



Asian Studies  
Association  
of Australia

# Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education

## *Inquiry into Building Asia Capability in Australia through the Education System and Beyond*

**Submitted by:** Asian Studies Association of Australia

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## Asian Studies Association of Australia

### Who we are:

The Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA) is the peak body for Asian studies expertise in Australia. Founded in 1976, the ASAA brings together university researchers and educators throughout the nation, who are at the forefront of developing Australia's Asia capability for the future. Our members include teachers of Asian languages and Asian studies across a range of disciplines and faculties at all 40 Australian universities. Generations of Australians have been trained in Asian languages, cultures, and societies by the members of the ASAA, giving university graduates the essential skills to prosper in the Asian Century. ASAA members provide expert analysis to the research, education, business and government sectors and help Australians navigate the complexities of engaging in our region. Though collaboration with institutions in Asia in research and knowledge translation, and by providing world-class education and training to students from Asia, the ASAA's members are crucial to Australia's people-to-people links with our Asian neighbours, and the development of a resilient, inclusive multicultural society at home.

The ASAA has been a consistent and vocal [advocate](#) for measures to address Asia Capability in Australia. Throughout its 50-year history the ASAA has produced several [‘state of the field’ reports](#) that examine the capabilities and potential of Asian capability in Australia, as well as threats to it. The most recent such report, [Australia's Asia Education Imperative](#), was published in 2023. The report outlines the state of Asia literacy in Australian universities from 2000 to 2022 and provides a roadmap for revitalising Australia's engagement with Asia through education.

In August 2025, the Association consulted widely and hosted a the ASAA Language Policy Forum which was open to members and affiliated groups, as well as a member survey (September/October), to ascertain how the state of play has changed since the completion of the *Australia's Asia Education Imperative* report. The executive summary from the ASAA Language Policy Forum is included at Appendix A. The analysis and recommendations provided in this report are based on the 2022 report, and the data collected from the forum and survey conducted this year.

### Why Asian studies?

Asia expertise is an indispensable sovereign capability for Australia. As the global geopolitical environment becomes increasingly uncertain, Australia's Asia capability will safeguard our national interests and bolster our security and prosperity. If Australia possesses a large pool of citizens with in-depth knowledge of Asian societies, able to speak Asian languages fluently, and experienced in bridging cultures on a human level, then we will have far greater influence and success in maintaining fruitful and stable relations in the government, business and education sectors. Asia capability is the ballast in our relationship with Asia. It cannot be substituted by a reliance on English as a common language, or on artificial intelligence, or on the growth of trade without the necessary depth of expertise. If we do not resolve the crisis of Asia capability urgently, Australians will experience more volatility in our diplomatic and business relationships, and the Australian government will struggle to advance our national interests in the region.



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## What is the crisis?

Asia capability is essential for a modern multicultural Australia. Our nation derives immense strength from the diversity of all its people, including Australians and immigrants of Asian heritage. Social cohesion is fundamental to modern Australia's future as a peaceful and democratic nation. We have seen how a lack of intercultural understanding leads to intolerance, prejudice and a breakdown of cohesion. Improving Australia's Asia capability will empower Asian-Australians to bridge their multiple cultural identities and develop their expertise in the region. Providing all Australians the opportunity to engage deeply with Asia will entrench the values of respect for diversity that is essential to our social fabric. The alternative is a future of radicalisation and polarisation along cultural, ethnic and religious lines, as is becoming distressingly apparent throughout the world. Reversing the crisis in Australia's Asia capability is the way to avert this grim future.

Australia must act immediately to increase its Asia capability across the education, government and business sectors. Despite decades of rhetoric of the need for Australia to engage with Asia, our national capacity to do so has declined to crisis levels. A quarter of the way into the Asian century, fewer than ever Australians are learning Asian languages, building cultural connections in Asia, and developing deep expertise on the world's largest nations and economies. The loss of Australia's Asia capability is a generational risk which, if not addressed decisively now, will leave Australia more vulnerable to external shocks in our region and disturbance in our modern multicultural society at home.

Australia's national interests have never been more entwined with and dependent upon Asia, but our sovereign Asia capability is at its lowest point in many decades. This dangerous paradox has emerged through a confluence of factors that have led to a crisis point. In the words of one observer at a policy forum recently held by the ASAA: 'We are graduating a nation of university graduates who've never learned anything about Asia.'

### **Three main trends emerged through our analysis:**

#### **a) Long-term Decline in Support**

There has been a decline in government and university support for Asian Studies and languages, despite Asia's growing global influence. There was 'a significant decline in government support for a national Asian languages strategy' in 2002 and 2012, resulting in 'the near endangerment of some language programs, such as Indonesian'. Furthermore, public funding for Asia-focused research—most notably through the Australian Research Council—'has failed to keep pace with the growth of the Australian university sector and with inflation'.

