

Strategic Engagement with India

A report from the June 2010 AUCC workshop



Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada
Association des universités et collèges du Canada

Introduction

Canadian universities, like their counterparts in many countries including the UK, US, and Australia, are expanding and accelerating their international education activities in India.

Many institutions are in the early stages of this effort while others are building on pre-existing presence in India. While student recruitment is central to these efforts, another main objective is partnering activities such as academic exchange, joint programming, and joint research projects.

As they develop their strategies of engagement, AUCC's role is to assist our members to address the related challenges and realize their objectives in India. As one example, to aid in member institutions' recruitment efforts, last year AUCC developed [*Recruiting International Students in India: A Good Practices Guidebook*](#).

As part of AUCC's India strategy and building on the session for presidents at the April 2010 membership meetings, AUCC hosted a two-day workshop in June 2010 to explore successful models of engagement in India. The event attracted more than 50 representatives of 30 universities from across Canada and featured experts from India, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, as well as Canadian universities. It was opened by the Indian High Commissioner to Canada, Shashishekhar Gavai, and included a keynote speech by David Malone, president of IDRC and former Canadian High Commissioner to India.

A range of panellists, including experts from India, presented examples of institutional strategies and models of partnerships. Small group discussions allowed for more in-depth exchange and analysis of experiences. (See agenda attached with links to presentations.)

The workshop underscored the variety and richness of current institutional strategies and partnerships while highlighting the need for Canadian universities to work together to build Canada's brand of excellence in India.

Canadian University Engagement: Why India? Why Now?

Canadian institutions looking to engage in India are motivated by the great promise of this country's rapidly developing higher education sector. They are however simultaneously confronted by equally great challenges presented by the breadth and complexity of India.

Great Promise

India is becoming an innovation hub and an "emerging economic powerhouse", with a burgeoning middle class, many times larger than the entire Canadian population, which is driving strong domestic demand. This demand is not limited to consumer goods – the list includes better infrastructure, more effective and transparent local government, efficient and effective application of the rule of law and of course better higher education opportunities.

The growth also creates demand for skilled labour. But this is colliding with a lack of capacity in supplying the labour. There are not enough high quality public institutions of education and training and the growing private sector share brings with it concerns about higher costs and lesser quality.

Advances in the higher education sector have been slow to date and while there are great numbers of students enrolled in higher education, the question remains: are they coming out of it with employable skills? This presents opportunities for Canadian institutions to help with this challenge through recruitment and partnering. The pool of students to begin with is advantageous – India’s is a culture that puts emphasis on achievement and as a result the young people are committed and serious in addition to already possessing good English language skills.

India’s research capacity is increasing rapidly and providing opportunities for engagement. Thomson Reuters reported last fall that India is on track to surpass the research capacity of each G8 country within the decade. More international collaboration with partners from provider countries like Canada is needed to consolidate these gains and enhance the innovation sector.

India is very networked through its massive global diaspora, a great portion of which is present here in Canada, including faculty at our universities. This represents a great asset for the collaboration and networking necessary in global education and innovation.

All parties are committed to higher education reform – the current minister responsible Kapil Sibal is determined to succeed as demonstrated by the Foreign Education Providers bill – described below. Over the next decade it is anticipated that 1,400 new postsecondary institutions will be created to serve seven million more students. India is opening its doors and inviting more international partnerships to help mount the response.

Many participants pointed out that this is a two-way opportunity. Canada can benefit greatly from interaction in India and can learn from Indian society - its places of learning and research and industry. Our Canadian students need exposure to Indian society given its status as a growing global force. This understanding and familiarity will serve Canada well in the future.

To achieve this goal, Canadian universities are exploring ways to ensure that some of their curriculum includes Indian content through joint programming and exchange.

There are also great opportunities for foreign partnerships in areas such as new institution mentoring; post-graduate and research capacity development; teacher training; and continuing education and corporate training for industry needs.

Great Challenges

Virtually all participants included some perspectives on the numerous challenges associated with implementing an India strategy. Primarily, the vastness of Indian society and its education sector proved most daunting. Navigation through the academic, cultural, and bureaucratic arenas has caused many strategies to be revised and restarted.

Some of the challenges noted:

In India:

- Dramatically changing parameters of education and research in India require a stringent quality assurance check of potential partners.
- Role of private sector in Indian education continues to evolve and due diligence is needed in exploring potential partnerships.
- General lack of profile for Canada and a lack of national approach to Canada brand-building and market research.

