



# Supporting Asia Capability

Asialink Education

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Asialink Education – Supporting Asia Capability

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Asialink Education acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the unceded land on which we work, learn and live: for the University of Melbourne this includes the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and Bunurong peoples (Burnley, Fishermans Bend, Parkville, Southbank and Werribee campuses), the Yorta Yorta Nation (Dookie and Shepparton campuses), and the Dja Dja Wurrung people (Creswick campus).

We extend our acknowledgement and gratitude to the Traditional Owners, Elders and Knowledge Holders of all Indigenous nations and clans who have been instrumental in the University of Melbourne's reconciliation journey.

We recognise the unique place held by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the original owners and custodians of the lands and waterways across the Australian continent, with histories of continuous connection dating back more than 60,000 years.

We also acknowledge their enduring cultural practices of caring for Country.

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## One Solution to Two Challenges Facing Australia

Two worrying dynamics are currently impacting Australia:



Limited Asia Capability among Australians to successfully engage with our region



Increasing racism in the Australian community, including in schools.

While seemingly discrete, these two dynamics reflect a fundamental shared challenge which can be effectively tackled with a single approach - enable young Australians to enhance their skills, attributes and knowledge to engage with people from different cultures, and particularly from our region.

Expressed differently, support to gain **Asia Capability will prepare young Australians to engage successfully with Asia and live in harmonious communities.**

Building Asia Capability among young Australians requires repeated interventions and opportunities over an extended period of time. The education sector is the appropriate domain to target these interventions *because it reaches every young Australian.*

To achieve widespread Asia Capability, young Australians need opportunities to build the knowledge, skills and attributes required throughout early childhood, primary, secondary and tertiary education levels. This is not currently happening. Not because of any particular barriers - but because of a lack of political vision, will and leadership.

Without a national plan to achieve Asia Capability in our schools and universities, we are leaving our national interests to chance. Some young

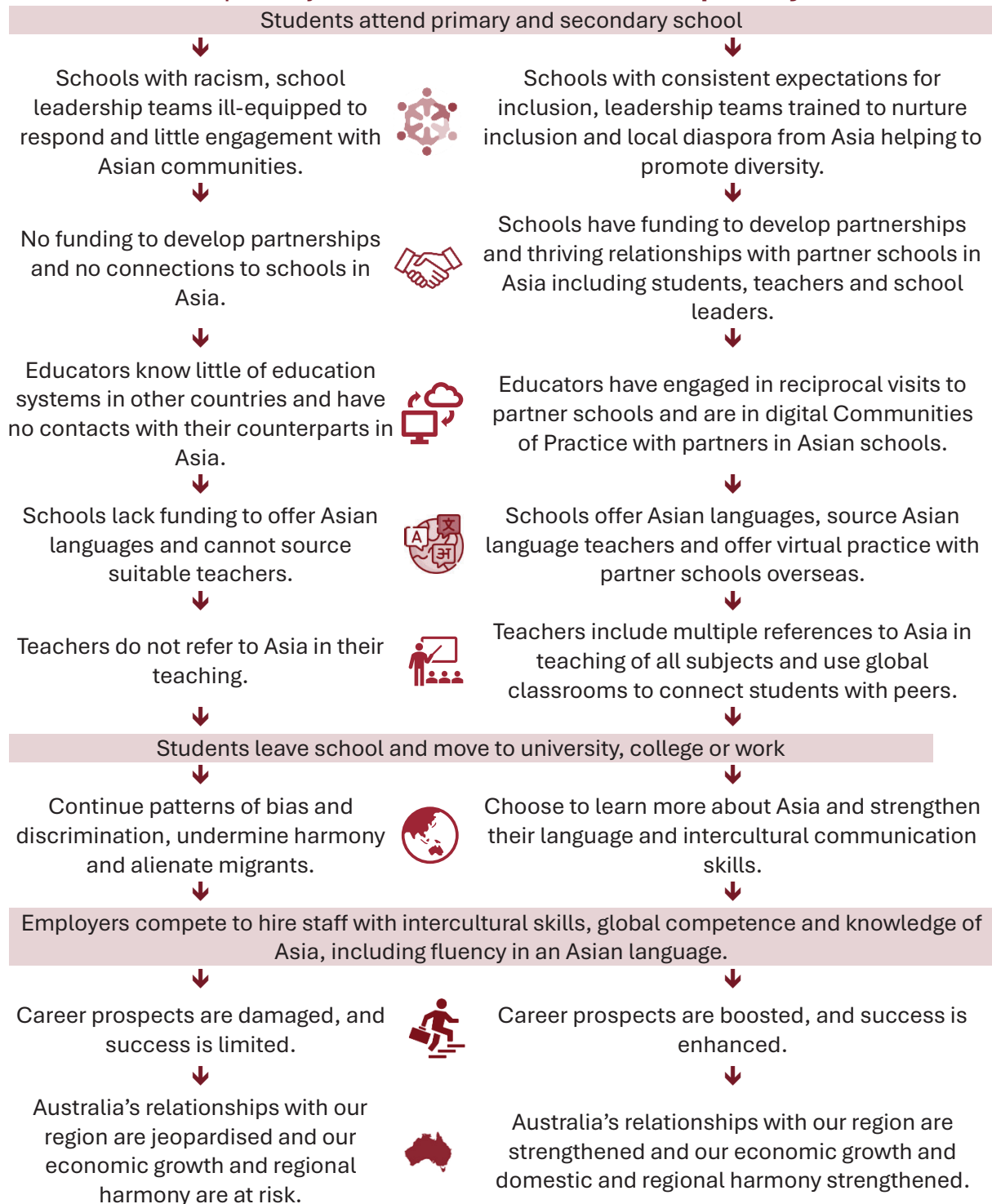
Australians will be lucky to attend schools in states or territories with a funded commitment to supporting Asia Capability. Most young Australians, however, will not. This represents a risk for Australia's future, one that requires a coordinated national response. Australia is at a critical point, with two potential futures laid out as the following Figure illustrates.

