

Submission to the
Department of
Foreign Affairs &
Trade

August 2024



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

A New Roadmap for Australia's Economic Engagement with India - Consultation

1. Background

The University of Melbourne welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Australian Government's *A New Roadmap for Australia's Economic Engagement with India*.

India's rapidly growing middle class, its embrace of technology, renewable energy, and demand for top education services and tourism experiences present opportunities to grow our economic ties. The University of Melbourne (the University) is pleased to note the successful implementation of the Roadmap recommendations in the 2018 India Economic Strategy to 2035 and the 2022 update. Some of these initiatives have significantly supported the education sector including teaching and research.

The University of Melbourne's engagement with India is multi-faceted and built upon the significant contribution of our large community of scholars, staff, students and visitors. The University has formed partnerships with several of India's top-ranked institutions.

There is an opportunity for Australian universities to capitalise on India's National Education Policy (NEP) to establish and expand transnational programs and research with India. The NEP outlines India's aspirational agenda for universal, high quality and inclusive school education, accessible, quality higher education, and impactful research.

In our experience, education institutions need consistent and coherent government policy and regulation to enable confident engagement with India. The new Roadmap should be integrated into the activities and policies across government, particularly Austrade, the Department of Education, and the Department of Home Affairs.

2. Obstacles to the Australian higher education sector's engagement with India

1. **The Government's proposed ESOS Amendment Bill** would grant the Minister for Education broad powers to cap international student enrolments and cancel or suspend the registration of courses provided to international students which are deemed to be low priority. This will be a major obstacle to higher education providers engaging with the Indian market.

If faced with a cap, leaders in the higher education market will have little incentive to diversify into large, but comparatively less profitable markets such as India.

The Bill as proposed imposes significant penalties on providers who enrol above their cap. This is likely to mean that providers will reduce international student enrolments to a level significantly below their cap, to ensure they do not overshoot it. This will further disincentivise providers from seeking to grow international student numbers, including from India.

As it is currently proposed, providers might only learn about their caps for 2025 on 31 December 2024, and for the following years on 1 September. This situation has created substantial uncertainty, making it challenging for providers to plan recruitment efforts and hindering their potential to connect more effectively with markets like India.

The combination of this Bill and other changes that the Government has made around visas (outlined in more detail below), is resonating in Australia's offshore markets, including in India. Students are reconsidering Australia as their preferred study destination. Growing higher education

sector engagement with India would be greatly assisted by a whole-of-government approach to policy settings, a regulatory impact assessment on changes to government policy and a decision by Government to not impose caps on international students.

The proposed international student caps will also be an obstacle to innovative forms of transnational education between Australian and Indian institutions, ultimately hindering efforts to strengthen economic ties with India. If caps are to be implemented, special consideration should be given to international (including Indian) students enrolled in collaborative/transnational programs resulting from partnerships between universities. This approach could help sustain and promote collaboration between the two countries while maintaining high standards and the integrity of Australian higher education.

For example, an exception should be made for the University's Bachelor of Science Dual Degree program which offers Indian students the chance to complete their degrees in both India and Melbourne. This involves studying in India for the first two years and spending the next two years on campus in Melbourne.

2. A key obstacle to expanding the higher education sector's engagement with India is **policy instability, particularly in relation to visas**. To support bilateral relations, visa procedures for Indian students and scholars to Australia should be simplified and processing times should be improved. In December 2023, the Australian Government released the Migration Strategy and a series of visa policy measures that have impacted international student, researcher and graduate mobility to Australia. The Indian student market has been particularly affected by these changes. Between 1 July 2023 and 30 June 2024 there were 51% fewer student visas granted to Indian citizens than in the previous financial year. In comparison there were only 8% fewer student visas granted to Chinese citizens.

University of Melbourne's own diversification strategy is being impacted by the visa changes.

In modifying visa rules the Government must also be mindful of the perception that countries such as India may develop that their students are being unfairly targeted by changes, and of the impacts that changes have on universities' efforts to diversify their student cohorts and on Australia's bilateral relationship.

Barriers and challenges are also present in the Indian visa system, limiting opportunities for Australian students to seek professional experience through paid internships.

Both governments need to ensure balanced reciprocity and visa policy settings which allow for adequate access to student and professional mobility and support for professional development opportunities through work-integrated learning and paid internships.

3. Another obstacle to engagement is a **lack of long-term funding mechanisms allowing sustained coordination between education sectors in the two countries**. This could be addressed by targeted, longer-term collaborative Centres of Excellence funded by both governments rather than short-term bilateral projects. Educational activities could be developed with premier Indian institutions and selected schools to train the next generation of research leaders and develop capacity, particularly in engineering and information technology. The focus of these Centres of Excellence could be on tackling key challenges, including water security, public health, digital agricultural services and digital governance.