ASAA members and affiliates have reported that conditions have slightly worsened or at best not declined further since 2022. Language programs have been closed and/or restructured (for instance at UTS and RMIT) or absorbed into broader degrees. Indonesian language programs have shown the most decline, Japanese and Chinese have been generally steady, while Korean (to the extent that it is offered) has emerged as a bright spot. Asian Studies programs have reportedly declined in enrolments



or shown little change.

Regional universities—such as the University of Tasmania—face particularly difficult circumstances, given their vulnerability to the confluence of a broader downturn in demand for language-learning as well as demographic decline. The closure of language programs within schools (such as with Indonesian in the ACT) has further reduced the flow of prospective students to the universities and disadvantaged regional young people.

What is more, since the publication of the last ASAA report, the full effects of the Jobs-Ready Graduates scheme have been felt in the faculties where language programs operate. This means that although languages are not targeted, the degrees in which they are housed are more expensive and less attractive.

### **b) Fragmented Policy Environment**

The 2022 report acknowledged Australia's achievements in realising Asian literacy but also emphasised the significant challenges it faces. A host of interconnected parties, including universities, have a stake and role in promoting Asian literacy but 'the ability of Australian universities to offer Asian Studies programs largely depends upon coordinated federal and state/territory government support, initiatives and structures across all levels of education, to create a pipeline of students from high schools who are interested and engaged in Asia and keen to advance their Asia skills, including language skills'. Nonetheless, the report shows, 'Government policy regarding Asian Studies has been marked by instability and inconsistency, with a series of policy initiatives punctuated by reversals and neglect'. A 'holistic understanding of Asia' is essential to government policy.

The lack of a national strategy was a common theme among participants in the focus group and survey, with frequent references to the perceived lack of coordination between and among the federal and state governments, the universities, and the school sector.

Participants in the public forum argued that it was essential to think of efforts to promote the learning of languages as a multidimensional, multi-level, and interdependent ecology. It was noted that decisions at the 'hyper-local level', such as by school principals and councils, can have long-term consequences for national-level efforts to promote language literacy. A respondent to our survey described the status of Asia-focused research at their university as 'patchy', and 'said it was sometimes supported, sometimes not, depending on university strategic goals', rather than the national interest. These indications of a lack of adherence to a national strategy make it all the more imperative that leadership flow from the top and the centre via the Commonwealth government.

### **c) Urgency for Renewal**

Australia must renew its commitment to Asia literacy to remain globally relevant and regionally engaged and deliver on this commitment via a genuine national strategy that benefits from the input of all key stakeholders. Although the national Australian Curriculum has identified "Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia" as one of three cross-curricula priorities since the 2010s, Asian language teaching in schools has been in sharp decline over the same period. Concrete measures to mitigate this



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drastic decline must entail 'significant government funding to provide appropriate incentives and structural support for primary, secondary, and tertiary education providers' of Asian language programs. ASAA's 2022 report recommended that funding for language programs be restored to \$18 per student, which was the level that pertained from 1995 to 2002.

The ASAA's outreach to its members and affiliated groups highlighted the need to direct remedial actions at the school system. Whereas colleagues based in universities have been keenly aware that fewer high-school students are continuing into language programs at the tertiary level, the other main dimension of the 'pipeline issue' is what is happening (or not happening) within the schools themselves. A respondent to our survey called for 'renewed investment into languages in primary and high schools, particularly in the regions' based on 'data that shows this will increase our numbers in universities and have a positive follow through to producing Language teachers.'

Participants reported a severe shortage of teachers, especially in Asian languages like Indonesian and Chinese, across the sector, which in turn has resulted in a lack of continuity in programs as senior educators retire and are not replaced. Students often lose access to language learning in senior years, particularly in public and regional schools. As one participant put it, 'High school programs live and die based on the teachers.'

In an interdependent ecology, the problems in one part of the system quickly spread elsewhere. Some participants in the ASAA survey reported that the long-term declines within the schools were already having adverse impacts on not only university enrolments but also staffing.

A consequence of this trend is a sharply reduced capacity to harness the potential for advanced Asian language studies among learners from Australia's diaspora communities, which have long been acknowledged to offer a unique advantage to Australia. Australians of Asian heritage can and should play a role in the building of Australia's Asia Capability, but they can only ever be one element of a broader national strategy. What is needed is a commitment to address the 'supply-side' problems noted above, which are detrimental to the retention of the 'critical mass' of Asia experts in Australian universities. Without such expertise, Australia cannot maintain the teaching and research programs which underpin its enviable reputation as a global leader in Asian Studies.