**Achieving genuine partnership with our region is not only about strategy and business. It requires Australians to be ready to engage with hearts and minds.**

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**WITHOUT a National Plan  
for Asia Capability**

**WITH a National Plan for Asia  
Capability**



## Why Asia?

It is impossible to overstate the importance of Australia's relationship with Asia. Deep relationships with Asia are essential to Australia's future prosperity and security. Australia is well positioned to influence and leverage<sup>i</sup> the geo-strategic rise of Asia, but most Australians remain uninformed, complacent and ill-prepared to engage successfully with our region.

Political, economic and social parameters underscore the reliance of Australia on a deep relationship with countries across Asia.

**Social** - The Australian population is increasingly shaped by Asia - three of the top five countries of birth for migrants arriving in 2023-4 were India, China and The Philippines<sup>ii</sup>. In 2024 almost 11 per cent of the Australian population was born in one of seven Asian countries<sup>iii</sup>.

**Economic** - In the 1980s Asian countries generated only 20% of global GDP – in 2026 this is estimated to reach 45%<sup>iv</sup>. Eleven of Australia's top fifteen trading partners are in Asia<sup>v</sup>, as are twelve of Australia's top fifteen export markets. This is predicted to rise further as Asian economies strengthen, with Southeast Asia alone due to be the world's fourth-largest economy by 2040.

Most of Australia's free trade agreements – including the vital Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement – are with Asian countries and give Australia access to Asia's estimated 3 billion consumers by 2030<sup>vi</sup>.

**Political** – Australia's engagement with Asian neighbours to reduce threats and

solve problems is vital. Cooperation with countries including India, Japan, Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines helps Australia to foster regional peace and stability<sup>vii</sup> and to uphold international law<sup>viii</sup>.

While government to government treaties are the building blocks of Australia's relationship with its neighbours, **people-to-people connections are the cement that holds those blocks together.**

To ensure that young Australians are optimally prepared to take on their roles as future leaders and citizens of Australia, a concerted focus on supporting them to gain the requisite skills, knowledge and attributes to be Asia capable is required. As Prime Minister Anthony Albanese stated in his Address to the Shangri La Dialogue on 3 June 2023, Australia's regional focus requires a:

**“... whole-of-nation effort ... investing in our capability and investing in our relationships”.**

## What is Asia Capability?

The terms ‘Asia Capability’ and ‘Asia Literacy’ are inter-changeable and refer to knowledge and understanding of Asia and Australia’s relationship with Asia and people-to-people relationships between Australians and our peers in Asia. The term is often misunderstood as referring only to Asian language skills. At Asialink Education we start with the OECD’s definition of global competence:

*“a multi-dimensional construct that requires a combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values successfully applied to global issues or intercultural situations”<sup>ix</sup>.*

Applying this to Australia means making it a priority to provide all young Australians with opportunities to build:

- ➔ **Knowledge** of Asian countries - their histories, geographies, politics, peoples and cultures
- ➔ **Skills** to engage respectfully and collaboratively with their Asian peers (often referred to as ‘cross-cultural communication skills’)
- ➔ **Attitudes and values** of openness, curiosity, respect, compassion, empathy and collaboration - a recognition of our interconnectedness and a sense of responsibility for solving shared regional issues.

To achieve this, it is essential that all young Australians are provided with rich opportunities throughout their education to gain the skills, knowledge and attributes to:

- ➔ Know about and appreciate the rich diversity of histories and cultural expressions found in Asia.
- ➔ Value the interconnections between Australia and its neighbours, including in collectively improving environmental sustainability<sup>x</sup>.
- ➔ Appreciate Asia’s global role, and its importance for Australia’s future<sup>xi</sup>.
- ➔ Deepen their intercultural understanding through developing active relationships with their Asian peers, both within and outside Australia.
- ➔ Enhance their intercultural competence, including their self-awareness, empathy, curiosity, openness and inter-cultural communication skills<sup>xii</sup>.

Providing all Australian students with sustained<sup>xiii</sup> opportunities to gain Asia Capability lays the foundations for Asia Capability as adults and the leaders of tomorrow<sup>xiv</sup>.

## Building Asia Capability starts with reducing discrimination within Australia

The 2023 report of the Independent Expert Panel’s Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System, **Improving Outcomes for All**, identified racism in schools as a significant issue, impacting student engagement and attainment, and teacher diversity.

Racism has a particularly negative impact on our First Nations populations, with both students and teachers lacking the cultural safety and freedom from

both racism and racist microaggressions that they need to thrive<sup>xv</sup>.