3. Opportunities for growth and partnership with India

1. The 2023 Mechanism for the **Mutual Recognition of Qualifications between Australia and India is an important step forward, and a significant opportunity** to deepen relations between the two countries. Simplifying and streamlining the process for mutual recognition of academic qualifications between India and Australia will help facilitate easier recognition of degrees and certifications obtained in both countries, resulting in expanded education and migration opportunities. Given the scale of movement of professionals between the two countries and the opportunities for expansion of services trade, work to improve bilateral recognition of professional qualifications will benefit both countries. The university is looking forward to further sector consultation on how this mechanism will be put into practice.
2. The University of Melbourne's Centre for the Study of Higher Education has been working with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) to undertake research and capacity building on international recognition of professional qualifications in APEC. They have been centrally involved in developing the APEC Inventory of Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRA) for Professional Qualifications and Licensure. The Inventory shows that only nine MRAs are in place between India and APEC economies, six of which involve Australia. With the agreement to establish Mutual Recognition of Qualifications between Australia and India there is also an opportunity for the Australian government to **support further research and capacity-building in relation to recognition of professional qualifications and licensure with a specific India focus.**

The University of Melbourne is keen to see **support for research into patterns of professional mobility between India and Australia**, focusing on priority professions, including in relation to:

- the attractiveness of Australian professional qualifications to Indian international students and the recognition of these qualifications in India and other countries
- the current state of recognition of Indian professional qualifications and licensure in Australia and opportunities for cooperation to build alignment and improve recognition over time

Such research would align with Australia's migration strategy and support a range of professional mobility initiatives that have been introduced in the 2022 Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement (ECTA), the 2023 Migration and Mobility Partnership Arrangement (MMPA) and future initiatives that may be included in a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement. The aim would be to provide an evidence base to support bilateral engagement between government agencies, competent authorities, professional bodies and other stakeholders.

3. There is an opportunity **to introduce a formal mechanism to facilitate the internationalisation of curricula** between Indian and Australian universities under the frameworks for developing joint courses implemented by India's University Grants Commission (UGC). Both countries would benefit from co-developing curricula for priority courses to meet their future job markets and the aspirations of India's NEP.

As an example of the sort of joint course which could be developed, the University of Melbourne offers a Bachelor of Science (BSc) (Blended) in collaboration with exceptional Indian research and higher education institutions. Launched in 2016, the BSc (Blended) program offers the opportunity for higher education institutions in India to deliver an innovative new three-year curriculum that is designed and quality assured by the University. The course is primarily designed to prepare graduates for further study in postgraduate science and related areas, particularly internationally, but it is also well-suited to workforce participation in science related companies that have industry-specific workplace training. The program is now taught at a range of institutions, including Savitribai

Phule Pune University and the University of Madras. The University is also extending these partnerships into other fields of study and exploring dual degrees and research programs.

4. There is opportunity for Australia to **support Indian education at all levels**, from schools to tertiary institutions as well as research training through joint Doctorates of Philosophy. As an example of where Australia could provide assistance, part of the NEP includes a new requirement that teachers must hold at least a four-year Bachelor of Education from a multi-disciplinary university by 2030. This has created enormous demand for initial teacher education. The Federal Government could simultaneously address these teacher shortages and build ties with India by funding initial teacher education internship programs that are available to both domestic and international students. International students who complete the paid internship programs could be required to remain and work in Australia for a minimum number of years, before having the choice to return to their home country to bolster their domestic teacher workforce.
5. Another opportunity would be for the governments to **allocate funding for collaborative teaching and learning programs** between Australian and Indian academic institutions. Currently, the Australia India Strategic Research Funds (AISRF) program is available only to enhance research partnerships. There is an opportunity for the government to support the education sector through other forms of academic engagement. For instance, a separate funding program could be established in partnership with the Ministry of Education in India to support student mobility and teaching programs.
6. There is an opportunity to strengthen coordination on global issues such as climate change, sustainable development goals, and regional security by **further involving universities and policy think tanks in policy coordination and diplomatic engagement**. Regular high-level dialogues and exchanges can help align policies and enhance diplomatic engagement.

Diverse opportunities are being created by both countries' net-zero targets and moves to tackle global environmental challenges. Universities are well placed to bring together government representatives, academics, policymakers, and private sector leaders from India and Australia to explore these opportunities. For example, the Australia India Renewables Dialogue organised by the Australia India Institute in Sydney on 16 July 2024, provided a platform to strengthen the clean energy transition partnership between the two countries. 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.

More opportunities for bilateral collaboration with India in tackling sustainability issues exist in the following areas:

- Modernising water infrastructure (from storage to farms and homes) for sustainable water and food through water engineering and digital technology.
- An innovative solution to national weather, water and environmental monitoring by virtual observation systems enabled by satellite Earth observation.
- Smart and sustainable building and manufacturing.
- Green technology for energy, building, agriculture and transport systems to achieve net zero.
- Space technology to manufacture light-payload satellites for Earth observation and mobile networks.
- Industrial sensing as a fundamental component of smart and digital technologies.
- Satellite surveillance of coasts for defence and national security.
- Earth observation initiatives to monitor nature in collaboration with NASA, ESA and ISRO.

7. Following the recommendations made in the current roadmap (6.1.2: *Reposition 'Brand Australia' to improve India's perception of the high quality of Australian Education: A 'Study in Australia' Education hub should be established in commercial offices*), there is an opportunity to **establish an 'Australia-India education 'Academy', or 'Hub'** to support collaboration on transnational research (TNR) and education (TNE). As it stands, Australian universities are essentially engaging with Indian partners independently, with all the difficulties and costs this entails.

A central hub which facilitates Australian universities' collaboration with Indian partners could potentially bring numerous benefits. It could support the ARCH-India Virtual Hub, increase involvement of Indian academic institutions and Diaspora, support Australian and Indian researchers and businesses, and develop leadership programs for women and youth. Such a body could potentially promote joint/dual degree programs, help reduce reliance on a single source country for international students, enhance industry engagement through research collaboration, and promote cultural understanding with Indian Studies.

By implementing these changes, India and Australia can create a more conducive environment for educational collaboration, foster mutual benefits, strengthen bilateral relations, and address global challenges through shared knowledge and expertise.

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