

**University Colleges Australia Conference 2012**

**Hyatt Hotel Canberra**

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**High Commissioner of India to Australia**

**The International Student Experience – an Indian Perspective**

Australia is one of the major destinations for Indian students studying abroad. At present there are 36,000 Indian students studying in Australia’s tertiary and vocational education sector. We are witnessing the emergence of a new opportunity for Australian vocational training institutes to deliver services to India. This demand for education is likely to grow exponentially over the next few decades.

Based on a 2012 survey of universities in Australia, it was revealed that 179 formal agreements have been concluded between Australian and Indian universities as of May 2012. Of these, 172 agreements are currently active. They involve student and staff exchanges as well as research collaboration. Five Australian universities deliver 15 programmes in India.

Like other emerging Asian economies, India faces a huge requirement of vocational education training over the next few decades. 12 million people enter the workforce in India every year. India faces the challenge of training a workforce of 500 million over the next few decades. Our domestic institutional training capacities are insufficient for this monumental task. The Indian Government encourages the participation of foreign Vocational Training Institutes in this sector, Australia and Germany are currently the preferred foreign vocational training providers for Indian industry. Indian corporates have successfully tied up with Australian Vocational Training Institutes to train trainers in specific skills in India. Roughly 75% of the Indian students studying in Australia are in the vocational training segment. Skills training and vocational education, therefore, presents a huge opportunity for Australia to leverage and benefit from Indian growth in the coming decades.

Science and Technology collaboration is acquiring a new salience in Australia’s relations with India. A number of Australian universities are pursuing collaboration with Indian universities. India and Australia have a highly successful Joint Strategic Research Fund that supports science and technology collaboration in the areas of agricultural research, astronomy and astrophysics, environmental sciences, microelectronics, nanotechnology, renewable energy, marine sciences and earth systems sciences. We need to strengthen such collaboration in the future.

Today, I want to dwell on a few issues related to the experience of Indian students in Australian universities. The issues that I propose to highlight are based on interviews conducted by the High Commission and Indian Consulates in Perth, Melbourne and Sydney. The issues and expectations ascertained from Indian students studying in Australian universities are the following:

* First, soon after arrival in Australia, students usually encounter social and cultural issues in the period of adjustment to local conditions. They are also confronted with decisions to be made with regard to accommodation, food and guidance.
* Second, there are a range of issues related to accommodation for international students which in turn have a bearing on their safety and security. Most universities have limited residential accommodation facilities for international students. To the extent that these facilities are available, they are expensive and often beyond their means.

Accommodation, therefore, remains an issue of great concern for international students. The high cost of accommodation makes it difficult for live near their educational institutions. Often students live in remote suburbs and are exploited by unscrupulous agents. Living away from the city causes security concerns as well since students often work during the night shift and have to take public transport at odd hours. New students should be offered accommodation inside the campus of educational institutions at cheaper rates. Alternatively, they should be offered concessional fares on public transportation as a means to promote their safety.

The high cost of accommodation often forces a large number of students to share living space which affects their study habits. Since students of the same nationality tend to live together this affects their integration with the local community.

Many Indian students feel lonely and isolated. They do not have access to cultural activities. They seek avenues for social interaction. There is a need for a social support system to deal with this problem.

I have attempted to summarise some of the concerns expressed by students and which have a bearing on tertiary education accommodation providers. I believe that Australian universities and their accommodation providers should focus on improving the international student experience as this would have profound consequences for the future growth of education linkages between India and Australia.