



Australia in the Asian Century White Paper

Creating and Transmitting Australia's Knowledge of a Dynamic Asia: A submission by the Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA) to the White Paper on Australia in the Asian Century

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The Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA), the peak national organization representing Asia-focus educators in Australian higher education, appreciates this opportunity to offer a submission to the white paper, Australia in the Asian Century.

The ASAA affirms the importance, noted in your terms of reference, of strengthening the understanding, skills and expertise of the Australian people to meet the economic, social and strategic challenges of the Asian century. This includes proposals to “deepen Asian literacy” and boost proficiency in Asian languages.

Other submissions to the White Paper address Asian cultural literacy and language at school levels. We focus on strengthening the provision of Asia-related studies and Asian languages in Australian higher education.

Why?

Australia's geography makes knowledge of Asia and the ability to communicate with the people of Asia essential for our national wellbeing. Knowledge plays a dual role here. One part relates to the provision of different forms of knowledge and the development of skills to enable our informed engagement with people of Asia, i.e., through teaching and learning. This capacity for Asia literacy depends on the other part: the creation of knowledge that is instrumental in shaping our consciousness. Such knowledge is encountered through teaching, learning and community education and ultimately informs understandings of Asia, not just inside Australia but also for others elsewhere who draw from knowledge we produce in this country. Knowledge is also created through research and publication. Since we use knowledge of Asia to inform our national policies, our commercial, personal and other decisions and therefore our behaviour as individuals and as a nation, Australia has a vital stake in this knowledge creation and the perspectives that influence it.

For more than 40 years the ASAA, Australian scholars of Asia, and various government and non-government reports have argued that the provision of Asian languages and studies in higher education is essential for the national interest (Henderson 2003).

Yet today the base of specialist knowledge and serious research that has been so enabling for our country in the past is imperilled. Observers working in education and research for some 40 years describe current circumstances as 'in crisis' (McLaren 2011 p. 11). They judge that teaching and learning about Asia have withered still further from the situation described in the ASAA's 2002 report, *Maximizing Australia's Asia Knowledge*. Our Association argued with a weight of evidence in 2005 that the national ability to understand and communicate with our neighbours in Asia had stalled at an "illogically low level" (ASAA 2005, p. 6). The imperative to address this national need to embrace Asian studies at this historical moment early in the 'Asian century' is even greater now. We in Asian studies need to reignite the study of Asia in Australia.

As Ross Garnaut (1989) noted 23 years ago, although English is a global language, professional dealings in Asia depend increasingly on mastery of Asian languages: to conduct business, read technical documents, understand news media and so on. Universities need to produce graduates with Asian language skills not just to do business but to teach these languages to Australians in schools and elsewhere. Yet data indicate that Asian language enrolments, which fell significantly in the late 1990s (ASAA 2002), still continue to fall and in some areas drastically, as Professor David Hill (2012) indicates for Indonesian. In 2001, less than 5 per cent of university students studied Asia in any way, while only 3 per cent studied an Asian language (ASAA 2005, p. 8).

Professor Anne McLaren's 2011 report on *Asian Languages Enrolments in Australian Higher Education 2008–9* illustrates the gravity of the present falloff. Of the 24 tertiary education institutions surveyed, 20 offered Chinese language courses and reported that enrolments increased 35 per cent since 2001 (McLaren 2011 p. 5). But international students and students from a Chinese background were the source of much of this growth. At La Trobe University, for example, while Chinese language course enrolments rose by 65 per cent, 62 per cent of students were native speakers from China (McLaren 2011 p. 5). As Professor McLaren observed, if this trend continues, Chinese could be perceived as a "'ghetto' language to be taken only by students of Chinese background" (p. 6). China represents major opportunities for Australia if we have necessary levels of China literacy and language ability to respond effectively.

We therefore strongly urge knowledge creation and transmission to build our national Asia literacy and capacity to maximise opportunities now before us.

What?

Knowledge creation entails national capacity for research on Asia through supporting development of 1) our existing knowledge producers: academic and other research staff as researchers themselves and as teachers of new researchers; 2) new knowledge creators: those undertaking postgraduate and other research training who themselves will create knowledge and teach/support further knowledge creation capacity.