- Lack of proximity to partners in India inhibits communication and exchange of information and people.

At home:

- Lack of understanding at some levels of home institutions of the emergence of India as a premier partner.
- The distance and related costs are barriers – both psychologically and practically.
- There have been misguided attempts to use other experiences and templates (e.g. China) for building relationships with India.
- Cannot rely on government funding – both provincial and federal support is not always constant.
- Institutions are drawing on own internal resources for seed funding but this is limited and ad-hoc.
- Finding corporate partnerships for funding is difficult – need to show results first with programs.
- There is a need for a different model of finding research funding counterparts outside of universities (e.g. research institutes, industry, NGOs).

Foreign Education Providers Bill

The workshop featured a session on the *Foreign Education Providers Bill* introduced by the current government. The bill outlines the parameters around the opening of India to international institutions and would allow for the regulated establishment of foreign campuses there. The bill, which as of fall 2010 was still working its way through parliament, could have potential consequences for future and existing academic partnerships between Indian and foreign universities.

Presenters indicated that the main intent of the bill demonstrates openness to partners but with parameters that ensure the protection of students' interests and assure quality.

There was some concern as to the interpretation and implementation of the letter of the law, as set out in the language of the Bill, in particular the ambiguity around the treatment of academic partnerships between Indian and Canadian universities, aside from the establishment of branch campuses. AUCC has advocated to Indian officials for clarity on this issue.

Institutional Strategies

An India strategy is a high priority but remains a work in progress for many institutions. This is in contrast to China – for which many universities have far more evolved strategies. Not all lessons learned in China however, can be applied to an India strategy.

The great complexity of Indian society and its higher education system must be met with an equally complex strategy.

Presentations by Canadian universities and universities in other partner countries at the workshop demonstrated that there are myriad strategies of engagement with India and valuable lessons to be learned from each. Ultimately a combination of top down and bottom up is optimal to ensure success as all participants agreed.

Bottom-up (Faculty-led)

A ‘faculty-centric’ strategy with a focus on specific joint faculty research projects in select sectors can be effective even in the absence of an overall institutional strategy for India.

One successful example is the Waterloo Institute for Nanotechnology which builds in two-way student mobility or internships with Indian partners. Having the Indian students on summer internships in Canada serves as a recruitment tool as well since many may opt to come back for full-time graduate studies.

Workshops are used as research enablers: they include sessions that bring researchers together with their detailed knowledge to share in proposal writing sessions so that at the end of the workshop the participants walk away with a concrete outcome – a proposal.

From these faculty-centric research projects, the aim is to build up to an institutional strategy. This grass roots approach mitigates the risk of resistance within the institution.

There remain difficulties when there is no central coordination. So in order to avoid issues such as duplication there is a need for someone to fill the role of coordination if not direction. Regular meetings help bring together different actors from across the institution active in the partner country to share best practices.

A cross-cutting committee amongst departments can aid in coordination and harness the benefits of the bottom-up approach.

Top-down (Central administration-led)

For some universities, the role of the president is crucial to success across the institution at home as well as building relationships in India in order to get to know people and establish a high level of confidence. The strategy has a better chance of succeeding when devised with the president’s early input and crafting of vision. The president is needed to help build consensus and engage faculty to come up with their own ideas – to avoid imposing the strategy. It also helps assuage concerns about loss of priorities.

Tim Gore of the University of Greenwich maintained an institution needs a long-term plan with a top-down commitment and direction from the president for an effective India strategy: while there may be many opportunities, an institution needs to focus but remain flexible at the same time to adjust.

Obtaining faculty buy-in can be more difficult when this approach is taken but can be overcome by providing them with opportunities for engagement by holding international conferences for meeting Indian counterparts and through participation in mission visits to India. Communications and information sharing internally as well as with partners is essential to keeping all actors in the partnership engaged. Establishing a cross-university country group is helpful to allow for sharing of information and priorities and identifying of existing activities to build upon.

Before solidifying partnerships in India, an institution needs to build meaningful and substantive relationships through face to face contact – ideally including top level administrators from the university – and then the development of the partnership has greater momentum.

One model is to set up a strategy team of senior management, a focus India team from faculty and deans and an India advisory board with private sector leaders. The University of British Columbia, for example, is identifying a Canadian team across disciplines to inform its strategy. While a main goal is to enrich the student body with Indian talent and culture, it is looking also at where Canada can add value – public policy issues such as how to manage Indian social disparities, law and human rights.