Within Australia's diverse, vibrant and multicultural community it is imperative that young Australians grow up with the ability to value our heterogeneity and to recognise the strengths that it brings. With increased migration from Asia<sup>xvi</sup>, Asian Australians contribute to the unique cultural fusion found in our society. Inclusion and respect are foundation stones for community harmony and equity, ensuring that everyone - from First Nations Australians to recent arrivals – feel that they belong. Addressing racism requires<sup>xvii</sup>:

- ➔ Increasing knowledge to identify and recognise our own biases.
- ➔ Enhancing skills to validate the experiences and feelings of others.
- ➔ Building attributes of empathy and openness.
- ➔ Opportunities to engage in dialogue about racism.
- ➔ A focus on how to change behaviours in particular situations and settings.

The Human Rights Commission identifies **education** as a priority area for anti-racism initiatives. School principals, teachers and students of all ages need a great deal more support to recognise their own biases and understand how to combat racism and increase community harmony in their own schools. As the US Brookings Institution identifies,

**education plays a powerful role in shaping worldviews, connecting members of a community who might have never met before, and imagining the world we want**<sup>xviii</sup>.

## Declining Asia Capability

Unfortunately, there are indications that Australians' Asia-Capability is actually in decline<sup>xix</sup>. After stop/start policies and years of neglect from Federal and State/Territory Governments, Asia Capability has become a wicked policy problem<sup>xx</sup>. There are talks of a 'crisis' in Asia Capability<sup>xxi</sup>. There are also indications that some Asians are withdrawing from engagement in Australia<sup>xxii</sup>.

There is an urgent need to reassess how Australia supports its young people's preparedness to engage with Asia<sup>xxiii</sup>. It is too late to wait to start focusing on Asia Capability until tertiary education or employment. School education shapes young people's values, attitudes and foundational knowledge and attributes. A coordinated national strategy that focuses on all young Australians is required.

This is not a strategy that should be the responsibility of the education sector alone. The sustainability and future success of all of Australia's economic and security sectors requires Asia Literate Australians<sup>xxiv</sup>. From agriculture<sup>xxv</sup> to aged care<sup>xxvi</sup>, hospitality to health<sup>xxvii</sup> and manufacturing to mining<sup>xxviii</sup>, Australia's key markets and sources of skilled workers are increasingly concentrated in Asia. This interdependence highlights the importance of all Australian employers, workers and community members having good levels of Asia Capability.

At present there are too many businesses and organisations in Australia that lack any staff with Asia Capability<sup>xxix</sup>. Far too



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few Australian professionals have the knowledge, skills or attributes to engage with their Asian counterparts, let alone any competence in an Asian language<sup>xxx</sup>.

The current Asia Capability deficit holds Australia back from optimising our geographic and social dividend. Building Asia Capability in future generations needs to start as early as possible.

The ubiquity of digital technologies makes this both feasible and cost-effective. With targeted use of digital tools:

- ➔ **EVERY** school in Australia could partner with a school in Asia.
- ➔ **EVERY** Australian child could learn an Asian language.
- ➔ **EVERY** teacher and school principal could build collaborative communities of practice with their Asian counterparts.

### Enhancing Effective Engagement with Asia

The economic growth and strategic security of Australia requires Australians to be adept in multi-layered engagement with their Asian neighbours. The soft diplomacy that is achieved through people-to-people connections is a vital counterpart to building Australia's security and trade partnerships. As Prime Minister Anthony Albanese stated in August 2023:

*“Deepening Australia’s engagement with Southeast Asia is a key priority for my Government. Our futures are intertwined – so it’s essential that we work together to achieve a peaceful, stable and prosperous region”<sup>xxxix</sup>.*

To ensure that young Australians are optimally prepared to take on their roles as future leaders and citizens of Australia, a concerted focus on supporting them to gain the requisite skills, knowledge and attributes to do so is required. To achieve this, it is essential that all young Australians are provided with rich opportunities throughout their education to gain the skills, knowledge and attributes that comprise Asia Capability.

### Raising Asia Capability

Awareness of the benefits of deeper engagement with Asia is well understood by all levels of government. There is less concurrence on how to achieve this, however. A significant issue is limited awareness among many Australian people, organisations and businesses of the contemporary realities of countries and peoples in Asia.

As Nicholas Moore notes, Australians have a pronounced lack of familiarity with the economies, societies and business opportunities of neighbouring countries in our region. A lack of ‘Asia Capability’. There is thus an urgent need to reassess how Australia supports its young people’s preparedness to engage with Asia<sup>xxxii</sup>. To address this, the Moore report suggests:

*“a whole-of-nation effort ... Increasing cultural Capability and capability is key to realising the breadth of opportunities in Southeast Asia ... Australia needs to lift investment in Southeast Asia Capability at all levels, from stimulating demand and teaching languages and cultural awareness to school and university students ... Government should ... encourage students to develop Southeast Asia*

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*cultural Capability skills to meet their future business needs in the region”*

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Asialink Education has learned an important lesson about the skills required to successfully engage with the region and its peoples over three decades of experience supporting children and adults to enhance their knowledge of Asia.

### Building Asia Capability requires multiple opportunities over time

Waiting until someone is working or offering a one-off program to raise Asia Capability is completely insufficient. Instead, it is necessary to provide the next generation of Australian leaders with a multitude of opportunities to learn about Asia, engage with their peers in Asia and build the attributes required to engage respectfully with people from different cultural backgrounds to themselves.