The provision of knowledge about Asia and the development of Asia literacy are fostered by various forms of learning such as through 1) published research, seminars and public discussions nationally and internationally, in person and electronically; 2), university teaching: good, widespread teaching transmits knowledge to carry new understanding throughout the community – across business, government, education and almost all walks of life. To some extent, person to person and electronic transmission channels are already in place. Tens of thousands of Australians interact with people in or from Asia every day and those numbers will only increase. Australians will work more effectively and comfortably, to greater mutual advantage, when they know more about the people from Asia with whom they engage and through these engagements can both 1) enhance their own knowledge/understanding; and 2) transmit their knowledge to others .

How?

We offer these ideas to improve Australia's capacity to work with the countries/peoples of Asia.

- Learn from past experience. Australia is still harvesting benefits from investing in teacher training, exchange/study abroad programs and other initiatives that were generally very successful during the 1980s and first half of the 1990s, in response to initial signs of a possible Asian century and the recognised need for greater Asian literacy. The earlier experience can usefully be mined for lessons – what worked, and what did not, and why – to usefully inform further efforts. Here ASAA's Maximising Australia's Asia Knowledge (2002) offers some useful pointers (elaborated below).
- Set up networks and systems to identify and creatively incorporate existing resources to maximise promotion of Asia literacy inside the education system at all levels. These resources include 1) technology: for teaching, global communication, independent learning and so forth; 2) people: (i) the Asian diaspora spread across Australia that could effectively be drawn into mutually rewarding educational programs to seed or promote Asia literacy; and (ii) Australians living and working in Asia, or returned to Australia with Asia literacy, who could be encouraged to contribute their knowledge, ability and personal connections for effective Asia literacy programs in Australia. For example, an online 'Australia–Asia Knowledge Portal' could bring together these disparate resources at a single point for easy access (ASAA 2002 p. 50).
- Promote deeper understanding of the importance of knowledge creation and transmission, to inform and prepare Australian society for maximising opportunities for mutual benefit with counterparts in Asian societies. To serve our national interests it is necessary to create competence in Asian literacy and promote intercultural understanding across Asian languages, to include those with relatively large and relatively small speaking populations. Asia has changed. Countries/regions (e.g., South Asia and the Middle East) that appeared only small scale on our Asian radar in the past are now becoming ever more important to Australian society and business. This means that languages of South Asia such as Hindi, Tamil, Bengali and Urdu, and of Middle Eastern languages such as Arabic and Persian need to be taught alongside languages of smaller Asian countries such as Lao, Thai and Khmer. These language programs

require support with in-country study and immersion programs for at least one year, to prepare a cohort of specialists in languages beyond Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Indonesian.

- As part of broader Asian literacy, Asian languages and studies are being taught at the primary and secondary level. But teachers in the current system lack professional background and necessary training. It is essential to create the capacity for effective and sustainable teaching in school programs. To this end, the inclusion of Asian content (1/4 of total study units) in teaching degrees is recommended, with at least one semester's study in Asia. Stop-start and splash of funding does little to improve the situation.
- Put Asia literacy policy into practice, i.e., wholeheartedly pursue initiatives to build the practical flesh of Asia knowledge, skills and connections onto the bones of policy rhetoric. The process must be informed by understanding that this is not a quick fix; education takes time to yield valuable results. Some ten years of solid investment is required to mainstream Asia in the nation's (and states') education systems and in time yield positive spill-over into business, government, media and mainstream society. Asian studies could be well incorporated into courses such as International Studies and History, Media Studies, and so forth, and supplementary units of study could be made available online to those who require them. Universities' commitment needs to be reflected in mission statements and policy documents as well as teaching and research.

Specifically, inside universities:

1. Acknowledge that the 'one size fits all' approach to university language programs cannot be applied to all Asian languages. For example, Chinese, Japanese and Korean use character-based scripts that make teaching and learning of these languages different from other languages. A realistic funding model needs to take account of the need for different student-staff ratios, contact hours and duration of course to achieve effective course outcomes and student literacy.
2. Appreciate that in postgraduate studies in particular, Asian studies students often pursue knowledge creation on a research topic that requires investment of considerable time in learning an Asian language, translating required materials and spending time in the country to conduct field work. This needs to be taken into account when considering 1) length of time such students are allowed to complete their postgraduate thesis; and 2) the financial support they require for fieldwork in Asia. For example, a postgraduate student doing research on the Japanese economy needs to acquire Japanese language and spend time in-country for fieldwork. Such students require more time to complete their postgraduate study than, e.g., the equivalent of a history student researching modern Australian history.
3. Act on the understanding that good courses attract and hold students and in this way contribute to Asia literacy. This is an argument for (a) effective, creative teachers in all Asian studies programs; and (b) in languages in particular, for class sizes appropriate for intensive Asian language learning. Universities need to be encouraged to support high-quality undergraduate courses. The creation of more teaching positions allowing for smaller class sizes and more effective tuition is recommended.
4. Effectively coordinate Asian studies within university programs through a) a process of 'mainstreaming Asia' inside and across programs; and b) maintaining

specialised centres where country experts create and foster knowledge of Asia. To this end, carefully consider how aspects of economic, social, cultural, political, historical and legal life in Asia are introduced in subjects across the full width of the teaching and research carried out in the university.