### How can this crisis be mitigated?

While the critical barriers that contribute to the crisis outlined above are systemic, there are potential enablers that could leverage existing funding streams to stimulate growth in the capacity of the education sector, and in particular higher education, to mitigate the immediate crisis. However, in the long-term, these measures will need to be supported by systemic change implemented through government investment and policy interventions, in order to build the kind of infrastructure that allows the education system to support sustainable, and sustained, Asia capability in Australian civil society, government and business. These include:



**a) Develop a National Agreement on Asia Capability in the Education System**

Whole-of-government coordination and leadership is imperative in addressing this crisis. Education departments at the state/territory and federal level report that ensuring Asian language education is delivered through schools is not in their remit. However, leaving the implementation of priorities in the national curriculum to school executives has demonstrably failed. The federal government should establish a National Strategy for Asia Capability and facilitate state and territory commitment to a National Agreement on Asia Capability in the Education System. Federal funding measures to stimulate Asia capability could then be tied to state and territory performance on agreed measures, such as minimum levels of Asian language offerings in schools, and linked, articulated pathways through the K-12 education system to higher education, allowing students to gain advanced language proficiency and other expertise. Such a body could then be tasked with overseeing measures to mitigate the current crisis, including those recommended in ASAA's 2022 report, and below.

**b) Develop new opportunities to redress critical gaps in expertise and workforce**

- i. Establish a bonded scholarship program for the training of new teachers of Asian languages and Asian studies in Australian secondary schools.
- ii. Establish skilled visa streams for teachers of Asian languages and other areas of shortage across the education system.
- iii. Create domestically oriented (ARC) research schemes which require language competence for eligibility and incorporate language skills in research methodologies, and increase the number of Asia experts on the College of Experts.

**c) Incentivise and reward study of Asian Languages**

- i. Boost overall ATAR scores for tertiary pathway students and facilitate the development of accreditation for vocational pathway students.
- ii. Disestablish the JRG; while Asian languages are not targeted, other Asia-related study programs are adversely affected by the punitive approach to disincentivising HASS study, which will have long term impacts on Australia's sovereign capability in Asia.
- iii. Safeguard NCP's language focus, and target students in areas of workforce constraints, such as those taking education degrees

**d) Sequester funding from existing funding streams**

Utilise existing funding to incentivise and stimulate universities to generate initiatives that build Asia capability through undergraduate and postgraduate study:

- i. Direct Commonwealth Supported Places to support students enrolling in Asian language and Asian studies programs and courses
- ii. Expand the parameters of demand-driven needs-based institutional Commonwealth Grant Scheme (CGS) funding caps (MBGAs) to include study areas of strategic significance in building national capability, specifically Asian language and studies curriculum objects, and language teaching in education degree programs.
- iii. Attract students from Asian diaspora communities to Asian studies by including them in Domestic Student Profiles for demand-driven needs-based funding.



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- iv. Tie universities' *New Overseas Student Commencement (NOSC)* allocations to performance indicators in building Asia capacity within their institutions, including proactive hiring of academics with Asia expertise, strengthening/introducing Asian language offerings and recruiting domestic postgraduate students.
- v. Tie funding calculations in both programs within Research Block Grants (RBG) - the Research Support Program (RSP) and the Research Training Program (RTP) to university performance in identified national priority areas for research training, and research and development in Asia-related fields.
- vi. Incorporate postgraduate and VET students into the New Colombo Plan. This is particularly important for domestic higher degree by research students who need to undertake coursework and fieldwork in Asia, given earlier Education Department Schemes such as the Endeavour program, are no longer available.
- vii. Direct specific NCP funding towards teacher training, in both pre-service and in-service opportunities (and re-examine state/territory policies that impede recognition of overseas learning for teachers)

This report was prepared by the executive of the Asian Studies Association of Australia Council on behalf of members.



## Appendix A

# Executive Summary: ASAA Language Policy Forum

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Date: 8 August 2025

Organised by: Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA)

Facilitators: David Hundt, Elly Kent, Jarrah Sastrawan

Participants: Over 90 educators, researchers, policymakers, and language advocates

### Purpose

To identify practical, collaborative, and policy-driven solutions for revitalising language education in Australia—particularly Asian languages—across schools and universities. The forum aimed to inform a national strategy and contribute to submissions for government and institutional decision-makers.

### 1. Key Themes & Insights

Language programs are in decline nationally, with closures and reductions in offerings, especially in regional universities. Integrated strategic approaches are necessary to protect and develop language programs, and the ASAA has a key advocacy and coordination role to play as the peak national body for Asian Studies in higher education.

### 2. University-Level Challenges

“We are graduating a nation of university graduates who've never learned anything about Asia.”

Language programs are being closed, restructured or absorbed into broader degrees (e.g., International Studies). Breadth enrolments (students from other faculties) are declining, affecting sustainability. Some universities are experimenting with winter intensives and cross-faculty dual degrees to attract new student markets.