The latter point is equally important for building success and harmony **WITHIN** Australia as it is **BETWEEN** Australia and our neighbours.

### Disadvantaged Australian students

There is no up-to-date data on the extent to which Australian students are gaining Asia Capability. The data that does exist highlights worrying patterns. Data gathered from the Global Competence module in the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018, indicates that there are marked discrepancies in the extent to which

Australian students are able to gain Asia Capability<sup>xxxiv</sup>.

The numbers point to significant variations between states and territories in key aspects of Asia Capability including:

- ➔ Students’ ability to understand the perspectives of others
- ➔ Students’ respect for people from other cultures
- ➔ Students’ attitudes towards immigrants
- ➔ The amount of contact that students have with people from other countries
- ➔ Students’ perceptions of discrimination at school, and
- ➔ The proportions of teachers that hold positive beliefs about multiculturalism.

In particular, the data suggests that opportunities to gain Asia Capability are most common among privileged urban students in large cities that have experienced large amounts of international immigration. Conversely, opportunities to gain Asia Capability are least common among less privileged rural and regional students in areas that are less multicultural.

Concerningly, **students with the least opportunity to gain Asia Capability tend to be those who are already marginalised**. This reinforces inequalities in outcomes of schooling. It means that the future prospects of the most marginalised of students are further imperilled, and the resilience and harmony of the communities that they live in are jeopardised.

Moreover, **Australian students are being disadvantaged in comparison with their peers in the region**. For example, a

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smaller proportion of students in Australia than in countries such as New Zealand, Singapore and Taiwan attend schools in which they are<sup>xxxv</sup>:

- ➔ encouraged to engage in virtual communications with people from other cultures
- ➔ offered an exchange program with schools in other countries
- ➔ involved in celebrations of festivities from other cultures
- ➔ given varied opportunities to learn about cultural differences (e.g., teamwork, peer-to-peer learning, simulations, problem-based learning, music, art, etc.), and
- ➔ given opportunities to learn how to communicate with people from different cultures or countries.

### Asia Capability in the Curriculum

Concerns raised about a lack of Asia Capability among Australian students in decades past led to the inclusion of Asia Capability as a cross-curriculum priority in the Australian Curriculum<sup>xxxvi</sup>. This was a major step forward in policy and provides a policy framework for action now. The intent is that all Australian primary and secondary students should have the opportunity to:

- ➔ **Know Asia and its Diversity** – appreciate diverse backgrounds and perspectives and understand interconnections with Asia.
- ➔ **Understand Asia's Global Significance** – learn about the different nations in Asia and how they have contributed to global developments.
- ➔ **Grow Asia-Australia Engagement** – build active connections with Asia in order to deepen empathy, respect and

opportunities for collaboration.

Achieving these outcomes requires the capacity of teachers across all curriculum areas to embed Asia Capability into their teaching. Unfortunately, the capacity of many Australian teachers to do so is limited. Programs to build teacher and school leader capacity in the 1990's and early 2000's proved to be highly successful but momentum and investment was stop/start and then dropped almost entirely by governments in 2013.

### Lack of Asia Capability among Educators

Anecdotal and research evidence<sup>xxxvii</sup> suggests that many Australian educators – from early-childhood to secondary teachers, school principals to university lecturers – lack sufficient awareness of Asia, familiarity and connections with people in Asia and confidence to teach about Asia to students.

Based on the information available, many teachers lack the skills, knowledge, training and confidence to embed Asia Capability into their teaching. This is likely due to a combination of:

- ➔ Lack of inclusion of Asia Capability in initial teacher training
- ➔ Lack of focus on Asia Capability in teachers' own school education
- ➔ Paucity of professional learning opportunities that focus on Asia Capability
- ➔ Absence of Asia Capability in school principal professional development, and
- ➔ A lack of focus on Asia Capability in school improvement plans and national testing.

In Australia, some states and territories offer more opportunities than others to teachers and school leaders to enhance their own Asia Capability, and their ability to lead Asia Literate schools and classrooms.

The picture across the country, however, is one of decline. This is the result of a significant loss of support from the Australian Federal Government in 2013, over a decade ago, when the National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP) ended.

Widely-supported schemes such as COAG's \$206.6 million National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools (NALSAS) Strategy (1996–2002)<sup>xxxviii</sup> or the Rudd Gillard Labor Federal Government's \$62.15 million National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP) (2008–2012)<sup>xxxix</sup> have not been in place for more than a decade. Federal Government funding for Australia's only national centre for Asia Capability in schools ended in 2015.

Some Asian countries have taken a centralised approach to building global competence. For example, Singapore revised initial teacher training to help all teachers better enhance students' global competence<sup>xl</sup>.

Without a concerted and joined up effort across Australia, any Asia Capability training and support for teachers will continue to be piecemeal or absent, ultimately limiting opportunities for many students to enhance their Asia Capability at school.

## School Partnerships

Since 2009, Asialink Education has partnered schools across Australia with their counterparts across Asia through in person and digital 'BRIDGE' programs. These enable schools to exchange expertise, work on collaborative projects together, for teachers to make reciprocal visits to spend time in each other's schools and open opportunities for students to learn together and collaborate.

In 2025, there is no reason why EVERY school in Australia could not have a partnership with a school in Asia. This would dramatically enhance the opportunities for teachers and students to lift their Asia Capability and connections with peers across Asia.