Other Initiatives

1. Promote and extend postgraduate scholarships for study in Asia. The ASAA recommends that funding be provided for up to 40 postgraduate study-in-Asia language fellowships at an average annual value of \$25,000 each for advanced students to study language and develop scholarly interests and personal connections for a year in a country of Asia. The annual cost would be \$1 MILLION, and these scholarships could be partly or fully badged and sponsored by private interests (ASAA 2005 p. 16). One year of in-country study could be implemented in an experimental four year degree structure (Ibid. p. 17). Such a program encouraging Australian students to study in Asia would create Australian graduates with practical experience, such as that offered by the ACICIS (Australian Consortium for 'In-Country' Indonesian Studies) for Indonesian language and studies.
Address the problem of retirement and retention in Asian studies generally. In the absence of viable career opportunities in Australia, young graduates take up jobs overseas so the aging cohort of academics is not being replaced (ASAA 2002 p. 27). Funding for new positions need to expand Asia teaching across universities will therefore also create jobs for graduates to better enable Australia to maintain a serious knowledge base of skilled academics. We urge five years of federal funding to establish entry-level positions in the study of Asia, to be awarded in a tender process, conditional on a university's demonstrated ability to build genuine, lasting programs rather than as a 'one-off' scheme. These positions would carry salaries for three years, then would become the accepted responsibility of the relevant university (ASAA 2002, p. 54).
2. Encourage PhD students to persevere with in-country fieldwork in Asia. A 'Fieldwork Fellowship' of \$25,000 per research student is recommended, while allowing students to extend their PhD candidature by one year to explore fieldwork opportunities and learn language in Asia. Sixteen fellowships will cost \$400,000 annually and could be partly or fully badged and sponsored by private interests (ASAA 2005 p. 15).
3. The creation of an Australian equivalent of a Fulbright scholarship is recommended, to be awarded annually to three distinguished scholars, authors or officials from Asia. This scheme would create and promote valuable academic and other networks between Asia and Australia, contributing to the diffusion of Asia knowledge in Australia, and helping to make men and women from Asia 'Australia literate'. Such a fellowship should bear the name of a distinguished Australian and should aim to carry a high level of prestige equivalent to a Fulbright or a Rhodes. The annual cost of three fellowships would be \$270,000 and could be badged and sponsored by private interests (ASAA 2005, pp. 17-18).
4. Keeping abreast of student numbers is recommended through 1) a regular commonwealth audit of enrolments in Asian languages; and 2) based on that data, setting realistic enrolment targets and establishing proficiency outcome

expectations for broad, lower-level skills, and advanced, intensive courses. Providing improved pastoral care for Asian students in the Australian education system is necessary, to help with academic outcomes and subjective student experience. International students are often reticent about participating in tutorials and may require instruction in Australian academic conventions. They will likely struggle with the large volume of material – lectures, textbooks discussions etc. – all delivered in English. Better pastoral care would help mitigate their concerns to improve their study experience. Establishment of networking, mentoring and buddy programs for international students is recommended, to be implemented from the national level.

Conclusion

When the ASAA conducted the Maximizing inquiry in 2002, its authors consciously rejected the word “crisis”. A decade later we cannot but use “crisis” to describe the state of Asian studies in Australia. Our nation is drawn inexorably into daily relations with the countries of Asia, but the capacity of our universities to teach about and research their societies, politics, histories and economies has declined still further. Additional inquiries and reports are not needed. What is needed is a range of straight forward, concrete and economical programs that creatively incorporate existing resources to support effective teaching of Asian languages, encourage young Australians to pursue study of Asia, and rebuild high-quality undergraduate and postgraduate programs in most of our universities.

The executive of the ASAA and its members would of course be happy to expand on any aspect of this submission. Thank you.

References

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