

# Shaping the Centre for Australia-India Relations

## Submission from the University of Melbourne

The University of Melbourne supports the Australian Government's establishment of a new Centre for Australia-India Relations. The relationship with India is one of the most strategically important for Australia, with significant opportunities for collaboration and cooperation that benefit both countries. Our countries have substantial people-to-people links, exemplified by our strong and long-standing education engagement. The value of this relationship has been underpinned through the announcement of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2020 and the signing of the [Australia-India Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement \(ECTA\)](#) in April 2022.

The Federal and Victorian Governments have identified strategic regions for focused Australian engagement with India which builds on existing relationships, physical presences, and opportunities to develop further connections in identified sectors. These priority regions align with those of the University, in terms of institutional partnerships and student recruitment, and as the locations where the University's India-based alumni are located.

The University has strong links with India, with a large network of Indian alumni and a wide range of partners and joint programs across the country. The University's [India Strategy 2020-2024](#) provides the framework for growing the relationship and provides a foundation and ecosystem to support India-focussed initiatives. Launched in 2019, the Strategy reinforces long-term commitments to Indian partnerships and joint research and collaborative teaching models that address key global challenges and deliver mutual benefit for Australian and Indian societies. The University will expand its footprint in India next year, establishing a Gateway Centre to build on existing engagement in-country.

The international portfolio at the University includes two national centres facilitating engagement and thought leadership with India – the Australia India Institute and Asialink. The Australia India Institute (All), Australia's leading centre dedicated to enhancing Australia-India relations, was founded in 2008 with ongoing funding from the Australian and Victorian Governments, the University, and other sources. The All has developed significant relationships across the academic, political, business and community sectors, and has enabled greater soft diplomacy, including between governments. This engagement has been bolstered by the All's presence in New Delhi. For example, Indian Minister The Hon Piyush Goyal recently [noted](#) the All's reputation within India and its Government for "building bridges between the two countries". Asialink is Australia's leading centre for creative engagement with Asia, developing insights, capabilities, and connections through programs in the Arts, Business, Diplomacy and Education. Asialink's mission is to build more effective and closer relations with Asia, including India. It has convened numerous events, worked with a wide array of partners in Australia and in the region, engaged with Australian executives, and co-hosted strategic Track 2 dialogues, including with India.

In the [All's Annual Oration](#) in April 2022, Australia's High Commissioner to India, HE The Hon Barry O'Farrell AO, stated that the work of the Centre would complement that of the All. However, many of the Centre's proposed activities are already undertaken by existing organisations. As such, the University supports the Centre taking on a coordination role, bringing together a network of partners to amplify and capitalise on the work currently underway. For example, the All could lead on promoting policy dialogue and greater research collaboration, building on its current expertise, while the Centre could work with others, including Asialink and universities, to progress its remaining activities. This model would reduce duplication and administration costs while leveraging the existing reputation, relationships, and activities of partner organisations. This would also allow the Centre to achieve the best value for money, ensuring that funding is invested in activities with proven outcomes and success.

### **What should the Centre seek to achieve and what should its work be guided by?**

The Centre should seek to bolster Australia's bilateral engagement with India at all levels – deepening the relationship beyond a government-to-government level by engaging business, education and research bodies, Indian diaspora communities, and Australian and Indian society more broadly. In part, its work should be guided by [An India Economic Strategy to 2035](#) (IES), the report to the Australian Government by University of Queensland Chancellor Peter Varghese AO, as well as DFAT's recently released [An Update to the India Economic Strategy to 2023](#).

Additionally, the Centre should seek to support outcomes from the ECTA to ensure the benefits from it are fully realised, including those relating to professional services, education, and tourism. There are a great number of opportunities arising from the ECTA, but these must be explained and promoted to ensure businesses take advantage of them. This could complement the work currently undertaken by Austrade.

