



## **Submission to the Southeast Asia Economic Strategy 2040 consultation**

On behalf of the Asian Studies Association of Australia

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Submitted by: President, Professor Melissa Crouch (University of New South Wales), and past President, Professor Edward Aspinall, Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA). Co-authors of the recent report: *Australia's Asia Education Imperative: Trends in the Study of Asia and Pathways for the Future* (2023).

The Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA) is the peak body of university experts and educators on Asia in Australia. Established in 1976, we promote and support the study of Asia in Australian universities and foster knowledge of Asia among the broader community. Our membership is drawn mainly from academics and students, but also includes industry and government Asia experts. We seek to promote knowledge about Asia in schools and to contribute to state and Commonwealth government policies related to Asia.

The ASAA welcomes the Southeast Asia Economic Strategy 2040 consultation. Our submission draws in part on the above mentioned report, which can be read in full here: <https://asaa.asn.au/reports/>.

### **The Immediate Challenge: Insufficient Asia literacy**

Australia needs more graduates who have Asia literacy, specifically knowledge and skills relevant to our engagement with Southeast Asia.

For about half a century, Australia has been a global leader in the study of Asia. Yet during 2000-2022, there was a decline in government and, in many cases, university support for Asia literacy. There is growing urgency to expand Australia's efforts to promote Asia literacy among Australian graduates due to Asia's rise to global prominence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the accelerating importance of Asia for Australian's economic future.

Asia literacy or Asia capability refers to the skills, knowledge and competencies a person needs in order to communicate and engage effectively with people in or from Asian countries. These skills and values include language competence, understanding of relevant cultural norms and codes, and of historical and social context, cross-cultural communication skills, and commitment to investing in mutual long-term relations. Such knowledge and skills are crucial across a wide range of industries – from business and trade to government and diplomacy, to education and the arts.

At Australian universities, there has been an accelerated shift away from a traditional area studies model of teaching Asian Studies that emphasised language acquisition and

comprehensive study of a particular Asian country or region, to a post-area studies model where the study of Asia is dispersed within faculties or schools organised on a disciplinary basis. This shift presents a challenge for government and universities to ensure graduates acquire deep intellectual engagement with Asia, alongside Asian language competency and cultural knowledge, while also providing opportunities to mainstream the study of Asia throughout the curriculum and across faculties.

Evidence suggests that the promise of mainstreaming Asia literacy is being missed: with a few exceptions, there has been a decline in Asia content across universities. A gap is emerging between a small number of Asia-focused universities (most of which are large research-intensive universities) and the majority of universities where Asia content is minimal and/or in decline. This gap creates the risk that most Australian students have little or even no opportunity to study Asia at university.

Universities have a crucial role to play by offering Asian Studies programs and by mainstreaming the study of Asia across disciplines. Doing so requires informed university leadership and coordinated federal and state/territory government support. Such cooperation is necessary to become what we want to be: an Asia-literate society.

*Recommendation: that the federal government develop a coordinated, national strategy, in consultation with universities, to support and enhance Asia literacy, including Asian languages and Asian Studies, across all levels of education but particularly in the higher education sector.*

### **The Immediate Challenge: Boosting University Language Programs in Southeast Asian Languages**

The teaching of Asian languages at Australia's universities has suffered from policy discontinuity and fragility. Cuts to university programs reduce student access to opportunities to study an Asian language. While Northeast Asia languages remain relatively strong, other Asian languages, including languages of countries that are strategically important to Australia, such as Indonesia and India, have fared much worse. The teaching of Indonesian has declined precipitously, and there is a risk that there will be some states where no opportunity exists to study Indonesian at university.

Australia has long recognised the importance of its economic, cultural and security engagement in Asia. The depth and quality of engagement across all fields is enhanced by knowledge of the region and advanced language skills. Cultural engagement and people-to-people skills can determine success in growth areas such as the digital economy and popular culture, the arts and education, health and tourism, as well as in traditional areas of trade and security cooperation. Further, a growing percentage of the Australian population identify as Asian Australians.

In this context, Asia literacy can help build Australian community, enhance national security and sovereign capability. But even beyond that, Asia literacy contributes to the legitimacy and credibility of our engagement with our regional neighbours, and helps us to understand our own place in this dynamic and fast-changing region.

To promote the study of Asian languages, significant government funding is required to provide appropriate incentives and structural support for tertiary education providers.

*Recommendation: Renew federal government support for Asian languages. The government should take two steps: first, to restore federal funding for the teaching and learning of Asian languages in Australian schools at a level of \$18 (2022 dollars) per Australian school student per year—equivalent to the level prevailing between 1995 and 2002; and second, to establish a competitive program, open for bids by universities, to support the teaching of lesser-taught but high-priority languages like Indonesian and Hindi.*

### **The Immediate Challenge: Insufficient Opportunities for Undergraduate and Postgraduate Engagement in Southeast Asia**

Bipartisan commitment and government funding has incentivised universities to establish study abroad programs for undergraduate students in Asia, namely via the New Colombo Plan. However, these programs are often disconnected from the goal of promoting advanced language skills based on long-term study of a language and culture

In the past, specialist government funding for postgraduate research in Asia existed in the form of the Endeavour Awards program and later the Prime Minister’s Australia Asia Awards. The closure of these programs has led to a gap in support for higher degree research that requires advanced Asian language skills.

*Recommendation: the government should maintain support for in-country study in Asia for Australian undergraduate students, and enhance the New Colombo Plan to encourage more sustained study of Asian languages and Asian Studies, beyond two–three week intensive trips. Incentives should be put in place to prioritise students who are already learning an Asian language, and to prioritise universities that offer relevant Asian language programs, so that students can continue to learn after returning to Australia.*

*The government should also introduce a revised version of earlier programs to fund postgraduate, especially PhD, field research in Asia and advanced learning of Asian languages. Priority should be given to students who have skills, or are advancing their skills, in an Asian language, and funding could include support to undertake advanced language studies programs overseas.*

### **The Immediate Challenge: Boosting Research Funding on Southeast Asia**

Australia’s global reputation for leadership in Southeast Asian Studies has been supported by public funding for research, notably through the Australian Research Council (ARC). During 2002–2020, our analysis shows that the ARC funded a total of 692 Asian Studies projects, for a total of almost \$216 million.

As our report shows, there is a gap in public funding for research on Asia because ARC funding has failed to keep pace with the growth of the Australian university sector and with inflation. Public funding available to academics at Asian universities is increasing. Australian government funding needs to keep up if Australia is to retain its competitive advantage as a global leader in Asian Studies.

*Recommendation: Targeted schemes are needed to reinvigorate high-level Asia-focused research and to promote research collaboration with Southeast Asia's booming universities and research sector.*

*First, establish two dedicated research schemes, to be administered by the ARC:*

- i) an Asian Studies Fellowship Scheme, and*
- ii) an Asia Special Research Initiative*

*The fellowship would support individual academics based at Australian universities to undertake major research projects on Asia for a period of three years. Applicants should be assessed relative to the position they hold. The Special Research Initiative would be for collaborative research to enhance the sustained study of Asia by teams of academics based at Australian universities. Criteria for both schemes would include competence in at least one Asian language, and collaboration with partners from Asian universities. Both schemes would apply to the humanities and social sciences.*

*Second, establish a special program based on the Centres of Excellence framework to support deep research collaboration between Australian and Asian universities in addressing major global challenges. Over a period of five to 10 years, five such Australia-Asia Collaborative Centres of Excellence could be supported, with potential for collaboration and support from partner Asian governments.*