Asialink Education's research and evidence shows that reciprocal visits to partner schools are incredibly powerful in opening up dialogue and exchange between educators. For school principals, they can be transformational in how they lead culturally diverse schools. For teachers they are able to provide insights that can be directly applied in their classrooms.

We strongly encourage education departments to make school partnerships with Asian schools a fundamental element of standard operations in every Australian school.

## Asia Infused Teaching Resources

While school partnerships can help to increase the Asia Capability of Australian educators, we can never expect every

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educator to become an Asia expert. Hence, it is vital that they can access teaching resources that are infused with case studies, examples and contexts that provide a solid introduction to contemporary Asian cultures, economies, societies and nations.

With previous core Federal Government Funding, the Asia Education Foundation was able to develop curriculum resources that provided Asia contexts for **every subject** at **every year level** for use by schools across Australia<sup>xli</sup>, these need to be updated in line with revisions to the Australian Curriculum.

We strongly encourage education departments to develop and regularly update teaching resources for use across the curriculum that enable teachers to introduce Asian contexts and peoples without needing a high level of Asia expertise themselves.

### Connected Learning Opportunities through Global Classrooms

Digital technologies are now embedded in the learning of students in most countries. They open up opportunities for connected learning that were difficult to achieve in decades past.

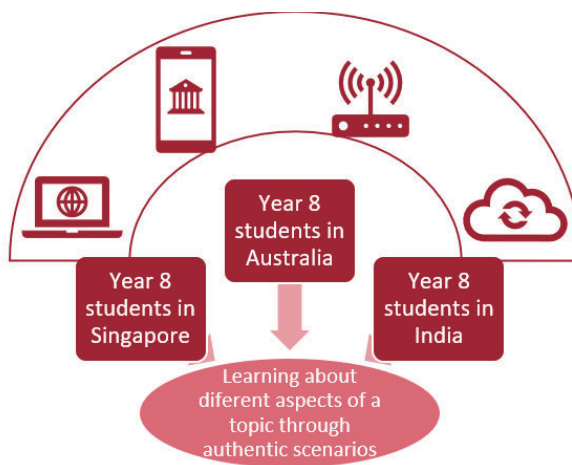
Contemporary classrooms, and the contemporary curricula, appear to have remained remarkably unchanged over decades. They have not undergone the significant reforms<sup>xlii</sup> that have been experienced by working adults. Yet within systems, innovative risk takers are radically shifting the learning experiences available to their students<sup>xliii</sup>.

**Global classrooms** are the innovation that has the greatest promise in nurturing Asia Capability. Now more than a decade in place, and used around the world, they involve creating virtual opportunities for students to learn with their counterparts in schools in other countries<sup>xliv</sup>. They move learning from the parochial to the global and enable international perspectives to permeate throughout the curriculum<sup>xlv</sup>.

The possibilities offered by global classrooms to radically transform the ability of students in Australia to start building the Asia Capability that they need are endless<sup>xlvi</sup>. The only challenge lies in enabling, designing and facilitating authentic, purposeful ways of doing so that enrich student learning.

Every school and university student should be expected to engage in multiple global classroom experiences throughout their studies. With the right support, this could be seen as a defining feature of education in Australia that significantly enhances its value to students. Informed by the OECD's Learning Compass 2030, this would allow education systems in Australia to envision "*what students will need to*

**Figure 1: Global Classroom Example**





*thrive in 2030 and beyond ... to learn to navigate by themselves through unfamiliar contexts, and find their direction in a meaningful and responsible way”<sup>xlvi</sup>.*

#### Example Student Forum

For several years, Asialink Education has been running Student Forms for primary and high school students in Queensland and Victoria. While designed to meet specific needs and curricula, these have several common characteristics:

- ➔ Students of similar ages from several schools in Australia join online with their peers from schools in multiple countries across Asia.
- ➔ Facilitators from Asialink Education provide a scaffolded series of opportunities for students to interact with each other through fun quizzes and short exchanges. For example, this might start with students exchanging limited information such as sports or fruit preferences in breakout groups.
- ➔ Over a series of sessions, facilitators introduce key topics – often referring to two or three Sustainable Development Goals – and utilise strategies such as design thinking to enable students to identify problems in their schools or communities, and to develop solutions. Students begin to share more and more with peers from other countries in their breakout sessions and build confidence in cross-cultural communication
- ➔ Ultimately, students report a much stronger sense of being a “citizen of the world”, better connections with regional peers, a new understanding of shared challenges and greater confidence in how to solve problems and lead in their communities.

## Learning Asian Languages

Many Australians do not value speaking another language. The proportion of Year 12 students enrolled in languages has stayed static across four decades, despite a number of attempts to increase it. In the 2018 OECD’s PISA international assessments, just 36% of Australian students reported learning one foreign language, and just 8% two or more foreign languages, compared to 88% and 50% across OECD countries respectively<sup>xlvi</sup>.

Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) data shows that Languages have the lowest enrolments of any Year 12 subject. Just over 20,000 Australian students take a language other than English in Year 12, compared to – for example – the almost 120,000 enrolled in science<sup>xli</sup>.

Languages are also the only one of the eight key Learning Areas in the Australian Curriculum that become optional in most schools and education systems after Year 8.