Finally, the Centre's work should be guided by India's [National Education Policy 2020](#) (NEP), noting the importance of

education in the Australia-India relationship and its focus within the new *Maitri* program. The NEP is introducing transformational reforms to India's education and training systems and presents opportunities for countries wishing to increase their engagement with India's education sector. For example, the NEP aims to increase the gross enrolment ratio in higher education to 50% by 2035 and introduces a minimum requirement for teachers of a four-year Bachelor of Education by 2030. It also provides opportunities to expand international education engagement.

The NEP has guided the University's engagement with India, including the recently launched Blended Academy for Teaching and Learning in collaboration with the Savitribai Phule Pune University (SPPU). The Academy, which enables an Indian higher education institution to deliver innovative curriculums designed by the University, will offer a new Graduate Diploma in Early Childhood Education to support capacity building in education.

Given the opportunities for further collaboration in education, the Centre should seek to engage with Australia's universities, building on and utilising their existing partnerships, knowledge, research, and alumni networks.

### **In addition to the activities outlined, what else should the Centre do to promote practical cooperation with India?**

**Fostering research collaboration** - Beyond the activities currently proposed, the University would suggest a focus on greater research collaboration between Australia and India, including initiatives led by the All. India is an important research partner for Australia, representing our seventh-largest scientific publication partner between 2016-20 and producing around 2,130 co-publications annually.<sup>1</sup> However, there is room for growth. The IES included deepening the research and innovation partnership between Australia and India as one of its main goals for education. It made multiple recommendations relating to research, including scaling up the Australia-India Strategic Research Fund.

The University welcomes the new *Maitri* Program, which will go some way to achieving this, but there are other activities that could support this collaboration. For example, the Australian Researcher Cooperation Hub India (ARCH-India), established in 2021, provides an online platform for researchers to connect expertise, build relationships, share information, and explore opportunities for collaboration and mobility. Importantly, ARCH-India, which is managed by the All and funded by the Department of Education, Skills and Employment, supports research not just in STEM but in HASS and other fields of study. Noting that the IES Update Action Plan included ARCH-India, the Centre could support this activity into the future and ensure the sustainability of the platform by partnering with the All.

Research collaboration could also be expanded through models such as the Melbourne India Postgraduate Academy (MIPA). MIPA is a joint initiative consisting of established researchers and joint PhD candidates from the University of Melbourne and a group of India's elite research universities. Through the program, collaborative research teams from Melbourne and India engage in projects that address key issues in science and technology. This program could provide a model for fostering a deeper research relationship between our two countries.

**Enabling social and community engagement** - In addition to research, the University proposes that the Centre's activities involve a focus on social and community engagement. This is a key focus for the University under its India Strategy 2020-2024, which includes building shared future societies that are "equal, inclusive and well-governed". This comprises activities such as: establishing the Indian Equality Law Program; working with the Indian Department of Empowerment of People with Disabilities (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment) and disability service providers to increase inclusion and improve the lives of people with disabilities, their families and carers, and; exploring opportunities for educational mobility for underrepresented groups in India.

The University has supported this work through the Indian Engagement Seed Grants, which advance new and sustainable links between the University and institutions and community organisations in India. The University has also used its India School Education Engagement and India School Engagement Special Grants to stimulate and support connections between University staff and members of school communities in India. These grants aim to improve access to primary/secondary settings, promote sustained learning, and bring about positive change for school communities.

### **What type of bilateral events do you think would enhance policy dialogue?**

Bilateral events that facilitate policy dialogue between Australia and India are an important way to deepen the relationship between the two countries. These events allow leaders from Australia and India to share policy learnings and discuss ways to achieve shared goals, encouraging policy and regulatory reforms that benefit both nations.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, An Update to the India Economic Strategy to 2023, p.23  
<https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/india-economic-strategy-update-report.pdf>

Noting the importance of these activities, the All's vision is "to be Australia's leading authority on the Australia-India relationship and the principal convenor of strategic dialogue between our two nations". The Institute has already developed a strong reputation as a facilitator of bilateral dialogue. For example, in April, the All hosted Minister Goyal and Australia's Trade Minister, The Hon Dan Tehan MP, to celebrate the ECTA. In February, the All hosted India's External Affairs Minister, Dr S. Jaishankar for a public conversation with All CEO Lisa Singh. In 2018, the Indian President, Mr Ram Nath Kovind, visited the All to deliver a lecture titled 'Australia and India as knowledge partners'.

