

India's Education Market: The Next Neo-Colonial Frontier

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Over the last week or so, Australian politicians and representatives of the university sector got busy pressing flesh in India, hoping to open avenues that have largely remained aspirational. It was timed to coincide with G20 talks in New Delhi, which has seen a flurry of contentious meetings traversing security, economics and education, all taking place in the shadow of the Ukraine War.

A starring outcome of the various discussions was an agreement between Canberra and New Delhi to ensure the mutual recognition of qualifications. On March 3, the Australian Minister for Education, Jason Clare, stated in a [media release](#) that the Mechanism for the Mutual Recognition of Qualifications was "India's most comprehensive education agreement of its type with another country."

Such a mechanism would ensure that Indian students attaining a degree from an Australian university would have it recognised should they wish to continue higher education in India. The release continues to optimistically extol the merits of the mechanism, which would open "a world of possibilities to develop flexible and innovative partnerships between the two countries." Minister Clare and his counterpart Shri Dharmendra Pradhan also reaffirmed their wish to establish an Australia India Working Group on Transnational Partnerships.

A number of memoranda of understanding, totalling 11 in all, were also signed, stressing bilateral cooperation between India and Australia in a number of fields, including law and bio-innovation.

"The developments today," [announced](#) the Indian Ministry of Education with certain effusion, "will create more opportunities for two-way mobility of students and professionals for the purpose of education and employment, and pave the way for making education the biggest enabler in taking India-Australia bilateral relationship to greater heights and shared aspirations."

The public relations front was also busy with fanfare. Brian Schmidt, Nobel laureate and vice-chancellor of the Australian National University, [met students and officials](#) at Sri Venkateswara College of the University of Delhi. His polite welcome was shaded by the more raucous one given to former Australian test cricketer Adam Gilchrist, who acts as the University of Wollongong's global brand ambassador. For such institutions, brands come before brains.

Gilchrist's presence was unsurprising, given the zeal with which the university he represents is pursuing a base in India. (The added point here is that Indians are utterly bonkers for cricket.) The soft power of cricketing appeal has been twinned with the hard corporate agenda. In July 2022, a [Letter of Intent](#) was signed between the University of Wollongong and the Gujarat International Finance Tec-City (GIFT City). According to the university, the intention is "to establish a location for teaching, research and industry engagement in GIFT City within a partnership or a stand-alone basis." This will further supplement pre-existing research collaborations in a number of fields, including 3D bioprinting, transportation and advanced medicine.

These events have served to show how starry-eyed education apparatchiks in Australia are increasingly looking to India as an alternative to China. Earlier this year, applications for student visas from India [exceeded](#) those from China.

What will eventuate from this round robin chat fest is hard to tell. The modern university behaves much as a colonial enterprise, with all its failings and brute drawbacks. In certain practices, they resemble the VOC or British East India Company. The guns and ammunition might have been abandoned but the residual ruthless mercantilism remains.

This takes the form of International Branch Campuses (IBCs), a booming neo-colonial favourite of universities from the United States, UK, Australia and a number of EU member states. Between 2002 and 2006, the number of IBCs [grew](#) from 18 to 82. By 2009, that number had swollen to 162. In some part, the move into the global education market, with its emphasis on academic capitalism, was encouraged by declines in domestic government funding. But it also betrayed a lazy myopia on the part of university managers.

Vice-chancellors, equipped with the powers of petty despotism, resemble functionaries in the service of capital, and not always good capital at that. They continue to embrace the plundering model of the rich student market, hoping to reap the rewards of the developing world spouting cliches about mutual advantage and "world class" education. If China falls out of favour, another market will take its place.

Deakin University's vice-chancellor, Iain Martin, [gives us a sense](#) of this attitude. India had "250 million people between the ages of 18 and 26 and an overcrowded, overly stressed domestic education system." Alas, standalone institutions from the outside were hard to establish as things stood. Thankfully, "the government has realised it needs to work with others outside India to open up educational opportunities."

As the *Australian Financial Review* [reports](#), "the sound of billions of dollars in tuition fees from a new generation of Indian students who are not just keen to study here, but to stay on to work and gain permanent residency, is pure happiness to the ears of vice-chancellors."

The welfare of such students, however, is quite a different thing. Those who tend to represent cash cows are rarely taken seriously, except for their cash. The quality of what

they receive is less significant than what they provide to university coffers. This works both ways, whether through the IBCs, or in the metropole where the main university campus is located. The treatment meted out to international students by Australian universities during the pandemic was nothing short of atrocious, characterised by callousness regarding the delivery of courses and uneven support schemes.

Another area of educational importance is also being neglected in these latest negotiations. India's officials and policy makers have expressed considerable interest in the role of vocational education. (This was touched on in the [Australia India Future Skills](#) initiative announced in March 2022 by the previous government.) A number of Australian universities are what are termed "dual sector" entities, straddling both tertiary and vocational. But its conspicuous absence on this occasion suggests that Australian universities, and some of their counterparts, are hoping for the easy cash-filled options.

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