The good news is that two of the three most popular languages studied at Year 12 (with around 20% of students in each), are Asian languages – Chinese and Japanese. Also in the top ten languages are Indonesian and Vietnamese, albeit taken by just 3% of Year 12 students and more prevalent in primary schools.

Despite the good news, the numbers remain concerningly low. The numbers also fail to indicate what proportion of Asian language learners in Australia already speak an Asian language at home or have an Asian heritage.

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There has been no national data collection on Asian language learning in Australian schools Foundation to Year 10 since the 2011 report *The Current State of Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese and Korean Language Education in Australian Schools*<sup>i</sup>. That's 14 years of not actually knowing how many young Australians are learning an Asia language in schools.

There is increasing discussion about any need for languages learning at all<sup>ii</sup>. Artificial Intelligence (AI) means that apps can provide rapid – and largely accurate – translations of spoken and written languages<sup>iii</sup>, rendering the need to speak another language fluently potentially unnecessary. And yet languages learning is an important way in to deep understanding of a culture. Beyond means of expression, languages reflect the underlying cultural underpinnings that give rise to them. This suggests that rather than being redundant, language learning remains important, and AI itself can offer new ways to learn a language<sup>iiii</sup>.

### Supply

There is little research on student motivations to choose language learning, but the supply of languages teachers is one factor that limits the languages offered by schools. A lack of skilled language teachers in many schools<sup>lv</sup>, particularly in disadvantaged and regional areas, creates inequality of opportunity. It would be counterintuitive to assume that the shortage of skilled language teachers is something that will be reversed in the short or medium term.

In addition, immigrant non-native English-speaking teachers are relatively rare – present in the Australian teaching workforce at just one third of the

proportion in the broader working-age population<sup>lv</sup>. This suggests that while Australian classrooms contain a growing proportion of students from Asian backgrounds, staffroom diversity is changing much more slowly.

Contemporary technologies are transforming language learning availability here and around the world. Initiatives such as Early Learning Languages Australia (ELLA) – which offers languages learning in six Asian languages to pre-school students<sup>lvi</sup> – demonstrates how a school could offer a number of languages to its students without the need for specialised teachers.

Other aspects of language learning – finding native speakers to talk to, guidance by a qualified language teacher, and opportunities to practice language in authentic scenarios – can also be provided through online platforms. Some schools are already using this approach – both with very young students and much older ones.

### Demand

Australia has struggled to engage students in Asian languages, and languages in general. Over three decades, the number of students learning Asian languages K-10 have only increased with major intervention from the Australian Government through the eight-year National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools initiative (NALSAS) with numbers falling again once Australian Government support ceased.

Research<sup>lvii</sup> suggests that an intrinsic interest in learning languages, the influence of friends and family and community norms are all vital drivers of

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language learning for students rather than potential job or career incentives<sup>lxviii</sup>. Research also suggests that if students have the opportunity to engage with their Asian peers, this can stimulate interest in learning an Asian language<sup>lix</sup>. The inclusion of rich 'Asia literate' curriculum resources in other subject areas can also stimulate students' desire to learn an Asian language.

While there is little data available on the decision making of Australian students to study an Asian language, including at diverse choice points (e.g., primary school, entering secondary school, post year 8 and post year 10), anecdotally four key factors arise:

- ➔ Although it is common for primary students to study a language in some states, there is often no choice of language available. In addition, a pipeline to continue to study the same language at secondary school is often not in place.
- ➔ Students at Years 7 to 9 mostly choose a specific language – or choose to continue language studies - if they are succeeding, they like the teacher, or their friends are also studying the language<sup>lx</sup>.
- ➔ Students are concerned about the challenge of Asian language learning and the possible negative impact on their Year 12 ATAR score. Research indicates that ATAR score incentives in place for languages in some states mostly attract students who already do well in languages<sup>lxi</sup>.
- ➔ Many parents do not regard learning an Asian language as an important aspect of education<sup>lxii</sup>.

This suggests a need for a multi-pronged strategy to build demand and address

each of the factors in turn. Most importantly, it is necessary to highlight the benefits of learning languages – not only for intercultural competence and future employability, but also for the benefits that language learning yields for cognitive development and general capabilities, including critical thinking, creativity and curiosity<sup>lxiii</sup>.

## Lack of Data on Asia Capability in Australian Schools

Strategies to build Asia Capability need to be informed by an evidence base which identifies current progress and areas of need. Understanding opportunities that students have to enhance their Asia Capability - how this is taking place, teacher capacity to support this, and the impact on learning outcomes - is a fundamental first step in informing targeted policies to ensure equal access to opportunities.

At present, Australia has very little empirical evidence on Asia Capability<sup>lxiv</sup>. Year 12 languages participation rates are the only piece of evidence that is consistently collected. There has been no data collection on language participation K-10 since 2011. Little evidence has been collected on the implementation of the cross-curriculum priority on Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia. Even less is known about the outcomes of schooling on Australian students' Asia Capability.

Australia needs to have a national data set on Asia Capability that identifies progress, gaps and requirements, helping to inform future progress and enabling change to be tracked over time.



This is what we would expect of *any* area of school education progress or reform.

## Funding Asia Capability in Australia

Australia needs to get serious about Asia Capability. Future Australian security, prosperity and harmony depend on it. Improving Australia's Asia Capability will take at least a decade of concerted effort, requiring national leadership, long term commitment and bi-partisan support. It's not in Australia's national interest to let the momentum built by Asia Capability initiatives fall away with change of government, as previously happened.

