



Australian Multicultural Action Network Inc
32 Quandong Street, O'CONNOR ACT 2602
ABN: 40 172 914 431 Assn No: A06217

Mr Ravi Krishnamurthy JP
PRESIDENT

President.AMANACT@gmail.com
Mobile: 0404629700

Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education

**Inquiry into Building Asia Capability in Australia through the education system
and beyond**

Prepared by:
Ravi Krishnamurthy
Community Leader and Educator
Date: 6th October 2025

Introduction

I am pleased to make this submission to the Committee's inquiry into **Building Asia Capability in Australia**.

Australia's future prosperity, security, and social cohesion are deeply tied to our ability to engage effectively with Asia—the most dynamic and consequential region in the 21st century. Having worked as both an educator and community leader, and as someone who has engaged closely with multicultural and diaspora communities, I strongly believe that **Asia capability is not optional—it is a sovereign capability that must be nurtured through our education system, workforce strategies, and broader national policy frameworks.**

This submission responds to the Terms of Reference by highlighting key enablers, barriers, and opportunities for strengthening Asia capability, while proposing practical recommendations for reform.

1. Structural Enablers and Barriers

- **Enablers:**
 - Australia’s multicultural society provides a natural advantage in building Asia capability, with diaspora communities offering authentic cultural and linguistic resources.
 - Our geographic proximity to Asia creates opportunities for sustained people-to-people exchange, trade, and regional collaboration.
 - **Barriers:**
 - Declining enrolments in Asian languages at universities (a 75% drop in Southeast Asian languages between 2004–2022) highlight systemic disengagement.
 - Fragmentation of responsibilities across Commonwealth, state, and territory governments has resulted in inconsistent delivery of Asian language programs in schools.
 - Societal attitudes sometimes undervalue language learning, assuming English dominance suffices for international engagement.
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2. Good Practice Models

- **Language Learning:** Programs like the **NSW Asian Languages and Studies in School Program** and the **Victorian Young Leaders to China Program** demonstrate the power of early exposure combined with immersive experiences.
 - **Intercultural Understanding:** Initiatives such as the **Asia Education Foundation (AEF)** have created important frameworks for embedding Asia literacy, but require renewed investment and scale-up.
 - **Digital Engagement:** Virtual exchange programs—particularly those accelerated during COVID—show how technology can overcome geographic and financial barriers to regional engagement.
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3. Current State of Asian Languages and Cultural Studies

- Despite decades of policy emphasis, **Asian language education in Australia remains fragile**. Japanese and Chinese retain enrolments, but Southeast Asian languages (Indonesian, Thai, Vietnamese) face critical decline.
- Many schools no longer offer Asian languages, citing workforce shortages and lack of demand.
- Universities have reduced or closed language programs due to low enrolments, creating a vicious cycle of declining supply and demand.

Strategies to stimulate demand:

- Incentivise schools and universities through federal grants tied to Asian language offerings.
 - Create visible pathways by linking language learning to career opportunities in trade, diplomacy, technology, and international business.
 - Invest in teacher training scholarships and pipelines to address workforce shortages.
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4. Opportunities Beyond Language Learning

- **Cultural Literacy and Diplomacy Skills:** Embedding intercultural understanding into school curricula and workplace training ensures Asia capability is broader than language proficiency.
 - **Workforce Development:** Industry-led programs can integrate Asia capability into graduate pathways, apprenticeships, and executive training.
 - **Community Engagement:** Diaspora communities should be recognised as “**Asia capability partners**”, with policies encouraging collaboration in education, tourism, entrepreneurship, and diplomacy.
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5. Whole-of-Government Coordination

Asia capability requires coordination across education, foreign affairs, trade, immigration, and skills policy. The following actions are recommended:

- Establish a **National Asia Capability Framework** to coordinate efforts across DFAT, Austrade, Department of Education, and state governments.
 - Embed Asia capability objectives into Jobs and Skills Australia planning, ensuring workforce strategies reflect regional realities.
 - Promote collaboration between universities, industry, and government to ensure graduates are region-ready.
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Recommendations

1. **Reinvest in Asian language education** through targeted federal funding, university support packages, and teacher pipeline development.
2. **Embed intercultural understanding and Asia literacy** across the national curriculum and professional training standards.

3. **Leverage diaspora communities** as partners in building authentic cultural and linguistic capability.
 4. **Expand immersive opportunities** (student exchanges, digital classrooms, tourism partnerships) to normalise Asia engagement from early learning onwards.
 5. **Establish a National Asia Capability Framework** with clear accountability across government, education, and industry.
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Conclusion

Australia's future is inseparably tied to Asia. Building Asia capability must be seen as a **whole-of-nation effort**—one that starts in early education, extends through tertiary training, and is reinforced in our workforce, industries, and institutions.

If Australia is to remain competitive, secure, and connected, we must urgently reverse the decline in Asian language learning, embed intercultural literacy across the curriculum, and ensure system-level coordination. Asia capability is not simply a cultural enrichment; it is a national imperative.

Respectfully submitted,
Ravi Krishnamurthy
Community Leader and Educator