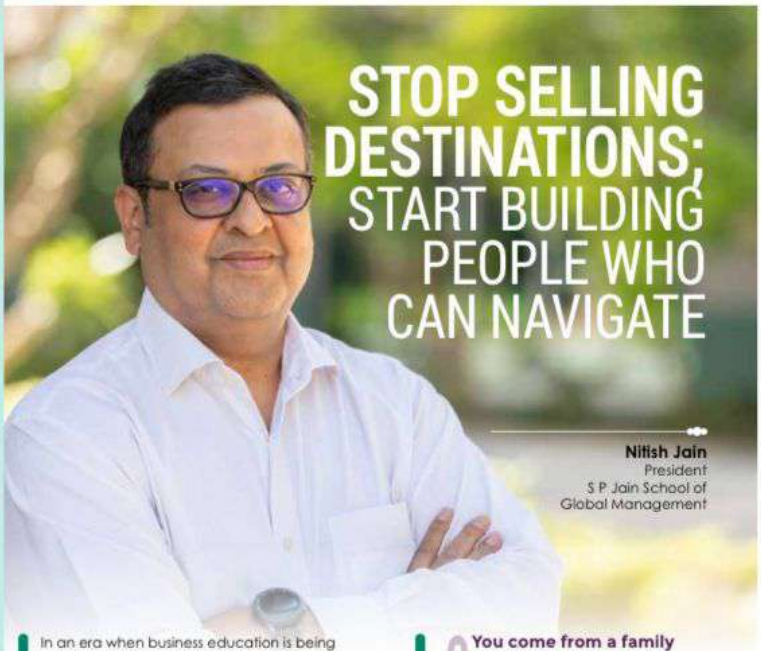

STOP SELLING DESTINATIONS; START BUILDING PEOPLE WHO CAN NAVIGATE

Nitish Jain
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In an era when business education is being reshaped by globalization, technology, and artificial intelligence, **Nitish Jain**, President of the SP Jain School of Global Management, offers a bold perspective on what the future should look like. In this exclusive conversation, he reflects on the philosophy behind building a truly global business school with campuses across continents and a learning model designed for a borderless economy. Speaking with clarity about leadership, innovation, and the role of AI in education, he also addresses the challenges facing modern management programs. Conducted by Education Post's **Prafull Pandey**, this insightful dialogue explores how global institutions must evolve to prepare leaders for an increasingly complex world.

Q You come from a family with a strong legacy in philanthropy and education. How have these early influences shaped your vision for S P Jain School of Global Management?

My grandfather believed education was the most enduring form of giving. Not scholarships or buildings but the act of genuinely expanding someone's possibilities. That stayed with me. When I set out to build SP Jain Global, I wasn't thinking about another business school. I was thinking about what business education should look like when the world is no longer neatly divided into local markets and domestic careers. The answer was an institution that takes students out of their comfort zone—literally, geographically—and puts them in the middle of how the world actually works. Hence, our vision is to transform lives, using the power of education.

Q The tri-city learning model was a bold departure from traditional management education. What gap were you trying to address when you conceptualized it?

The gap was simple: most business schools were preparing students for a world that no longer existed. The way you do business in India is different from how you would do it in Singapore, Sydney, Dubai or London. You can read about global intelligence, but you only develop it by actually navigating it. By working with a team in Singapore, then moving to Dubai, then Sydney. The discomfort of that transition is the education. That's what we built.

Q Building campuses in Dubai, Singapore, Sydney, and Mumbai is no small achievement. What were the biggest strategic and cultural challenges in creating a truly global institution?

Navigating the regulatory environment in each of these cities was entirely its own puzzle—compliance frameworks, accreditation requirements, and academic standards that don't translate neatly across borders. The harder challenge was holding it all together. You can't build a global institution by replicating one culture across four cities. That's franchising, not globalisation. We had to create a shared identity strong enough to hold across very different environments while remaining genuinely local in each one. That tension never fully resolves. You just get better at managing it.

Q How do you define global leadership in today's business environment?

A global leader is someone who can walk into a room where they're the outsider—culturally, contextually—and still make sound decisions. That requires more than intelligence or experience. It requires the humility to know what you don't know, and the agility to adapt quickly. What concerns me is that most leadership development programs still treat this as a soft skill. It isn't. In a world where your supply chain, your team, and your customers span multiple continents, global intelligence is a core business competency.