In 2012 it was understood that children starting school then would enter the workforce when China and India had become the world's major economies. Lack of investment in building Asia Capability between 2012-2022 has now failed another generation of young Australians.

Between 1995 and 2002 the National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools (NALSAS) Strategy provided as much as \$30 million per year to support Asia Capability among Australian school students<sup>lxv</sup>. Based on the number of school students at the time<sup>lxvi</sup>, this equated to around \$9.55 per student - approximately \$19 in 2022's purchasing power<sup>lxvii</sup>.

In Australia in 2022 there were just over 4 million school students<sup>lxviii</sup>. Replacing NALSAS funding would therefore equate to \$77 million per year at 2022 rates. This is just 1/800<sup>th</sup> of the overall Federal Education Budget for 2023/2024<sup>lxix</sup>.

Several priority activities would be enormously beneficial in supporting a greater focus on Asia Capability in Australian schools:

**\$2.5 million - The development of a suite of postgraduate micro credentials for in-service teachers**, designed to equip them with the skills and knowledge to incorporate the cross-curriculum priority of Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia into their teaching.

- ➔ Each micro credential would be stand-alone but would earn credit towards a recognized postgraduate qualification.
- ➔ For example, a 10-hour micro-credential on how to provide students with opportunities to enhance their intercultural understanding of Asia with examples from the Australian Curriculum.

**\$4 million - The development of a set of digital resources**, aligned to the Australian Curriculum and targeted at different year levels and subjects, bringing Asian contexts into the classroom, incorporating both stimulus material and student learning activities.

- ➔ These could be developed in partnership with governments in the Asia and Pacific, enabling sharing of pedagogical and curriculum insights and encouraging greater collaboration across education sectors.
- ➔ For example, a 30-minute digital module on Year 8 science using Indonesian volcanoes as a case study to introduce the role of heat and kinetic energy in the rock cycle.

**\$7.5 million for 1,000 schools - The establishment of a program of digital partnerships between schools** in

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Australia and Asian countries, based on the BRIDGE program – AEF’s flagship program with a focus on teacher professional learning<sup>bx</sup> - but focusing on specific topics of interest to schools in particular regions, or catering to different student cohorts. For example:

- ➔ **Agricultural BRIDGE** – partnering teachers at schools in regional and remote areas with a focus on sustainable agriculture (drawing on the experience of the HarvestEd project already successfully implemented by AEF<sup>bxix</sup>).
- ➔ **Vocational BRIDGE** – partnering vocational teachers in Australia and Asia, with a focus on enhancing vocational teaching practices (drawing on the example of the VETConnect project already successfully implemented by AEF with India<sup>bxii</sup>).
- ➔ **STEM BRIDGE** – partnering STEM teachers in Australia with STEM teachers in schools in Asian countries with particular strengths in STEM (for example Singapore or Taiwan) to facilitate virtual STEM professional learning communities.
- ➔ **First Nations BRIDGE** – partnering teachers at schools in Australia with high proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander Students with teachers at schools in Asian countries that cater to First Nations students to focus on culturally appropriate educational practices.
- ➔ **Wellbeing BRIDGE** – partnering teachers to focus on student and teacher wellbeing initiatives.

**\$1 million – Development of an ‘Asia Literate School’ audit tool** – enabling schools to self-evaluate their progress towards a series of targets around the

inclusion of Asia Capability programs and activities.

- ➔ Including digital tools to help schools plan for Asia Capability Enhancements.
- ➔ Including a program of professional learning and mentoring between 100 schools (based on the Growing Global Citizens program already successfully implemented by AE).

Ensuring a harmonious region requires a focus on people-to-people connections. By deeply engaging with communities across the Indo-Pacific region, Australia can shape hearts and minds. This represents an investment in peace, ensuring that all countries in the region are deeply intertwined, their interests shared and their futures interdependent.

To fully engage with its neighbours, all Australians must have the skills, knowledge and capacity to do so. An investment in Asia Capability is an investment in Australia’s future.

**\$2 million – Development and Implementation of a ‘Lead Asia Capable Schools’ Program** - targeted at school principals and deputy school principals in both primary and secondary schools across Australia, and developed in collaboration with school leadership experts, this program would enable current and future school principals to:

- ➔ deepen their understanding of Asia (including through visits to one or more education systems in Asia)
- ➔ expand their skills and knowledge in developing and applying strategies in their schools to provide students with opportunities to strengthen their Asia Capability, including through partnerships with schools in Asia.

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(This initiative would build on the successful ‘Leading Asia Literate Schools’ previously offered by Asialink Education).

### About Asialink Education

The Asia Education Foundation was part of Asialink when it was founded by the Keating Government in 1992. Under the One Asialink Strategy, AEF’s name was changed to Asialink Education (AE) but the focus of our work has not changed.

AE has positively impacted thousands of students, teachers and school principals across three decades. We have ensured that they have the tools to foster harmony and friendship within their own communities and have connected them to their peers in 20 countries in Asia. Our goal is to ensure that every young person is provided with the opportunities to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, competencies and networks required to assure a cohesive and inclusive Australia and Asia region.