#### *Current Challenges:*

- Declining enrolments, structural issues, and limited funding – especially but not only caused by the Jobs-Ready Package
- Language programs (especially Indonesian) are struggling to grow enrolments after consecutive shocks since early 2000s, with regional universities face particularly difficult circumstances
- Internal challenges: artificial restrictions on the capacity of students in other faculties to enrol in





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language and/or area studies courses; reduced options for including language studies as part of education degree

### *Proposed Solutions:*

- Rethink language majors with hybrid language-culture models, utilize all modes of teaching to deliver language (e.g., incorporate language options into studies courses where possible)
- Implement cross-institutional collaboration with Asian and Australian partners to deliver language courses in person (intensives) and online
- Advocate at university and federal, state policy levels to carve out dedicated funding and exemptions for language studies, and advocate for policy change.
- Tap into new markets (e.g., winter schools), service teaching
- Leverage NCP funding to collaborate with other disciplines/faculties to reach new student cohorts

### 3. School-Level Pipeline Issues

“High school programs live and die based on the teachers.”

“There needs to be a shared bank of resources and more collaboration between schools.”

Severe teacher shortages, especially in Asian languages like Indonesian and Chinese. Lack of continuity in programs due to retirements and absence of replacements. Students often lose access to language learning in senior years, particularly in public and regional schools.

### *Current Challenges:*

- **Pipeline Problem:** Fewer high-school students continue language studies into university due to perceived difficulty and limited pathways.
- **Teacher Support:** Lack of resources, coordination, and accreditation; teachers often not teaching languages; ageing workforce

### *Proposed Solutions:*

- Shared resource banks and better collaboration between schools and universities (noting there are currently broader pushes for federally-led shared curriculum resourcing)
- Harmonisation of curriculum across states, and cooperation between schools in different jurisdictions but geographically close (e.g., ACT/NSW; northern NSW/Southeast Qld)
- One-page ‘fact sheets’, infographics, and public campaigns to promote diffuse benefits of language-learning
- Federal vision and consistent reporting – Victoria as a model

### 4. Policy Coordination & Fragmentation

“We need a bumper sticker version of what we’re putting to government.”

“We need to be ruthlessly creative... otherwise in 10 years we’ll still be in the same situation, but worse off.”



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Fragmentation between federal, state, and institutional policies is a major barrier. Decisions are often made at the hyper-local level, influenced by principals and school councils with limited language literacy. An effectively harmonised national curriculum and cross-sector collaboration is needed to advance Asian language and promote Asia literacy.

### *Current Challenges:*

- Coordination between a wide range of stakeholders in the creating of a genuine national strategy for languages: federal/state governments (education departments), universities, overseas governments, private and philanthropic sectors (including private sector education bodies like CEO)
- All have made efforts towards common goal, but these efforts are often fragmentary and do not add up to a cohesive strategy
- Need for imaginative lobbying and media influence to 'cut through' and mobilise public (including e.g., school parents/community) of need for change
- Potential partnerships with some overseas governments (most notably, China) complicated by political rhetoric/geopolitical tensions

### *Proposed Solutions:*

- Use language of 'partnerships' to build support: rhetoric that all public-officeholders and/or public servants are obligated to support
- Be 'ruthlessly creative' in advocacy and policy influence
- Leverage government interest and commissioned roadmaps (e.g., DFAT's Moore report)

## 5. Cross sector issues

"We need to change the narrative in our very Anglo monolingual country."

There is a need to reframe language learning as a social cohesion and cultural literacy issue, not just a national security issue.

### *Current Challenges:*

- Foreign interference legislation has created a chilling effect at all levels and in all sectors
- Fear around Chinese language programs due to geopolitical tensions has led to program closures and hesitancy.
- Widespread perceptions of the other as threatening, and language learning as unnecessary, strongly influence the de-prioritisation of Asian languages in schools, universities and in government policy

"Chinese is not just the language of the PRC—it's a language of Australia."

### *Proposed Solutions*

- Ring-fenced funding for language programs and teacher training.
- National curriculum harmonisation and reporting mechanisms.
- Teacher training incentives, including partnerships with DFAT, embassies, and the New



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Colombo Plan.

- Community engagement and PR campaigns to shift public perception and build political momentum.
- Cross-sector partnerships between universities, schools, embassies, and government departments.

### Next Steps

Emphasis on building a long-term, cross-sector network to sustain momentum and influence policy.

- ASAA to consolidate forum insights into policy recommendations for federal and state governments, and universities.
- Participants in the forum and more broadly invited to opt-in to ongoing collaboration and advocacy.
- Seek ongoing role in these decision-making processes, but be guided and informed by input of its members and allies/likeminded groups (including schoolteachers)
- Create and sustain localized and larger networks spanning members and non-members of ASAA with interest in and passion for the teaching and learning of languages in Australia

“We won’t win this campaign by the end of the year. It’s a long-term process.”