Q As President, how do you balance innovation with academic rigor and institutional stability?

Innovation without rigor is just novelty. Rigor without innovation becomes irrelevance. The balance we strike is this: we experiment continuously at the edges—new technologies, new pedagogies, new partnerships—but our academic standards don't flex. What keeps us honest is outcomes. Our alumni are at Apple, Google, McKinsey, BCG, Meta, Amazon, Coca-Cola, Microsoft. When they succeed, we know we got the balance right. When they tell us what they wished they'd learned, we listen.

Q How does studying across multiple global cities shape students' leadership mindset differently from a single-campus model?

There's a difference between knowing that business works differently in Dubai than in Sydney, and actually experiencing it in person. Single-campus programs can teach you about cultural diversity. We put you inside it. When you've had to adapt your communication style, your assumptions, and your decision-making framework three times in 12 months—that's not academic exposure, that's leadership conditioning. The world's most complex business problems don't come with a regional instruction manual. Our students learn that early.

Q In your view, how important is cultural intelligence compared to analytical and technical business skills?

I'd push back on the framing slightly because it's not a comparison, it's a sequence. Technical skills get you in the room. Cultural

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intelligence determines what you do once you're there. I've seen brilliant analysts fail in cross-border roles because they couldn't read the room, build trust across cultures, or navigate an uncomfortable negotiation in an unfamiliar context. We treat cultural agility the same way we treat financial modelling—something you develop deliberately, not something you absorb by osmosis.

Q How do you ensure curriculum relevance across diverse economic ecosystems?

You can't solve this from a central academic committee. Relevance has to be built into the architecture of the institution through faculty who've actually worked in the markets they teach, case studies drawn from live business challenges in each region, and a genuine willingness to retire content that's no longer earning its place in the classroom. We also listen to what our industry partners are telling us they can't find in new hires. That gap analysis is often more instructive than any curriculum review.

Q You introduced the Engaged Learning Online (ELO) platform as a technology-driven solution. What specific challenges in online education were you aiming to solve?

The honest answer is that most online education at the time was just recorded lectures with a discussion board bolted on. It was asynchronous, passive, and lonely. We weren't interested in building that. The question we asked was: what makes a classroom actually work? It's not the room; it's the live dynamic between faculty and students, the spontaneous debate, the moment when someone challenges an assumption and the whole class shifts. ELO was built to preserve that. Not to simulate a classroom, but to genuinely recreate the conditions that make learning stick.

Q How does ELO differentiate itself from conventional online learning platforms?

Most platforms are content delivery systems. ELO is a live teaching environment. The distinction matters enormously. Our faculty aren't uploading videos; they're teaching in real time to students across Mumbai, Dubai, Sydney, Singapore, and London simultaneously, from studios built specifically for that purpose. The best professor in the room teaches everyone, regardless of geography. That's not a feature, that's a fundamentally different philosophy about what online education should be.

Q With AI rapidly transforming industries, how should business schools redesign their pedagogy?

Three things need to change. First, replace passive content delivery with AI that personalises learning in real time: every student learning at their own pace, with their own gaps identified and addressed before they become failures. Second, free faculty from repetition so they can do what only humans can: mentor, challenge, and develop judgment. Third, simulate the actual future of work—cross-functional, AI-assisted, ambiguous—rather than preparing students for a version of business that no longer exists. The schools that do all three will be the only ones still relevant in twenty years.

Q Do you see hybrid learning becoming the dominant format in management education over the next decade?

I think the more useful question is: dominant for whom? For a 22-year-old coming straight from undergrad, the residential experience still has enormous value in the form of the peer network, the immersion, the separation from your

previous life. For a working professional who needs to upskill without stepping off the career ladder, hybrid is the only viable option. The schools that future-proof themselves will stop treating these as variants of the same program and build genuinely distinct experiences for genuinely distinct learners.

Q SP Jain Global has consistently ranked among leading global business schools. Beyond rankings, what metrics truly matter to you?

Rankings are a signal, not a destination. They tell prospective students we're worth considering, and that matters. But the number I actually watch is simpler: where are our alumni five years out? Not just their titles, but whether they're leading teams they couldn't have led without what we gave them. Whether they're comfortable in rooms that would have intimidated them before. Whether they're making decisions at a scale that reflects genuine growth. That's the only scorecard that doesn't lie.

