

Monash's commitment to Mumbai unwavering

by Jeremy Gilling

Monash University is adamant that last month's terrorist attacks in Mumbai will not deflect it from its joint research program with the Indian Institute of Technology in Bombay (IITB), or from its long-term commitment to international research collaboration.

This is despite a report in *The Australian* last week that "growing joint research deals between India and Australia will be under pressure and university marketing and promotional trips are likely to be reconsidered" following the attacks. A delegation of 25 senior executives from Monash were among the 30 or more Australian academics and university staff in Mumbai at the time (CR, 02.12.08).

Monash vice-chancellor and Universities Australia chair Richard Larkins, who led the Monash delegation, told *Campus Review* that "it is essential that Australian universities engage internationally and tap into the international talent pool".

"There are risks all over the world, and these need to be seen in perspective. In India, the risks posed by traffic are vastly greater than from terrorism," Larkins said.

"We will continue to take official warnings seriously and do what is necessary to mitigate risks, including additional security arrangements where appropriate. Staff and students will be given a free choice on whether to travel to India, or anywhere else."

Larkins remains enthusiastic about the Monash-IITB program, describing it as "a very exciting partnership between two world-leading research universities, involving jointly supervised PhDs and a role for Monash in training the very brightest of India's graduates". Students enrol simultaneously in both institutions and study primarily in India, with at least six months spent in Australia.

Monash dean of engineering Professor Tam Sridhar, in Mumbai with colleagues to further the joint research program, confirmed Larkins's sanguine assessment of the program. "Unfortunately, attacks such as this can happen anywhere. But this program is far too important to both countries to allow it be deflected by these tragic events."

The terrorist attacks certainly inconvenienced the project, he said, resulting in cancelled and rescheduled meetings and changed travel

the projects were all based a long way away from the attacks in secure surroundings, and were never in danger."

Monash announced the launch of the joint IITB-Monash research academy late last month, with construction of the \$5 million facility starting on 26 November, the day the attacks began. Already 36 joint projects are under way, with a strong focus on environmental outcomes. These include investigating ways to blend cement with industrial by-products, thereby filling air cavities in the cement so it requires less energy – and reduced emissions – to heat to allow it to set at maximum strength in minimum time; protecting ground water from pollution by improving barrier systems in landfill; improving understanding of artificially engineered geothermal reservoirs; and modelling, design and optimisation of novel stem cell bioreactors.

Sridhar sees the environmental projects as having both practical and symbolic importance. "The world understands that acting effectively to mitigate climate change requires us to bring China and India along with us. Initiatives such as this – where research is conducted simultaneously and collaboratively in both countries – give ownership of the outcomes to both countries, and thus a greater readiness to adopt the innovations in both countries."

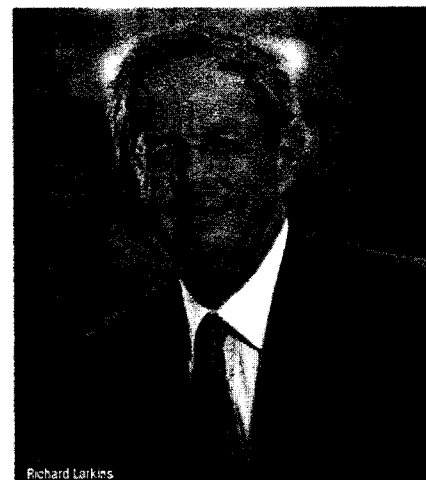
Monash, says Sridhar, is way ahead of the international university pack – not just its Australian counterparts – in developing research links with India. "Every enterprise I'm talking to – including global corporations like Cisco

Fertilising ideas with Vietnam

Sydney University is also investing in joint research with a south Asian partner – in this case Vietnam – aimed at improving living standards and environmental outcomes.

Ivan Kennedy, professor in agricultural and environmental chemistry, leads a project to maintain rice yields in Vietnam while reducing urea nitrogen fertiliser input. The project was one of 22 winners (from 1800 applicants) – and the recipient of a \$US200,000 grant – in the World Bank 2008 Global Development Marketplace.

