

## A New Roadmap for Australia's Economic Engagement with India 5 August 2024

Key takeaways:

1. Changed visa settings would improve the ability of Indian students to study in Australia
2. Australian institutions face regulatory challenges in delivering education in India
3. A new roadmap for economic engagement should include a focus on transnational education and investment in Brand Australia

The Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN Universities) welcomes the opportunity to comment on a new roadmap for Australia's economic engagement with India. Our six members hold a wealth of longstanding and diverse expertise in partnering with India to educate students and collaborate on research. **With a focus on innovation, industry partnerships and producing employable graduates who can adapt to rapidly changing job markets, our universities are well-placed to offer solutions** to India's demand for high-quality education and skills training and work towards greater scientific cooperation.

### CASE STUDY:

*The Birla Institute of Technology (BITS), the town of Pilani and RMIT University came together in 2023 to create The Academy. This partnership is the first Australian/Indian dual degree program contributing to the development of a globally engaged and skilled workforce. The Academy is committed to delivering high-quality transnational education to Indian students and facilitating significant regional collaboration between Australia and India.*

*As part of the program, undergraduate students spend the first two years of their degree studying at BITS Pilani in India, and in their final two years study at RMIT. This is the first partnership between Australian and Indian universities in which students will graduate with two qualifications. The Academy also offers a joint PhD program focused on several key India-Australia priorities.*

## Changed visa settings would improve the ability of Indian students to study in Australia

As Australia's second largest cohort of international students,<sup>1</sup> Indian students continue to demonstrate a huge interest in studying in Australia. It has taken some years for numbers to recover post-COVID, with 2023 being the first year to see growth in numbers. However, Indian students are

<sup>1</sup> Australian Department of Education data to April 2024, accessed at: [International student numbers by country, by state and territory - Department of Education, Australian Government](#) on 1 August 2024

now being adversely affected by the Government's recent changes to student visa settings. **Our universities have experienced a high number of refusals and delays in the processing of visas particularly for undergraduate courses and those coming into Australia via pathway programs**, even though efforts are made to ensure a high quality of applications. Data from the Department of Home Affairs indicates that 59 per cent of student visa applications for the higher education sector from Indian citizens were granted in the 2023-24 year, compared to 87 per cent of applications in 2022-23.<sup>2</sup>

**Stable visa settings are vitally important for maintaining Australia's reputation as a preferred and reliable destination for international education in an extremely competitive environment.** ATN Universities strongly supports visa settings which provide high-quality Indian applicants with opportunities to study in Australia. This would provide greater certainty for students and offset the impacts to our bilateral relations with India that are starting to become evident as students remain in limbo.

## **Australian institutions face regulatory challenges in delivering education in India**

The regulatory environment in India continues to be challenging for those wishing to set up new transnational ventures. India's National Education Policy 2020 is still in implementation phase and Australian institutions must navigate rules set by multiple governing bodies including the University Grants Commission and local governments. ATN Universities acknowledges that Australian Government officials in India have been working to clarify these arrangements; **anything further that can be done to resolve sticking points, improve certainty and provide best-practice examples that satisfy regulatory requirements would be welcomed.**

### **CASE STUDY:**

*In partnership with Accenture, UniSA proposed to set up a transnational education venture in India. At the time, obtaining clear guidance on issues such as taxation, repatriation of funds and how to set up a venture partnership with industry proved difficult. Even with the introduction of new regulations by the University Grants Commission related to the set up and operation of campuses of foreign higher education institutions in 2023, the operating environment remained unclear, particularly in relation to recognising industry partnerships. Ultimately, the venture was not pursued.*

While there is a framework for mutual recognition of Australian and Indian qualifications, it could be strengthened to incorporate new and innovative models such as online or blended learning. This would make delivery of transnational education in India more financially viable for Australian institutions.

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<sup>2</sup> Australian Department of Home Affairs data to 30 June 2024, accessed at: <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-statistics/statistics/visa-statistics/study> on 2 August 2024

**There can be incoherence between Australia’s highly regulated tertiary education environment and Indian requirements.** For example, taking the same example of online education: Australia’s Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) has given approval for institutions to deliver online or digital lectures offshore, but India will not recognise this as an acceptable form of delivery for transnational education. There is also misalignment in relation to credit for recognised learning completed in each country. This makes it difficult to develop joint coursework programs that could be offered in partnership between Australian and Indian universities.

## **A new roadmap for economic engagement should include a focus on transnational education and investment in Brand Australia**

### **A targeted approach to collaboration**

The opportunities to collaborate with India are vast and there are many directions a new roadmap could take. We note that education has been a focus area in successive policy frameworks on Australia’s engagement with India. For example, the India Economic Strategy to 2035 presented education as the ‘flagship of the future economic partnership’<sup>3</sup> and the 2022 update to the Strategy also prioritised the strengthening of education and research links. **We would welcome a particular focus on transnational education, with co-investment from the government to mitigate some of the risks of setting up overseas ventures.** Assistance to navigate regulatory obstacles, increase recognition of online courses and introduce new models of delivery – particularly through partnership with industry – would also greatly improve the viability of such projects. This could be through the development of joint centres and institutes in areas of common importance between Australia and India.

**A new roadmap could also intensify cooperation on key industrial and economic sectors of interest for both India and Australia.** These include the green economy, energy transition, ensuring sustainability and resilient supply chains, water and food security, healthcare and sports science. ATN Universities offer extensive expertise in these fields and are actively looking for expansion opportunities.

### **Brand Australia**

Greater investment by the Australian Government in our reputation and brand in India has the capacity to be a force multiplier across economy-wide efforts to deepen collaboration. A concerted effort to project Brand Australia should lean into our ability to deliver high-quality education, skills training and research collaboration. **We should take a multistakeholder approach and clearly reflect that partnership with India is a two-way street offering benefits for both nations.** Alongside existing initiatives, it is important that we grow the number of Australian students spending time in India, which is vital to improving cultural understanding and developing longstanding and deep relationships.

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<sup>3</sup> Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, India Economic Strategy to 2035 Education Sector Snapshot, accessed at [Sector Snapshots - An India Economic Strategy To 2035 - Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade \(dfat.gov.au\)](#) on 1 August 2024

Public diplomacy efforts should take place in both India and at home. In India, there can be a misperception that Australian education institutions are of lower quality than US and UK competitors. In Australia, students, alumni and a huge Indian diaspora have built links across all aspects of society. We should go beyond traditional areas such as sports diplomacy to demonstrate shared interests across a range of fields – including education, training and research.

We cannot maintain our reputation if Australia is not perceived to have a welcoming environment. **To that end, we reiterate the need to revise current student visa settings and improve the predictability and reliability of Australia as a study destination.**

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ATN member universities are committed to long term, genuine engagement with India for mutual benefit. We would welcome the opportunity to collaborate on further initiatives as we deepen our bilateral ties.

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