Q Being named a "Game Changer in Education" and receiving the "Outstanding Contribution to Education" award are significant recognitions. What do these honors represent for you personally?

These recognitions matter but what they represent, more broadly, is confirmation that the unconventional decisions were right. Building campuses in cities where no Indian business school had gone before, betting on a multi-city model when the conventional wisdom was consolidation—those weren't easy calls at the time. Recognition like this doesn't make the risk feel smaller in retrospect. It makes the people who took it with you feel seen.

Q How do you measure long-term institutional success – placements, alumni impact, entrepreneurship, or societal contribution?

Placements are the first chapter, not the whole story. The number I find most telling is this: nearly 30 percent of our alumni become entrepreneurs within a few years of graduating. That tells me something about the mindset we're building, not just the credentials we're conferring. Beyond that, I want to know whether our graduates are still learning a decade out; whether the habit of adaptability we instilled has held. In a world being reshaped by AI and automation, that may be the most important thing we gave them.

Q How do you assess the transformation of Indian higher education over the past decade?

The transformation is real, but it's uneven. At the top end, Indian institutions are genuinely competitive, producing talent that holds its own anywhere in the world. The challenge is that "top end" still describes a relatively thin slice of the system. What's changed meaningfully in the last decade is intent. There's a seriousness about employability, about global exposure, about building institutions that can travel beyond their postal codes. That shift in ambition is significant. Execution is still catching up.

Q What must Indian business schools prioritize to compete globally?

Stop importing frameworks and start building original ones. For too long, Indian business education has been derivative—case studies from Harvard, pedagogies from Wharton, rankings benchmarked against Western institutions. India has an extraordinary laboratory right at its doorstep: one of the world's most complex, fast-moving, and entrepreneurially rich economies. The schools that figure out how to turn that into intellectual currency, producing insights and methodologies that the world wants to learn from, not just replicate, those are the ones that will genuinely compete globally.

Q Can India realistically emerge as a global education hub? What policy reforms are necessary to enable this vision?

Realistically, yes. Easily, no. The ambition is there. The talent is there. What's missing is the regulatory architecture to match. Right now, building a globally competitive private institution in India requires navigating frameworks that weren't designed with global ambition in mind. Foreign investment restrictions, accreditation rigidity, cross-border collaboration barriers — these aren't small inconveniences, they're structural ceilings. The good news is that these are policy problems, not capability problems. They can be fixed. The question is whether there's sufficient urgency to fix them before the window narrows.

Q As an education entrepreneur, what were the defining risks you took that shaped your institution's journey?

The first was geographic. When we opened campuses in Dubai and Singapore, the idea of an Indian business school operating internationally was, at best, an experiment. There was no playbook. Every regulatory approval, every faculty hire, every lease negotiation was ground we were breaking for the first time. The second risk was philosophical. Committing to technology-driven learning before it was fashionable or even fully proven. ELO wasn't built because the market asked for it. It was built because we believed the future of education would require it.

We're making the same bet again today with our AI tutor and personalised learning system. The idea that every student can have an intelligent learning companion—one that knows their career aspirations, their goals, their gaps, and adapts in real time—is still unconventional in higher education. Most institutions are still debating whether AI belongs in the classroom. We've already put it at the center of the learning experience. That's a risk. But the nature of building ahead of your time is that validation takes a while. We've learned to be comfortable with that.

Q What leadership principles guide your decision-making process?

Speed matters more than most institutions admit. Education has a culture of deliberation—committees, consultations, consensus. That culture has value, but it can also become a way of avoiding decisions. The principle I return to most is this: a good decision made quickly is usually better than a perfect decision made too late. The other principle is to stay close to outcomes, not activity. It's easy to confuse a full calendar with progress. I try to regularly ask whether what we're doing is actually moving the needle for students, and if it isn't, to stop doing it, regardless of how much institutional momentum is behind it.

Q What advice would you give to aspiring edupreneurs building institutions in today's competitive landscape?

Build for a student who doesn't exist yet. The students entering your institution five years from now will have different expectations, different career anxieties, and different technological fluency than the ones you're designing for today. Beyond that, don't confuse scale with impact. Some of the most influential institutions in the world are small. What makes them powerful is the clarity of their purpose and the consistency with which they pursue it. Start there.

Q How closely do you collaborate with global industry leaders in curriculum design and delivery?