The President of the University of Alberta has been a driving force for its strategy even to the point of her involvement in undergraduate recruitment efforts with top Indian high schools. The president chairs the administration's India regional council to develop plans. They are trying to get the India strategy to the same level as China relations where they have considerable experience. A recruitment focus is to bring in Indian graduate students but in many ways the recruitment in India is brand building for purposes of partnerships and not revenue-motivated. One area being developed is greater use of alumni networks.

The University of Alberta tries to work towards one or two flagship initiatives as part of its India strategy (likely major research collaboration projects) but wants to stay open for unforeseen opportunities.

Maastricht University of the Netherlands pursues its India strategy as part of its centrally-driven strategic focus on “brain circulation” to emphasize the many mutual benefits to all involved in the partnerships. The India strategy was presented at an internal institutional conference on India to get appropriate feedback and allow for further refinements. Another tactic is to establish a cross-university working group. The central administration would consult it closely to ensure support and participation from below as well as from above.

Community Driven

The University of the Fraser Valley has developed its relatively recent India strategy in large part through engagement with the substantial and pro-active local Indo-Canadian community. This diaspora community wishes to see their children benefiting from an interface with the burgeoning education sector in India. As an example, it created a Centre for Indo-Canadian studies through funding raised by the local community which provides a vehicle for exchange and collaboration. The partnerships are being developed in close consultation with members of the local community who are a useful source of information on the selection of potential partner institutions from India.

One of Simon Fraser University's main pillars of its India strategy is ‘community engagement.’ The goal is to ensure the Indo-Canadian community in BC and Canada is engaged in forging and enabling SFU's relationships with Indian institutions, communities and agencies. One vehicle for this is an SFU-India Advisory Council comprised of local leaders. It hosts various arts and language exhibits and cultural events and has strong links to local NGOs and government agencies supporting immigrant integration.

The community based approach can benefit as well from the growing dynamism of India's civil society. The University of Victoria's office of community based research faculty has been instrumental in developing an MA program in community development in partnership with the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) – an Indian NGO. The faculty members have worked closely with and learned from Indian partners in designing the curriculum.

Creating Partnerships

To have impact and profile with partners in the complex setting that is India, there are some lessons from existing approaches to creating these partnerships.

Play to your strengths

In navigating the system, Canadian institutions were encouraged to be true to their own identity. In the first instance, in seeking to create a partnership the representatives of the institution need to know the institution and how it is perceived. From there they can ensure the partnership reflects the institution's character and avoid an inconsistent and untenable plan that runs counter to the institutional goals and direction. Institutions were also urged to reflect on their value proposition and to play to their strengths.

While it is important to carefully select the institutions to develop a relationship, being adventurous in partnering also has the potential to pay dividends in the future through more innovative agreements or programs. This may necessitate a fair bit of capacity building with the Indian partner.

Institutions should be prepared to invest but also they should seek reciprocity of funding from Indian partners. They should also be prepared to commit staff with India expertise.

Concordia University, for example, has a strategy that highlights its own particular identity – an intersection of research and creativity. This has the benefit of responding to researchers' interests (which may mean letting chaos flourish) and harnessing it in an effort to maintain some control.

The University of Alberta has developed core principles of collaboration that guide its partnering activities:

- Equal partnership: recognition of the growing strength of Indian research, talent pool in R&D, and need for our students to gain in-depth understanding of India
- Build on commonalities between India and Canada: Commonwealth connection, English language, longstanding democratic traditions, multiculturalism
- Build on common interests e.g. energy, health, agriculture, preservation of cultural heritage

York University has been building on the Ontario government's Ontario Maharashtra Goa program to facilitate student exchange with India. Taking their engagement further, it has launched the Schulich MBA program in partnership with G.P. Jain Company in Mumbai with plans to develop a full fledged campus in Hyderabad in 2012 to tap into the large demand for business students in India.

It can be helpful in the pursuit of partnership in academic programs that an institution consider working with good quality 2nd tier universities as the top ones in India can be difficult to engage due to the large number of international partners with whom they already have partnerships. These 2nd tier institutions may have financial capacity but not research capacity. Once installed, the partners can do work to help bring up standards and then contribute to India's higher education capacity.

Focus on key partners but be multidimensional in partnerships

While it is important to be focused in the number of Indian institutional partners to ensure effective application of resources and effort, it is of equal importance to ensure that each partnership is

multidimensional. A diversity of arrangements with the partner, be it different activities or programs and with various faculties, should make up the relationship. This includes conferences, alumni events, research projects, publications, faculty and student exchanges.