Our bespoke programs have enabled participants to:

- ➔ Build Asia Capability
- ➔ Learn about the contemporary realities of countries in Asia
- ➔ Strengthen intercultural communication skills, and
- ➔ Connect with peers in countries across Asia to enhance collaboration and partnership.

In three decades, we have created cross-curricular curriculum resources, school partnership programs, national and international educator professional learning initiatives, innovative student programs and rich networks that connect

Australian schools with 23 countries across the Indo-Pacific.

AE’s Council comprises representatives from all education jurisdictions in Australia, in addition to members from Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, Education Services Australia, school principals’ Associations and the Catholic and Independent schools’ sectors.

AE programs increasingly utilise global classroom methodologies to enhance student outcomes. Students and teachers report that they are transformational. Our programs:

- ➔ **Encourage** students and educators to adopt a stance of openness and acceptance towards people different from themselves.
- ➔ **Provide** students with opportunities to learn together with their peers in countries across Asia.
- ➔ **Create** communities of practice to connect educators with their professional peers in schools across the region.
- ➔ **Enable** students to work with their peers to identify ways to solve collective problems in order to build a better future together.
- ➔ **Build** the skills and knowledge that will enable students to succeed in their future lives and careers in a diverse Australia and an interconnected region.

For Asialink Education’s first 25 years, we received core funding from the Federal Government Department of Education, but this was cut in 2015 by the Howard Government. Since then, we have continued to design and deliver programs on a fee-for-service basis but

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our ability to reach young Australians and their teachers around the country to ensure the momentum built in Asia Capability is sustained has been massively reduced. We have since seen:

- ➔ Significantly decreased engagement of Australian schools with schools in Asia.
- ➔ Reduced opportunities for students to engage with young people in Asia.
- ➔ Stagnation in already small numbers of students studying Asian languages (and a significant drop in Indonesian).
- ➔ Teachers lacking the support and resources to incorporate the cross-curriculum priority of *Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia* into their teaching.

It can be no coincidence, as Australia's outgoing Racism Commissioner notes, that "*racial discrimination remains a daily occurrence for far too many*"<sup>lxxiii</sup>.

### Supporting Asialink Education to Do More

The goal of the Australian Governments' *Invested: Australia's Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040* is to deepen Australia's engagement with our region and ensure our shared future prosperity. The Strategy emphasises the rapid pace of growth in the region and the need for Australia to be its trusted and reliable partner in order to reap the opportunities it presents. As Foreign Minister Penny Wong stated:

*We seek genuine partnership with Southeast Asian economies to capture untapped opportunities for our mutual benefit*<sup>lxxiv</sup>.

Achieving genuine partnership is not only about strategy and business. It requires Australians to be ready to engage with hearts and minds. The first recommendation in Australia's Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040 is for National Cabinet to develop a whole-of-nation plan to strengthen Southeast Asia Capability. As the authors of the report state:

*Increasing cultural Capability and capability is key to realising the breadth of opportunities in Southeast Asia ... Australia needs to lift investment in Southeast Asia Capability at all levels, from stimulating demand and teaching languages and cultural awareness to school and university students*<sup>lxxv</sup>.

It is vitally important that young Australians are provided with ample opportunities to build and strengthen core competencies such as global competence, intercultural understanding and intercultural communication skills. Achieving this required a sustained focus on the skills of teachers, the contents of the curriculum and the implementation of cross-curriculum priorities to provide a fertile environment for tolerance and open-mindedness to thrive.

Asialink Education has a proven track record in supporting students, educators and young professionals to enhance their Asia Capability. We need Federal Government support to reach more students, more educators and more young professionals to raise Australia's Asia Capability.

## Recommendations

### 1 – A National Plan for Asia Capability

- ➔ Federal and State Governments work together to develop a coordinated plan to enhance Asia Capability in Australia
- ➔ Restore Federal Government funding for Asia Capability to ensure that all Australian students have sustained opportunities to build it during their education
- ➔ Develop initiatives to support sustained and active partnerships between Australian and Asian education systems

### 2 - Support for Educators

- ➔ Inclusion of Asia Capability in all pre- and in-service training programs for school and tertiary educators
- ➔ Develop an Asia Capability guide for schools that provides guidance to help schools reflect on and enhance their Asia Capability practices
- ➔ Opportunities for educators and leaders to visit Asian countries and become familiar with Asian education systems
- ➔ Partnerships with educational institutions in Asian countries, including professional learning communities and communities of practice

### 3 - Asia Capability Across the Curriculum

- ➔ Revise curricula to incorporate explicit reference to Asia throughout.
- ➔ Develop digital resources for use across curricula to include Asian perspectives, case studies, examples and in the teaching of all core curriculum subjects
- ➔ Inclusion of Asian contexts and perspectives in assessment activities
- ➔ Regular review of educational practices and student outcomes around Asia Capability

### 4 - Multi-Pronged Opportunities for School and University Students

- ➔ Support Australian schools to develop school partnerships with Asia that enable joint virtual classrooms between Australia and Asia
- ➔ Incorporate global classroom activities in all subjects to enable students to collaborate with peers in Asia on topics of local and regional importance including STEM
- ➔ Develop communication materials for parents, students and schools on the value of Asian language learning
- ➔ Develop age-appropriate resources and applications to enable students to learn Asian Languages virtually
- ➔ Provide conversation classes offered by diaspora or (virtually) by Asia-based teachers

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