Closely enough that the line between classroom and boardroom is genuinely blurred. Our faculty aren't just academics who consult occasionally; many have run businesses, led

functions in major corporations, or built companies themselves. That's deliberate. When a student is working through a supply chain problem with someone who has actually had to make that call at 2 AM with a board breathing down their neck, the learning is categorically different. We don't treat industry collaboration as a marketing feature. It's how the curriculum stays honest.

Q What key skills will define employability in 2026 and beyond?

The skills that matter most are precisely the ones hardest to automate: judgment under ambiguity, the ability to build trust across cultures, and what I'd call meta-learning which is knowing how to acquire new skills quickly rather than hoarding the ones you already have. Technical fluency is table stakes now. Every graduate arrives with that. What separates the ones who advance is whether they can operate effectively in conditions they've never encountered before. That's not a personality trait; it's a capability, and it can be taught. Most programs just haven't prioritised it.

Q In an era of micro-credentials and specialized certifications, are traditional MBA programs still relevant?

Micro-credentials solve a specific problem extremely well: targeted skill gaps, fast. The MBA solves a different problem. It builds the kind of integrative thinking that lets you connect a finance decision to a people problem to a market signal and arrive at a coherent strategy. You can't credential your way to that. Where MBA programs lose the argument is when they stop evolving, when they're still teaching the same case studies they used fifteen years ago and calling it rigour. The credential isn't the issue. The complacency sometimes hiding behind it is.

Q Business education is often criticized for being expensive and elitist. How do you respond to concerns that global MBA programs primarily serve privileged segments?

It's a fair challenge and I won't dismiss it. Global education is expensive, and pretending otherwise doesn't serve anyone. What I'd push back on is the assumption that expensive necessarily means exclusionary. The question is whether the institution is actively working to widen access or simply paying lip service to it. Scholarships, financing, and merit-based aid aren't afterthoughts for us; they're how we ensure that a student's postal code doesn't determine their ceiling. The goal was never to build an institution for the already privileged. It was to build one that creates the kind of global opportunity that changes the trajectory of a family, not just a career.

Q With rising tuition fees worldwide, is the traditional MBA model becoming financially unsustainable?

The model is unsustainable only if the outcomes don't justify the investment. If a program genuinely transforms employability and earning potential, the economics work. If it's coasting on brand legacy and a two-year credential that the market no longer values at face value, then yes, the pressure will become existential. The schools that survive the next decade won't necessarily be the cheapest or the most prestigious. They'll be the ones that can demonstrate, clearly and honestly, what a student is worth after they graduate versus before.

Q Critics argue that business schools produce managers rather than entrepreneurs. Do you believe management education adequately fosters risk-taking and innovation?

Not adequately, no. The structural problem is that business schools are fundamentally risk-averse institutions trying to teach risk appetite. You can't simulate genuine entrepreneurial discomfort in a curriculum that's designed to be predictable and assessable. What we can do, and what we try to do, is create conditions where students encounter real uncertainty, real failure, and real accountability before they graduate. The fact that nearly 30 percent of our alumni become entrepreneurs within a few years tells me the mindset takes root, even if it doesn't always flower immediately.

Q To what extent do global rankings reflect genuine academic quality versus institutional branding and marketing strength?

Some of it, yes. Rankings aren't meaningless; they capture real signals about faculty quality, employer perception, and graduate outcomes. But they also reward legacy, size, and the ability to manage a ranking methodology, which isn't the same as educational excellence. The more honest metric is this: would an employer who has hired your graduates for five years recommend your program to their own children? That's harder to gauge. We pay attention to rankings because our students and their families do. But we don't let them drive strategy.

Q Rapid international expansion by business schools can risk dilution of academic depth. How do you safeguard quality across multiple campuses?

Centralised standards, but localised judgment. The curriculum framework, the academic benchmarks, the faculty development processes, those are consistent across every campus. What varies is the application, because it should. A case study on market entry looks different in Singapore than it does in Dubai, and that difference is a feature, not a bug. The real quality control mechanism, ultimately, is outcomes. If our Sydney graduates and our Mumbai graduates are both performing at the same level in the same global companies, we've done it right. If there's a gap, we have a problem to solve.

Q Technology-driven platforms promise engagement, but can digital tools ever truly replace human mentorship in education?