The Australia India Institute is also host to the Australia India Leadership Dialogue (AILD), a privately supported bilateral track 1.5 dialogue of senior government and industry leaders, and the leading forum for informal diplomacy between Australia and India. The Australian Prime Minister, Trade Minister and Shadow Foreign Affairs Minister have attended the AILD in the past, highlighting its strategic significance. The AILD 2022 will take place in New Delhi in partnership with Atlassian and the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) with a focus on bilateral priority issues, particularly emerging technology such as ed tech, fin tech, energy security, digital health, and the digital economy.

Given its current track record, the All would be well placed to lead the Centre's work promoting policy dialogue. This could include other bilateral events, such as sector-specific policy roundtables, lectures and discussions with Australian and Indian politicians, diplomats, academics, and business people. Future events for the Centre could focus on common areas of interest, including sustainability, climate change, health and education.

### **What initiatives could help engage Australia's Indian communities in support of the bilateral relationship?**

Engaging Australia's Indian diaspora community is a key focus for the University, as outlined in the Engaging with India Strategy. This large community is a significant factor for Indian students when deciding to further their studies in Melbourne. The Strategy commits to developing a framework for broader engagement with the Indian diaspora in Melbourne, including through community events on campus for Diwali and increased partnership with the All.

Deepening cultural connections and understanding constitutes a major part of the All's work, as cultural diplomacy is one of the three key impact themes for the Institute. This program focuses on enhancing public opinion and cross-cultural understanding of Australia and India, through policy-oriented research and analysis on important bilateral issues including diaspora communities, people-to-people links, arts and culture, youth and innovation, international education, sports diplomacy and gender equality. Given the importance of these links, the All hosts a range of cultural events. For example, in August 2021 the All hosted All India Week to celebrate India's 75<sup>th</sup> Independence Day.

Through Asialink, the University has delivered highly successful creative exchanges, such as targeted dance exchange and commissions with partners in Kolkata. Support is also growing through programs to internationalise and develop market readiness for Australian start-up creatives seeking to target Indian creative industry ecosystems. The Faculty of Fine Arts and Music has also funded overseas experiences to India, deepening cultural connections. The Centre could continue to support and build on these types of activities to strengthen the bilateral relationship and engage diaspora.

### **How can the Centre help business build its India literacy and connections?**

Increasing India business capability is essential to enhancing economic activity between our countries and realising the benefits of the ECTA. The University has supported the provision of this upskilling through both Asialink and the All. For example, the All plays an important convening role, drawing a diverse range of business groups together.

Hosted by the University, Asialink is Australia's National Centre for Asia Capability, equipping organisations in all sectors to become Asia ready by developing critical capabilities, insights and connections, to engage and negotiate the complexities of the region. The work of Asialink Business goes beyond building India literacy by providing comprehensive market resources, increasing understanding of business practices, strengthening cultural intelligence, and facilitating connections. Asialink Business runs important programs for the Asialink Group such as the Asialink Leaders Program, which offers a transformational experience to Australian emerging leaders looking to engage in the region, equipping them with the latest insights, capabilities, and connections to position them for success with the region.

The Centre should work to build connections between the Australian and Indian business communities, including Australian businesses that do not currently engage in the region. This could be strengthened by leveraging the knowledge and connections of Indian diaspora and alumni. Additionally, the Centre could set up an Indian cultural library for reference and research among Australian businesses about India, its people, cultures, history, and opportunities to do business with India. The Centre could also explore how knowledge of India is built into both our secondary and tertiary education curricula, building Australia's long-term capacity to engage with India.