



BUILDING ASIA CAPABILITY IN AUSTRALIA THROUGH THE EDUCATION SYSTEM AND BEYOND



SUBMISSION TO:
THE HOUSE STANDING COMMITTEE ON
EDUCATION

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Submission to the House Standing Committee on Education inquiry into Building Asia Capability in Australia

The Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (the Academy) is an independent, not-for-profit organisation that brings together the multidisciplinary expertise of our nation's leading thinkers to provide practical, evidence-based advice on important social issues facing society.

As the pre-eminent organisation in Australia representing excellence across the social science disciplines, we welcome the opportunity to respond to the *Inquiry into Building Asia Capability in Australia through the education system and beyond*.

Introduction

A strong and sustained Asia capability is fundamental to Australia's national interests. It underpins social inclusion and cohesion and supports Australia's economic, cultural, political, and security relationships with our nearest and most dynamic region.

Building this capability requires a broad base of knowledge, research, and teaching in Asian languages, societies, and cultures. Over several decades, government reviews and expert analyses have consistently recognised that Australia's prosperity and security depend on our ability to understand and collaborate with a rapidly changing Asia.

The social sciences make a distinct contribution in this regard, extending far beyond language learning. Disciplines including economics, international relations, law, education, history and political science all provide a necessary platform for developing a deep and nuanced understanding of Asian-region dynamics, Australia's strategic position and opportunities to strengthen ties.

Australia possesses the foundational assets to build world-leading Asia capability including significant and growing diaspora networks, a history of research capacity, and long-term engagement with the region. Yet persistent structural, policy, and funding barriers continue to limit Australia reaching its full potential. The Academy strongly supports this inquiry and welcomes the Committee directing its attention to this critical area.

We make nine recommendations:

- **Recommendation 1:** Create incentives to **encourage tertiary students with Asian language skills into Initial Teacher Education**
- **Recommendation 2:** Support **system-level coordination to build Asia literacy in schools**, with a focus on long-term investment in teacher capability and evidence-based teaching and learning resources

- **Recommendation 3:** Protect **long-term funding for Asian languages and social and cultural studies** in higher education, even when enrolments are low, recognising their strategic importance
- **Recommendation 4:** Request that the Australian Tertiary Education Commission **examine Asia capability development within the higher education sector**, with particular attention to ensuring consistent national delivery and reversing fee structures that undermine enrolments and career pathways
- **Recommendation 5:** Encourage **undergraduate programs that combine a primary degree with targeted study of an Asian language and culture**, including a period of study in the relevant country
- **Recommendation 6:** Enhance **support for in-person study via the New Colombo Plan** by ensuring flexibility of stay duration and inclusion of costs for university staff to travel and facilitate in-country learning
- **Recommendation 7:** Consider **regular and systematic collection of data** by the Department of Education in collaboration with States and Territories on language, social and cultural studies to identify Asia capability strengths and gaps
- **Recommendation 8:** Promote **Asia-focused research and collaboration between Australia and Asia as a national priority**, including the number and quantum of projects funded by Australian Research Council and other grant schemes
- **Recommendation 9:** Recognise **Asian diaspora communities as key partners in building Australia’s Asia capability** through a coordinated national framework for diaspora engagement

To discuss any matters raised in this submission, please contact Andrea Verdich, Policy Director on 0438 218 352, or andrea.verdich@socialsciences.org.au.

Education pathways

Australia risks losing the linguistic, social and cultural capabilities needed to understand and engage with the Asia region

The Academy welcomes the Committee’s focus on strategies to increase both demand for and access to Asian languages and cultural studies within Australian schools and universities.

The foundation for developing Asia literacy starts in Australian schools and classrooms. The Australian Curriculum includes *Asia and Australia’s Engagement with Asia* as a Cross Curriculum Priority and *Intercultural Understanding* as a General Capability; however, implementation is inconsistent. Language provision is highly uneven across States and Territories and between year levels, with substantial attrition before the senior years.¹

A critical driver of language provision is teacher supply and capability, including decreased opportunities for Asian language learning for teachers in undergraduate courses and professional teaching training. Many teachers of Asian languages report limited opportunities

¹ Scrimgeour et. Al (2024) [The State of Languages Education in Australia: Provision and Participation, Towards a National Plan and Strategy for Languages Education in Australia Research Project One Report](#)

for professional learning, limited in-country language experience, and few incentives for deep specialisation.²

Recommendation 1: Create incentives to **encourage students with Asian language skills into Initial Teacher Education**

Recommendation 2: Support **system-level coordination to build Asia literacy in schools**, with a focus on long-term investment in teacher capability and evidence-based teaching and learning resources

The Committee rightfully recognises the significant and sustained decline in Southeast and South Asian languages in Australian universities, both in terms of course offerings and student enrolments. Strategic languages with low enrolments such as Indonesian, Tamil, Vietnamese, Hindi are particularly at risk. Others, such as Cambodian, Javanese, Sundanese, Filipino and Urdu have disappeared entirely.³

Beyond the decline in Asian languages, Asian-orientated social sciences staff and programs are shrinking in universities, limiting Australia's national capacity to teach important knowledge domains that will equip young people with the knowledge, skills and intercultural understanding required to engage effectively with our immediate region. For example, undergraduate studies available in Indian history, Southeast Asian studies, and other region-specific disciplines are in decline or unavailable to the majority of university students across the nation.