No, and I'd be suspicious of anyone building an education business who thinks they can. What AI does extraordinarily well is the part of teaching that shouldn't require a human in the first place: repetition, personalised practice, performance tracking, on-demand explanation. Freeing faculty from that work is genuinely valuable, because it means the time a student spends with a human mentor is spent on things only humans can provide: navigating an ethical dilemma, being told an uncomfortable truth about your blind spots, or understanding that a setback isn't terminal. That's not a small thing. That's often the thing people remember twenty years later.

Q With AI-powered self-learning and alternative credentials gaining popularity, could the two-year MBA become obsolete?

SP Jain Global's MBA is twelve months. Not because we were cutting corners, but because we believed that if you design a program with genuine intensity, global immersion, and AI-driven personalisation built in, you don't need two years to achieve the outcomes. You need focus.

The question isn't really about duration. It's about whether the MBA, at any length, is delivering something that micro-credentials and self-directed AI learning cannot. And the answer is yes, but only if the program is doing the hard things: building integrative thinkers, not just skilled specialists; developing leaders who can operate across cultures; creating peer networks that last decades, not just cohorts that graduate together. That value doesn't require two years. It does require an institution willing to be ruthless about what earns its place in the curriculum and what doesn't.

Given geopolitical uncertainties and shifting visa policies, is the global campus model vulnerable to political and regulatory risks?

Of course it is. Any institution that tells you otherwise isn't being honest. The question is whether the model is designed to absorb those risks or amplify them. A single-campus program that loses its key market has nowhere to go. A genuinely multi-city institution—where students are already moving across jurisdictions, building networks in multiple countries, and experiencing different regulatory environments firsthand—is structurally more resilient. The risk is real. The diversification is also real.

If you were to critique one aspect of the current global business education ecosystem – including your own institution – what would it be?

We are all, to varying degrees, selling a promise we can't fully keep: spend two years and a significant sum of money with us, and we will prepare you for the future. But the honest truth is that no institution—not Harvard, not Wharton, not SP Jain Global—can fully prepare someone for a future that none of us can predict with any confidence. AI is reshaping entire industries faster than any curriculum committee can respond. The jobs our students will hold at the peak of their careers may not exist yet. And we're still largely building programs around job titles and industries that we recognise today.

The revolutionary move would be to stop selling destination and start selling navigation. Stop promising students they'll arrive somewhere specific and start building people who can find their way anywhere. That requires a fundamentally different kind of institution: less focused on what we teach and far more focused on how we build the capacity to keep learning. We're working towards that.

If you were to build S P Jain School of Global Management from scratch today, what would you do differently?

I'd abolish the degree. Not because credentials don't matter, but because the degree as currently constructed is a deeply dishonest signal. It tells the market that two years ago, under conditions that no longer exist, this person met a standard that may or may not predict anything about their actual capability today. I'd replace it with a continuously updated capability profile, built by AI, validated by real-world performance, and owned entirely by the student. Portable, dynamic, and impossible to fake. The institution's job wouldn't be to confer a credential. It would be to build something genuinely verifiable. That would change everything—for students, for employers, and for every business school comfortable hiding behind a piece of paper.

What legacy do you hope to leave in the field of global business education?

I hope SP Jain Global becomes evidence that a different model was possible; that you didn't have to choose between global scale and genuine depth, between innovation and academic rigour, between being regionally rooted and internationally relevant. If, twenty years from now, the multi-city model is considered obvious rather than audacious, that would mean we helped shift the industry's imagination about what business education could be. More personally, I'd want the legacy to be measured in the compounding effect of our alumni. Not their titles, but the decisions they've made, the teams they've built, the businesses they've started, and the people they've developed in turn. That's the kind of impact that doesn't fit neatly into a ranking. It's also the only kind worth building for.

Rapid-Fire (For Feature Highlight)

- **One word that defines the future of education:** Personalisation.
- **AI. Threat or opportunity:** Opportunity. But only for the institutions willing to be honest about what that means for their existing model. For the ones that aren't, it's a threat wearing a very patient face.
- **Physical campuses or digital ecosystems:** Both. Campuses aren't about location; they're about the collisions that happen when smart people are in the same room under pressure. Digital ecosystems scale that. You need both.
- **One book every MBA student must read?** Thinking fast and slow by Daniel Kahneman
- **Your mantra for young leaders?** Get comfortable being the least experienced person in the room. That discomfort is not a problem to solve; it's the fastest education available.