

5 August 2024

Dear Colleagues,

Submission to A New Roadmap for Australia's Economic Engagement with India

The deep and enduring relationship that Australia shares with India is underpinned by the people-to-people links that have been developed and nurtured through our long-standing education partnerships. Universities Australia represents Australia's 39 comprehensive universities that have patiently and purposefully bolstered Australia's relationship with India for decades.

In the original, *An India Economic Strategy to 2035 (IES)*, education was named as the flagship of the bilateral relationship. Universities Australia provided input on the development of the IES, as well as the *Update to the IES*. We welcome the opportunity to input into a new roadmap for Australia's economic engagement with India.

Our universities have a longstanding and fruitful relationship with India, significantly bolstered by these strategies. They have played a pivotal role in enhancing bilateral ties, particularly in education, research, and innovation.

Universities are key to maximising the economic potential of the relationship with India. Australia is facing skill shortages, economic challenges and security issues in a fast-changing environment and we need more skilled people, educated in our universities, to help us respond.

In turn, India is looking to realise their education ambition to educate 500 million students by 2035. Australian universities are here to help by giving as many people as possible the educational opportunities they deserve.

Since the release of the IES, we have witnessed a substantial growth in the Australia-India economic relationship with an unprecedented number of Ministerial visits. During that time, Australia also successfully concluding negotiations on the Australia-India Economic Comprehensive Trade Agreement (ECTA). This agreement was welcomed by our universities to assist in facilitating greater collaboration between our researchers, whose work is essential to the success, safety and prosperity of both our nations.

The *Update to the IES* further solidified these gains, emphasising the critical role of education in our bilateral relationship and committing to a suite of initiatives to continue to bolster our economic, science, cyber, people-to-people and environmental ties with India. The former Government invested approximately \$62 million to support greater initiatives and grow the relationship.

To ensure sustained progress, it is essential to solidify and implement the initiatives identified in these strategies. A comprehensive review of the current strategies and initiatives that have, or have not, progressed would provide valuable insights and help avoid redundancy in subsequent documents.

Several key bodies and groups have played vital roles in supporting and building on the Australia-India relationship. Universities Australia plays an active role in the Australia-India CEO Forum and has previously supported the Centre for Australia India Relations. We have firsthand experience on how instrumental these groups have been in fostering business and cultural links, promoting mutual understanding, and driving collaborative initiatives. Their contributions should be acknowledged, and their roles enhanced in the development of the new roadmap.



It should be noted that while Universities Australia welcomes the intent behind the development of a new roadmap, we urge DFAT to consider the current political and international education policy environment first.

Australia and India are united in understanding the power of education – to change lives and power economies. Australian universities followed this direction, supporting Government in their ambitions to grow the relationship by educating Indian students, collaborating in research, expanding partnerships and opening branch campuses.

Australian universities invested heavily in the Indian market, recognising the value of this partnership for national prosperity. Unfortunately, recent visa policy changes and the introduction of Ministerial Direction 107 has significantly impacted the free flow of Indian students into Australia. Shifts in visa policies have resulted in too many Indian students having their dreams of acquiring a world-class Australian education vanish.

It is well understood that enhancing student mobility is crucial for fostering long-term bilateral relations, supporting diplomatic efforts, enhancing soft power and leveraging the full potential of our academic and research collaboration. Yet, these policy changes are not only having a detrimental impact on our reputation as a welcoming country that values our people-to-people links with India but also significantly impacting on our universities' reputations and ability to continue to invest in this market.

As such Universities Australia recommends:

1. **Reconsider the timing** of progressing another strategic economic document and instead, focus on solidifying and implementing the current strategies, ensuring they are effectively executed, and any gaps addressed.
2. **Build on the ECTA with India** and bolster our economic relationship by finalising the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) negotiations, which will provide substantial benefits for both countries by enhancing trade, investment, and economic cooperation.
3. **Enhance the support for collaborative bodies** by increasing funding and resources for the Australia-India CEO Forum and the Centre for Australia India Relations. Strengthen their roles in fostering bilateral ties, facilitating dialogue, and driving collaborative grants and scholarships across sectors.
4. **Conduct a thorough review of past initiatives** identified in previous strategies, highlighting successes and taking note of initiatives that did not proceed to ensuring that future efforts are better aligned with current and emerging opportunities.

Universities Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide input into this process and would be pleased to discuss the recommendations of this letter further.

Yours sincerely,

Luke Sheehy
Chief Executive
Universities Australia