Recommendation 3: Protect **long-term funding for Asian languages and social and cultural studies**, even when enrolments are low, recognising their strategic importance

Recommendation 4: Request that the Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) **examine Asia capability development within the higher education sector**, with particular attention to ensuring consistent national delivery and reversing fee structures that undermine enrolments and career pathways

Recommendation 5: Encourage **undergraduate programs that combine a primary degree with targeted study of an Asian language and culture**, including a period of study in the relevant country

Immersive experiences, including in-country placements for language acquisition and qualitative research remain crucial for developing depth of understanding. The New Colombo Plan funding for university students has enabled more mobility of students to Asia, but recent changes to extend the duration of placements have created barriers to participation due to higher associated staffing costs and students' difficulties in balancing study and work commitments.

Recommendation 6: Enhance **support for in-person study via the New Colombo Plan** by ensuring flexibility of stay duration and inclusion of costs for university staff to travel and facilitate in-country learning

Enhanced data is required to track and build Asia capability

A major constraint in tracking Asia capability strengths and gaps is the ability to access and disaggregate publicly available data on schools, higher education and research. For example,

² Scrimgeour et. Al (2024) [The State of Languages Education in Australia: Provision and Participation, Towards a National Plan and Strategy for Languages Education in Australia Research Project One Report](#)

³ Aspinall, E & Crouch, M, (2023) [Australia's Asia Education Imperative: Trends in the Study of Asia and Pathways for Reform](#), Asian Studies Association of Australia

undergraduate and postgraduate student enrolment, load, and completions data cannot be disaggregated to identify China-focused study areas.⁴

- **Recommendation 7:** Consider **regular and systematic collection of data** by the Department of Education in collaboration with States and Territories on language, social and cultural studies to identify Asia capability strengths and gaps

Research and development

Asia-related research and collaboration is a vital component of our national capability and should be supported as a matter of priority

Notably absent from the inquiry Terms of Reference is the role of Australia's research and development system in building our sovereign Asian capability. Cultural, social and economic capability requires deep understanding of many aspects of Asian society, and we must ensure there are future experts in diverse fields of studies.

Growing and supporting research and academic networks between Australia and its Asian neighbours through the prioritisation of collaborative research and development between Australian and Asian researchers in the social sciences and other fields are crucial elements of building Australia's Asian capability. These cross-country collaborations generate direct and indirect outcomes in educational and vocational training and employment.

Over the past decade, joint research between Australian and Asian teams has delivered important breakthroughs in areas such as energy, medicine, food and agriculture, environmental sustainability, and ageing societies. These successes have largely relied on individual researchers' networks and institutional support, with limited public investment, and many projects face critical funding gaps when moving from discovery to practical or commercial application.

The largest source of competitive research funding in Australia for non-medical research is administered by the Australian Research Council (ARC). ARC funding for Asia-related research has gradually declined, both the total number of projects being funded annually and the value of total funding in real terms.⁵ Research which furthers our understanding of the Asia region is also absent from the [National Science and Research Priorities](#).

The abandonment of the Data 61 platform *Expert Connect* to search for researchers by field and location also means that Australia lacks the infrastructure to make our capacity in research visible and discoverable to regional partners. Public funding for the facility would have improved transparency and visibility of Australian research in the region.

Recommendation 8: Promote **Asia-focused research and collaboration between Australia and Asia** as a national priority, including projects funded by the Australian Research Council and other grant schemes

⁴ Australian Academy of the Humanities (2023) [Australia's China Knowledge Capability](#)

⁵ Aspinall, E & Crouch, M, (2023) [Australia's Asia Education Imperative: Trends in the Study of Asia and Pathways for Reform](#), Asian Studies Association of Australia

The diaspora advantage, social cohesion and public discourse

Australia has a significant and growing Asian Australian community. Over 17% of the total population is now of various Asian backgrounds. Asia and Asians are now part of Australia - not apart from it.

Asian diaspora communities bring unique advantages—language proficiency, cultural understanding and extensive transnational networks which keep Australia directly in touch with economic opportunities, cultural exchange, and regional security issues. This includes the important role of international students in Australia’s capability.⁶

Despite their value, diaspora communities are often under-utilised in policy frameworks related to Asia capability. It is crucial to make better use of expertise among this group while also recognising that these communities require nurturing and support, starting with settlement services and extending through the school and higher education systems to the labour market.

Public recognition and the valuing of the linguistic and cultural skills of Australia’s growing and diverse diaspora from the Asian region will also bring benefits for social cohesion and serve to combat dis- and misinformation about, for example, racial and cultural stereotypes and the geo-politics of the Asian region. This recognition will allow for a more robust democracy within Australia.

Recommendation 9: Recognise **Asian diaspora communities as key partners in building Australia’s Asia capability** through a coordinated national framework for diaspora engagement

The quality of our national conversation on Asia has a direct impact on our capability

The tone of public discourse influences how Australians perceive Asia, with implications for student choice, career prospects and decisions to develop and deploy Asia-related skills and experience. There are anecdotal examples of experts and professionals concealing their knowledge on Asia, due to concerns for their career.⁷

The strengthening of the delivery of Asian languages and cultural and social knowledge in the school system and higher education has to be complimented by shifts in the representations of Australia’s Asian communities and their productive contribution to the nation through the media and creative industries, and by the deliberate inclusion of the importance and advantages of Asian capability for employment within the public sector and industry.

Promoting a balanced, evidence-based national conversation on Asia that recognises Asia capability as a national priority is essential to building a broad-based cohort of Australians with the knowledge and skills to engage effectively with the region. This will also ensure that Australia’s unique geographical and demographic advantages within Asia are leveraged to their full potential.

⁶ Lowe, D. (2015). Australia’s Colombo Plans, old and new: international students as foreign relations. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 21(4), 448–462.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2015.1042468>

⁷ Australian Academy of the Humanities (2023) *Australia’s China Knowledge Capability*