This helps in many ways – not the least of which is in funding. If finances dry up in one area of collaboration, another area can be tapped to maintain momentum.

For example, the University of Alberta has a multidimensional engagement through its partnership with the University of Hyderabad. It includes high-level research cooperation, a research chair at U of A, creation of study abroad program for U of A students to Hyderabad, research internships, and faculty partnerships.

In whichever activity, research collaboration or academic programs, Concordia University endeavours to include two-way student and faculty mobility for both partners to support its international education principles.

Research partnerships can be given looser parameters because, among other things, the dispersed and uncoordinated nature of the Indian research sector, but the strategic areas to be considered for collaboration should be a part of the Canadian institution's overall strategic research plan. On the other hand, academic cooperation programs cannot be left too loose or decentralized. They need more structure to ensure quality of experience for participants.

Maastricht University has worked to brand itself through a strong proposition for collaboration and partnership building. Combining the strengths and needs of both Indian partners and Maastricht, there has been a significant effort to build relationships through an on the ground presence in the form of an office in Bangalore. This allows one person to be the key contact, a sustained presence, as well as make easier use of media outreach and advertising.

Making use of private sector connections is another important dimension to open up funding mechanisms. Maastricht has engaged both Dutch and Indian private sector partners to leverage funding for collaboration projects in India.

There are other potential partners in the Indian non-governmental sector as points of entry for Canadian institutions seeking partnering activities and to address the issue of funding sources. There are growing numbers of non-governmental organizations and think-tanks for which the Indian government has been increasing funds. These organizations will be playing an important role in public policy development and could be useful partners for Canadian researchers and academics.

Placing students at the centre of partnership activities ensures a dynamism and energy to the partnership. The University of British Columbia supports a student-led virtual classroom project involving UBC and Indian students. The small project of joint reading of a book pays large dividends in improving the student experiences within partnerships. UBC also created a Global Lounge with dedicated support staff to create a welcoming atmosphere and sustained support services to the students.

Canadian universities should include in their strategies a focus on sending Canadian students and researchers to benefit from Indian business expertise. Our students need to be comfortable with India and this matters to employers.

Develop an outgoing dimension to get students out first – this builds enthusiasm and familiarity within the institution – faculty are engaged through their students. The partnership needs faculty

links to allow trust between faculty to send students. A central faculty mobility seed fund helps to achieve this.

Overall Observations on Engaging with India

Across the many different approaches presented at the workshop, in all cases there were many points of agreement on what are the essential elements of good strategic engagement with India:

- As the partnership is being developed, it is important to listen carefully to the partner and make no assumptions. Partnering in India will be unlike any other partnering activity elsewhere.
- An initial commitment through internal seed funding is helpful in leveraging other sources of funding.
- Be prepared to invest but expect reciprocity for funding – Indian partners do have funds.
- Find champions among home faculty and partner faculty to tap into different sources of seed funding.
- Participate in signature programs (e.g. MITACS Globalink or the Ontario Maharashtra Goa program) to bring additional benefits through increased profile – the word of mouth provides a good network for future initiatives.
- Consider creating profile-raising initiatives such as McGill’s Canada-India Centre for Innovation and Carleton University’s Canada-India Centre of Excellence in Science, Technology, Trade and Policy.
- Use Indian alumni as spokespeople or champions to ensure promotion is done from the Indian perspective.
- Be focused in partners but multidimensional in partnership design.
- Look to non-traditional partners, NGOs, think tanks, and research institutes.
- Overcome the distance challenge by getting on the phone – not just email. Use technology for enhancing communications – this can assist greatly in the interaction with partners.
- Include reciprocal exchange as part of partnering initiatives by incorporating outgoing mobility for Canadian students and faculty in addition to incoming mobility from India.

Moving Forward

Canada Brand

Canadian universities, in spite of their many obvious strengths and high value proposition, still need to increase profile in India and bridge the current information gap and overcome Canadian universities’ fractured and low-profile image in India.

Canada has a generally positive image but is not well-known and cannot expect to be well-known as some of the bigger countries especially in the competitive field that is India. A coordinated effort is needed for maximum impact in such a complex environment.

The low profile, the distance and travel are all enormous barriers – and reasons why Canadian universities benefit from working together on collective initiatives. The November 2010 AUCC-led Presidents’ mission demonstrated the increased impact of such a collective effort.

AUCC is committed to build the Canada brand and promote increased engagement with India through a coordinated and collective effort and to add value to members' existing activities.