

The growth and expansion of the Australia-Bhutan academic nexus

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The Australia-Bhutan Friendship began in 1962 when Ashi Tashi Dorji, the sister of the Royal Grandmother of Bhutan, led a Bhutanese delegation to the Colombo Plan Meeting in Melbourne. Australia wholeheartedly supported Bhutan's membership in the Colombo Plan and offered scholarships to Bhutanese students to study in Australia. Supported by Senator Sir John Grey Gorton and the full endorsement of Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies, Bhutan's membership to the Colombo Plan was fast tracked. This was historic, as it was the first international organisation that Bhutan was able to join.

Crucially, the Colombo Plan opened the doors for Bhutanese students to come to Australia for higher studies. Therefore, it is only fitting that on this important occasion, we pay special tribute to Ashi Tashi Dorji for her commendable efforts in laying the foundation for the excellent bilateral relations between Australia and Bhutan. We also celebrate the recognition conferred on her by the Commonwealth of Australia when she was decorated with the 'Honorary Officer of the Order of Australia' by the Governor-General in 2018.

Since then, thousands of fortunate Bhutanese, including myself, have come to Australia to obtain a world-class education and upgrade our skills. Seven of the 11 cabinet members, including the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister of the previous Bhutanese government, had a higher education degree from an Australian university thus clearly reflecting Australia's immense contribution to the human resource development of Bhutan. Therefore, education has been the cornerstone of our bilateral relations.

Today, Australia remains a preferred educational destination for Bhutanese, and with an estimated 37,000 Bhutanese residents in Australia, it hosts the largest Bhutanese diaspora. The Bhutanese community has become an integral and responsible part of Australia's multicultural fabric, serving as a vital bridge for people-to-people relations between our two countries.

Given the growing friendship and cooperation, diplomatic relations between Bhutan and Australia were established in September 2002. Considering the dynamics of the changing bilateral relations and the growing numbers of

Bhutanese in Australia, Bhutan established its Embassy in Canberra that formally opened on 17 December 2021, coinciding with the 114th National Day of Bhutan, thus becoming Bhutan's tenth diplomatic mission abroad. With the establishment of the Embassy, relations with Australia have expanded and the cooperation has intensified at different levels.

Australia-Bhutan relations were further elevated and received a great boost when His Majesty The King accompanied by Her Majesty The Gyaltsuen and Their Royal Highnesses the Gyalseys and Gyalsem visited Australia from 10 to 18 October 2024. During the visit to Sydney, Perth and Canberra, His Majesty met with the Government-General, the Prime Minister and other Australian government officials and business leaders, and the Bhutanese community in Sydney, Canberra and Perth. This was His Majesty's maiden visit to Australia and the first time that a Head of State of Bhutan visited Australia and interacted with the highest leadership of Australia.

The visits of other Royal Family members, two visits by our current Prime Minister, one in 2016 during his previous term, and more recently in March 2025, and the reciprocal official visits by the former Bhutanese Foreign Minister and the Australian Assistant Foreign Minister to mark the 20th anniversary of diplomatic relations in 2022, as well as the reciprocal exchanges of parliamentary visits in 2024 and 2025, have contributed significantly to strengthening our bilateral relations. In addition, there are numerous Bhutanese civil servants who come to engage and learn from their Australian counterparts on a regular basis. Furthermore, several Australian universities not only conduct joint degree programs with counterpart institutes in Bhutan, they also regularly engage in research projects and other programs. Therefore, there is constant engagement between Australia and Bhutan at different levels.

The intensification of the engagement between Australia and Bhutan have also come at a time when Bhutan is undergoing major transformations to build a brighter future for every Bhutanese. For this, His Majesty has initiated reforms in the economy, civil service, finance and education sectors. Additionally, His Majesty has pronounced the establishment of the Gelephu Mindfulness City that will not only bring about

economic prosperity to the country, it will also set a global benchmark for sustainable living in the 21st Century. The main long-term objective of this noble initiative is to gradually build a nation of highly capable people, which will translate to a more prosperous Bhutan.