"The norm in Vietnam is about 100 kilogram of nitrogen fertiliser per hectare, and with the cost of fertiliser roughly tripling over the past two years largely as a result of oil price rises, this translates into increasing hardship for Vietnam's 30 million farmers," explains Kennedy.



Richard Larkins

and IBM – says our presence on the ground is well in advance of the rest. The 36 projects are just the start for us – we have several hundred similar projects in prospect, and multinational corporations are showing great interest in many research areas. Several universities, Australian and overseas, are looking at our model as a way of connecting with the region.

"Monash isn't investing in this program and this research facility to make money – although of course we don't plan to make a loss. We're here to make a difference; to advance the cause of science, to strengthen the pipeline between the two countries, and also to recognise the international demographics of our student population."

Sridhar says Monash is happy to share the insights from the program with other Australian universities that are aiming to raise their research profile in the region.

that specific micro-organisms are present in the root zones of rice plants. These organisms are added in a biofertiliser product known as BioGro. When seedlings in rice paddies are inoculated with BioGro, they require at least 50 per cent less fertiliser than non-inoculated plants."

Not only does the project help alleviate rural poverty, it cuts the amount of environmental pollution – nitrous oxide is thought to be 300 times as damaging a greenhouse gas as CO₂. Farmers also say that the inoculated plants are tougher and more resistant to fungi and insects.

The World Bank grant is to "scale up" the project and develop a viable supply chain from factory to farmer and robust quality control processes.

Technology and skills transfer is a key component of the project. Next year two Vietnamese graduates will come to

The price of competition

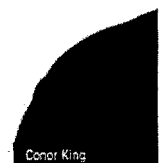
As canner parents seamlessly guide their children from community day care to public primary school to private high school to Group of Eight university, will the outcomes of the Labor government's education revolution finally change the nature of the debate about public and private providers?

It is clear that the Rudd Government has little time for arguments of the natural superiority of public providers. The Minister for Health Nicola Roxon says regularly that she is not too fussed about public or private but is concerned about good health care delivery. Julia Gillard has made similar comments about public and private schooling. This thinking is reflected in the COAG skills and workforce development discussion paper's ideal world where there is no preference for a provider "other than on the basis of quality, price and individual choice". The Victorian VET changes largely put TAFEs and other VET providers on the same footing. None of this should be a shock. The Hawke and Keating governments actively pursued reforms in many areas where the focus was the service delivery outcomes, with providers of various types used.

Yet most of us have an instinctive desire to consider public ownership as proof in itself of institutional value. This is a deeply conservative hold onto assumptions that the only way to achieve the desired public outcomes is through publicly established institutions. Hence, on what could roughly be called the left side of politics, there is struggle between those who want to hold the mechanism of public ownership and those who are agnostic about ownership. The latter group wish to make best use of any mechanism to produce the desired outcomes for all,

industrially were tension between was very clear.

In education the dichotomy is in public schools are private schools reli



Conor King

a significant parent In this case parent significant amount same outcome, but benefit of better re child and whatever to the school. The newer private scho the long-standing not fit that model emphasis more on in approach and v.

In tertiary educ the private role is mostly complain undercut by priva In this case, the q better delivery an private providers' comprehensive, p adaptable delivery government chan many TAFE fans least, through a fi for the student at and a cap on cha better placed that meant a price-bas places to particul left TAFEs with t

arrangements. It cast a gloom over our proceedings, of course. But the people involved in

The research and pilot phases of the project have revealed nitrogen fertiliser input can be sharply reduced by ensuring

Sydney University to learn these sophisticated quality control techniques. JG

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not just for those with the knowledge to assess the options and the capacity to pay the required costs.

My perspective is very much influenced by my time in aged care policy in the 1990s. I quickly learnt that with no other information but ownership to go on, you would choose a non-profit aged care service over a for-profit provider and both over a state provider. The data on standards showed this. The reason for the low rating of the state providers was low investment in old facilities as well as outdated approaches to caring that

high cost courses resources to avera picked out of exis the Victorian gov any signs of givin management free Universities are opposite of the sc providers that are and that have the see them losing tl over standard bac degrees. Other pr in the likely grow