Any university that claims to be world-class — as we at the University of Birmingham, in the world’s top 100 universities, do — cannot overlook India.

It is the world’s largest democracy: India ensures that one-sixth of humanity can cast their votes regularly in free and fair elections. It is a rising economic powerhouse. And it is one of the most important regional powers in Asia. By 2025, it will have the world’s largest population; by 2050, the world’s largest economy.

Our university’s relationship with India is a long one. We were founded in 1900 and welcomed our first students from India in 1909. In over 100 years since then, we have provided education for more than 2,000 Indian students, including the former Cabinet Secretary Ajit Seth and acclaimed writer and critic, the late Dr U.R. Ananthamurthy, recipient of the Jnanpith and Padma Bhushan awards. And we have worked with our Indian partners to tackle some of the challenges that face our two countries, and the rest of the globe, in the 21st century.

India Institute
To mark this long history and to celebrate the thriving partnerships that we have in India, we have created the University of Birmingham India Institute. We were proud to launch the Institute in the presence of His Excellency Y.K. Sinha, High Commissioner of India to the UK, and our Indian-born Chancellor Lord Bilimoria of Chelsea, the Founder and Chairman of Cobra Beer, President of the UK Council for International Student Affairs and Founding-Chairman of the UK-India Business Council. Their presence reflected the...
significance of the new Institute.

Whether through academic research and scholarship, teaching and postgraduate research, policy analysis and debate, collaboration with corporate partners, or public engagement in culture, the India Institute will maximise our engagement with and the impact of our work in India.

Global goals
Much of our work with Indian partners focusses on tackling a number of the Global Goals identified by the United Nations. For example, a Global Goal of particular focus at Birmingham is ‘Good Health and Well-being’. One of the India Institute's first actions was to host a workshop exploring ethnic diversity and the genetics of cancer.

With funding from the UK's Medical Research Council, the workshop brought together scientists and clinicians from India, Africa and the UK to develop epidemiological, clinical and genomic research in the three most common cancers in women of non-Caucasian ethnicity: breast, ovarian and uterine.

One important study will compare women from the large Punjabi population in the West Midlands with those in the Punjab region in India. This will lead to a greater understanding of how the cancers emerge and will help to diagnose and prevent the disease in susceptible families. As a result, there will be health benefits in both India and the UK.

The workshop was part of an ongoing project linking the university with a number of centres of excellence in India: the Postgraduate Institute of Medical Education and Research, Chandigarh; the National Institute of Biomedical Genomics, Kolkata; and the Public Health Foundation of India.

Climate action
Another key Global Goal for the university is ‘Climate Action’. Our environmental science experts are helping to tackle health problems associated with air pollution in Delhi. Some 46 million people live in and around the city, where air pollution levels are found at times up to 30 times greater than those found in the UK. The research also chimes with India Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Smart Cities Mission, to make India’s cities citizen-friendly and sustainable.

Involving leading researchers from universities in India and the UK, the team led by Birmingham experts will investigate the causes of pollution in the Indian capital city. ‘ASAP-Delhi: An Integrated Study of Air Pollutant Sources in the Delhi National Capital Region’ is supported by a £1.4 million grant from the UK’s Natural Environment Research Council and the Medical Research Council Air Pollution and Human Health programme.

The four-year project will determine the sources and processes responsible for airborne particulate matter in Delhi, linking with other projects funded in parallel to develop solutions.

Clean cold
A third example of how partnership between the University of Birmingham and India helps to tackle Global Goals is our work on ‘clean cold’. Our Birmingham Energy Institute launched earlier last year a programme of research to develop strategies to resolve the cooling dilemma — providing cooling through the use of novel low-carbon and zero-emission technologies and new policy approaches.

The project’s launch report highlighted how ‘clean cold’ is central to achieving almost all of the UN’s 17 global Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

Thanks to the partnership between the University of Birmingham and our partners in India, we will host the world’s first International Congress dedicated to sustainable cooling. Academic experts will join leaders from industry and government to map a global response to ever-increasing global demands for cooling.

Influential policymakers from India laid the foundations for the congress by working with University of Birmingham and other UK academic and industry experts to develop a blueprint that could help the country’s agriculture and food sectors tackle the challenge posed by ever-increasing global demands for cooling.

These are just some examples of the many collaborations between the University, our partners in India and the wider world. The launch of our India Institute marks an important milestone in our long-standing relationship with India. It re-affirms the University of Birmingham’s deep and strong commitment to engagement with the country; an engagement which is set to grow even further as we pursue opportunities to develop research and education collaborations to tackle Global Goals.

From reducing the impact of refrigerated food distribution chains, to helping make India’s cities more sustainable, our researchers are forging links with their counterparts that will change millions of lives for the better, in both India and the UK.

Professor Robin Mason is Pro-Vice-Chancellor (International), University of Birmingham.

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