His Majesty's concern for his people extends beyond Bhutan's borders. His Majesty is deeply committed to the welfare of Bhutanese living abroad. Bhutan's Embassies and Missions, including the Embassy in Canberra, regularly receive directives from His Majesty's Secretariat to always do their best to take care of the welfare of the Bhutanese people wherever they are living in the world.

While His Majesty, the Government, and the bureaucracy are working tirelessly to transform Bhutan into a prosperous modern nation-state, we as citizens, including the diaspora, must also support such change and make contributions wherever possible. Given the large pool of experts and qualified people among the Bhutanese in Australia, there are ample opportunities for the Bhutanese living in Australia to contribute to the ongoing nation building efforts under the Royal stewardship. Since Australian universities also host the largest number of Bhutanese scholars pursuing PhDs and conducting ground-breaking research, it is only befitting that we harness their knowledge, skills and expertise to build Bhutan.

Therefore, to bring together Bhutanese scholars from diverse fields, and to offer them the platform for academic engagement within themselves, and have an avenue for brain-circulation through which they can contribute to developments in Bhutan, the Australia-Bhutan Research Conference (ABRC) was initiated by the Royal Bhutan Embassy. The ABRC aims to create a collaborative platform that connects higher-degree research students, researchers, and academic professionals from Bhutan and Australia for cross-pollination of ideas and exchange of knowledge; showcasing research outcomes; fostering stronger academic, professional networks and institutional linkages; explore possibilities for commercialisation of research; and strengthen people-to-people links and bilateral ties between Australia and Bhutan.

The first ABRC was organised on 4th and 5th December 2023 at the University of Sydney under the theme 'Intersections of culture, climate, and science: Innovations from Bhutanese research in Australia'. The Conference showcased the remarkable contributions of Bhutanese scholars in Australia while fostering a conducive environment for cross-cultural exchange, innovative ideas, and potential collaborations.

Following the success of the first Conference, the second ABRC was organised by Edith Cowan University in Perth in 2024

on the theme 'Interdisciplinary perspectives on emerging topics – bridging innovations between Australia and Bhutan' from 4th to 6th December 2024. This Conference reflected the dynamic landscape of contemporary challenges and opportunities faced by Bhutan as it navigates towards economic self-sustainability and the cultivation of a knowledge-based society. In totality, the ABRC serves as a valuable platform for sharing knowledge, exchanging ideas, and collaborating on innovative solutions that can also contribute to the many transformations underway in Bhutan. For the Bhutanese academics in Australia, it allows them to engage in nation building in spirit and purpose.

The Bhutanese community is widely admired in Australia for its sincerity, hard work, trustworthiness and reliability. Also, Australians are equally impressed by the unity, close-knit bonds, and genuine care that Bhutanese people show for one another. These are admirable qualities that reflect positively on the Bhutanese diaspora and are a source of great pride for Bhutan. During His Majesty The King's visit to Australia, he reiterated the importance of supporting one another and joining hands to shoulder the responsibility of national endeavours. I firmly believe that the Bhutanese community in Australia is well-positioned to answer this call and make a positive contribution to Bhutan's transformation.

The Bhutanese diaspora in Australia has effectively become a brain bank of an exceptionally qualified and diverse pool of individuals - PhD holders, educationists, engineers, IT specialists, architects, medical doctors, nurses, childcare and aged care specialists, entrepreneurs, and support workers. With access to world-class education and training in Australia, along with valuable exposure and experience, our fellow citizens have developed a wealth of skills and expertise that can contribute significantly to Bhutan's development.

To this end, inspired by the ABRCs of 2023 and 2024, a group of Bhutanese scholars in Australia have taken up the task to launch the *Bhutan Insights Journal* to provide a vital public space dedicated to exploring synergies between Bhutanese experiences and global perspectives, aiming to reshape knowledge, deliberate ideas and provide a deeper understanding of sustainable growth. Aligned with the visionary initiatives of His Majesty The King, including the Gelephu Mindfulness City, the Journal provides an innovative forum for interdisciplinary research. It will be a critical conduit for sharing valuable insights grounded in global foresight tailored to local contexts. I am confident that the Journal will encourage robust academic discourse, promote a vibrant intellectual network, contribute to the shaping of national policies, and inspire constructive actions towards realising a happier Bhutan and a more harmonious world.