

Centre for Australia-India Relations – IRU Response

Overview

The Innovative Research Universities (IRU) welcomes the announcement of a new Centre for Australia-India Relations that will foster closer ties and support our expanding relationship with India. The IRU has a particular focus on strengthening engagement with key partners in the Indo-Pacific through education and research and we look forward to working closely with DFAT and other partners on the development of the new Centre and the implementation of the *Maitri* scholarships and fellowships. Below we provide initial ideas on opportunities for strengthening the bilateral relationship in line with the stated focus areas for the Centre, namely:

- policy dialogue;
- business links and literacy;
- engaging the Indian diaspora community; and
- deepening cultural connections.

About the IRU

The IRU is a group of eight universities across every mainland State and Territory in Australia, with a shared commitment to inclusive education and to high-quality research that delivers impact for our communities. Since their founding in the 1960s and 70s, many of our universities have also had a commitment to contribute to a better understanding of, and closer engagement with, our neighbours in the Indo-Pacific.

The IRU has a distinct international profile, with more diversity among its international students, and more offshore delivery of education, than the average across Australian universities. Prior to the pandemic, India was the most important source country for international students at the IRU, with Indian students representing 16 per cent of our total international cohort. Across our individual members, this ranged from 31 per cent of the international student cohort to 10 per cent. IRU members have published more than 1,000 journal articles with Indian collaborators since 2017, with annual collaborative output roughly tripling between 2017 and 2021. IRU member La Trobe University is one of only two universities in the country offering studies in Hindi.

One of the IRU's key priorities is to strengthen international engagement with a focus on strategic partners in the Indo-Pacific, and we would welcome the opportunity to work more closely on DFAT on this objective. Currently, IRU universities are also working collectively in partnership with Austrade to explore new opportunities for partnerships and in-country education delivery in India. An IRU representative participated in the Australia India Business Exchange (AIBX) 2021 Business Mission as part of the virtual education delegation.

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Shaping the Centre for Australia-India Relations

The IRU supports the introduction of new *Maitri* scholarships and fellowships to strengthen exchange and cooperation. To meet the policy goal of deeper and broader mutual understanding across all sectors of our societies, we believe that scholarships and fellowships should be accessible to a wide range of students and professionals, from all socio-economic backgrounds, universities, disciplines and course levels. A coordinated national approach to promoting Australia, inclusive of all cities/regions and universities, should be part of the *Maitri* initiative, supported by the new Centre.

To ensure the most efficient and effective use of new funding to support the bilateral relationship, government should map existing scholarship and fellowship opportunities and address any gaps in two-way student and researcher mobility. Particular attention should be given to opportunities for two-way exchange at postgraduate and PhD levels, to build the next generation of future research and innovation partnerships in universities and industry. This should include broader government priorities and programs with a bearing on the Australia-India relationship – for example, the existing Quad STEM fellowships which provide opportunities for Masters and PhD students to further their studies in the United States. These could be extended to also strengthen two-way mobility between Australia and India. The Centre could also play a valuable role in better connecting existing programs, for example new joint Masters and PhD programs and initiatives to connect student exchange with broader objectives for more strategic research collaboration and industry innovation, including alignment with activities supported through NCP.

In our recent [submission](#) to the Department of Education's consultation on diversification of Australian international education, the IRU recommended steps to improve policy coordination across multiple departments and portfolios. In the context of the relationship with India, the new Centre could play a valuable role in strengthening policy dialogue and alignment between initiatives across the Australian Government. For example, strengthening university-industry dialogue between Australia and India to support policy goals of increased technology sector collaboration and research commercialisation, as well as the Future Skills Dialogue.

Universities should be involved in mapping engagement and delivering new programs with the Indian diaspora community and the new Business Champions group, which can also play a role in achieving education and research outcomes. By leveraging university communities, including students and alumni, the Centre can play a critical role in strengthening India literacy across Australia, including language and culture. Both in-person and online events and initiatives will support this goal.

The IRU also welcomes the new Australia-India Education Qualifications Recognition Taskforce as a key step in removing barriers to closer collaboration between the two countries. In line with the *Australian International Education Strategy 2030*, the taskforce should examine recognition for new forms of education delivery, including offshore and hybrid/online. A particular focus for the IRU is recognition of 12 month diploma programs offered in India by Australian institutions, as a pathway to further study.

We believe that the new Centre can also play an important role in promoting the benefits of two-way study and work-integrated-learning opportunities for both Indian and Australian students. This will require universities being involved in policy dialogue and engagement with the business community for a more modern and coordinated approach. For example, in addition to creating new opportunities for Indian students to study at Australian universities, we would also like to see

broader opportunities for Australian students to undertake internships with Indian companies and for graduates of Australian universities to be supported in finding employment in India. A practical next step could be for the IRU to partner with the new Centre on a bilateral workshop or roundtable to bring together university and industry representatives.

Building upon our existing connections with India and our commitment to strengthening engagement with the Indo-Pacific, the IRU welcomes the opportunity to work with DFAT on shaping the new Centre for Australia-India Relations.

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