also acknowledged the crucial role of IHERN in nurturing this ecosystem and emphasised the importance of sustained engagement beyond the conference. He encouraged participants to continue collaborating, publishing, mentoring, and contributing actively to the network's initiatives, reaffirming IHERC's place as an annual anchor for scholarly exchange in the field.

A forward-looking momentum was set with the formal announcement of IHERC 2026 by Prof. N. V. Varghese (NIEPA) and Prof. Saumen Chattopadhyay (Jawaharlal Nehru University), who will lead the upcoming conference as General Chair and Program Chair respectively. Their brief remarks outlined the commitment to deepen the conference's thematic scope, expand participation, and strengthen IHERN's role as a catalyst for higher education research nationally and globally.

The closing session concluded with a shared sense of purpose. Attendees left with renewed enthusiasm for advancing scholarship, influencing policy discourse, and strengthening the research community that IHERN continues to build. The announcement of new initiatives—including the launch of the IHERN Blog and plans for expanding member engagement—signalled an exciting trajectory for the network and set the stage for the next chapter in its journey.

About IHERN

India Higher Education Research Network (IHERN) is a network of scholars dedicated to advancing higher education research in India. Its vision is to strengthen the research ecosystem and generate evidence that can inform policy-making. IHERN aims to become a leading network for researchers working on higher education studies through projects, events, evidence synthesis, and policy advocacy.

The first-year membership fee is waived. Members will receive invitations to monthly research seminars and will be eligible to apply for Fellowships, Research Grant RFPs, conference fee waivers, and travel support for presenting at select international conferences.

Currently guided by a Steering Committee, IHERN will gradually expand to include members who are established researchers from institutions in India and abroad working on higher education in India. Membership is now open. Researchers interested in joining can email ihern@iiitd.ac.in or register through the online form.

IHERN Open House / Townhall Session

The IHERN Open House held as part of IHERC 2025, emerged to be one of the most energising and participatory components of the conference. Designed as a collaborative dialogue, the session brought together IHERN members to strengthen the network of higher education researchers, with IHERN serving as a catalyst by providing a platform for scholars to connect and collaborate.

The session opened with Prof. Pankaj Jalote (IIIT Delhi), co-founder of IHERN, who provided an overview of IHERN's mission: to strengthen India's higher education research ecosystem by building a connected community of scholars, generating high-quality evidence for policy, and nurturing a culture of shared learning. He highlighted IHERN's journey so far, as a project housed at IIIT Delhi with philanthropic support to its aspiration of evolving into a self-managed, member-led academic association.

Participants were also introduced to IHERN's broader organisational structure, including the Steering Committee comprising leaders such as Ashish Dhawan (The Convergence Foundation), Hemant Kanakia (Maker Bhavan Foundation), and Clare Loughlin-Chow (CEO, SRHE, UK), as well as IHERC's academic leadership representing institutions in India, Australia, the UK, and the US.

Key Themes and Ideas emerged from members. The Open House created a space where participants actively shaped IHERN's emerging priorities. Several actionable ideas were surfaced. It emphasized on promoting peer leadership and shared ownership by encouraging members to voluntarily step forward to lead initiatives, contribute blog posts, and co-create network activities.

Participants resonated strongly with the idea of IHERN becoming a self-managed association in future. The Open House reaffirmed IHERN's identity as a nurturing, collaborative space where researchers share ownership of its direction, values, and future initiatives.

The session closed with an invitation for continued engagement, signalling IHERN's shift toward a more decentralized, community-led model of academic networking. The enthusiasm and ideas shared at the Open House underscored the growing demand for sustained, high-quality research on higher education in India—and the central role IHERN aims to play in shaping that future.