

## Questions on Notice: House Standing Committee on Education

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

#### Australian Primary Principals Association Response

##### 1. What reforms are needed to improve teacher workforce shortages?

Australia's teacher workforce shortages require **system-level reform that addresses both supply and retention**, rather than short-term fixes. Key reforms include strengthening the attractiveness and sustainability of teaching through **competitive remuneration, reduced administrative burden, and clear career pathways**, particularly beyond the early years. Initial Teacher Education pathways must be streamlined, with **targeted scholarships, flexible and even funded entry routes** to bring capable candidates into classrooms more quickly. Nationally consistent workforce data and forecasting are also essential, enabling governments to plan for regional, specialist and future needs rather than responding reactively. That said, APPA forecast the workforce shortage in 2008 as it was already impacting 'hard to staff' schools there calls for action but were not heeded. Engaging with the profession more fulsomely and authentically needs to be a priority and this includes partnerships to esteem the profession. Esteeming and valuing the profession will be evident when they are at the decision making table.

Equally critical are reforms that support **retention and professional longevity**. This includes structured induction and mentoring for early career teachers, ongoing professional learning, and workload models that prioritise teaching and wellbeing. Mentoring is mostly done by the profession as a goodwill activity. Providing dedicated time to teachers in schools to mentor new language teachers and funding for part-time or retired teachers to mentor (either face to face or online) would be welcome incentive.

Workforce strategies must also explicitly address specialist shortages, including languages and cultural expertise, through targeted incentives and funded pipeline programs.

As APPA has consistently argued, resilience alone cannot sustain the profession; **safe workloads, professional respect, and sustainable conditions** are the reforms needed to stabilise the workforce and ensure schools can meet both current demands and future national priorities. Data from research and surveys of the teaching workforce have for years spoken of the increasing challenges that impact retention and yet systems have failed to act in long term and sustainable ways.

## **2. How does the school system support teachers in their professional development, particularly across language and cultural studies? How can teacher professional development be improved?**

Access to high-quality mentoring—both within schools where specialist expertise exists and across school or professional networks such as professional learning communities (PLCs)—is essential to building teacher capability in languages and cultural studies. However, such support is often ad hoc and unevenly distributed. In hard-to-staff schools, leadership capacity is frequently absorbed by managing workforce shortages, and these schools commonly have a higher proportion of early career teachers. As a result, opportunities for in-school mentoring and targeted professional learning in Asian languages and cultural studies are limited.

A more systematic approach is needed. Establishing cross-site PLCs, supported by a dedicated facilitator, would provide sustainable professional learning and mentoring structures. For example, allocating 0.2 FTE to a Highly Accomplished or Lead Teacher to coordinate a network, facilitate mentoring, and lead professional learning would significantly strengthen capability across schools. While professional associations can and do provide valuable support, not all teachers are aware of these opportunities or able to engage with them without explicit system encouragement and resourcing. A coordinated, system-endorsed approach would ensure greater equity of access and impact.

## **3. What factors have influenced the negative perceptions of parents and students towards learning an Asian language and culture?**

### **a. How can the school system change negative attitudes?**

Negative perceptions of learning an Asian language and culture have been shaped by a combination of structural, societal and systemic factors. In many primary schools, Asian languages have been delivered inconsistently due to workforce shortages, short-term funding and limited access to specialist teachers. This has resulted in fragmented programs that struggle to build proficiency or confidence, reinforcing the perception that Asian languages are “optional” or less valuable than other curriculum areas.

Broader community narratives have also played a role. Shifting geopolitical tensions, limited public understanding of Australia’s economic and social connections to Asia, and a historical emphasis on European languages have all contributed to diminished perceived relevance among parents and students. When learning is disconnected from real-world purpose, continuity and future pathways, engagement declines.

The school system can change negative attitudes by embedding Asian languages and cultures as a **core and valued component of a contemporary education**, rather than

an add-on. This requires sustained investment in qualified teachers, long-term program continuity, and curriculum approaches that clearly connect language learning to identity, intercultural understanding, future work opportunities and Australia's place in the region.

Schools must be supported to engage families and communities, including local cultural organisations and regional partners, to make learning visible, authentic and meaningful. From APPA's perspective, improving attitudes is inseparable from improving conditions: when programs are stable, well-resourced and respected, students experience success, parents see relevance, and confidence in Asian language and cultural learning grows across school communities.

High-level, consistent messaging from government is critical, as negative perceptions of Asian languages and cultures are, in some instances, underpinned by both overt and covert racism. Clear, public anti-racism statements and sustained community-wide strategies can help shift narratives, legitimise inclusion and belonging, and reduce the expectation that schools alone must challenge entrenched attitudes. When governments visibly affirm the value of Asian languages, cultures and Australia's place in the region, it creates the enabling conditions for schools to do their work with community support rather than resistance.

This system-level leadership is especially important for primary schools, where leadership capacity is limited. Many schools operate with very small leadership teams, and in smaller settings there may be only a single principal carrying responsibility for staff wellbeing, community engagement and student safety. Without strong system-wide support to address the impacts of racism, the emotional labour placed on school leaders is significant and unsustainable. APPA strongly advocates for shared responsibility across systems, so that confronting racism does not fall disproportionately on individual principals, but is supported through clear policy, resourcing and coordinated action beyond the school gate.

#### **4. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using emerging technologies in the teaching of Asian languages and cultural studies?**

APPA recognises that emerging technologies offer important opportunities in the teaching of Asian languages and cultural studies, particularly in the context of ongoing workforce shortages. Digital platforms can increase access to language learning where specialist teachers are unavailable, support continuity across year levels, and provide exposure to authentic language use through virtual exchanges, multimedia resources and real-time connections with speakers across the region. When used well, technology can enhance engagement, support differentiated learning and broaden

students' understanding of contemporary Asian cultures beyond a static or stereotypical lens.

However, APPA strongly emphasises that teaching, especially in primary schools, is fundamentally a **relational, human endeavour**. Language learning is deeply connected to trust, identity, cultural understanding and belonging, all of which are best fostered through consistent relationships with skilled educators. Over-reliance on technology risks reducing language learning to transactional or superficial experiences, particularly for younger learners who benefit from modelling, interaction and responsive teaching. Technology should therefore be seen as a **complement, not a substitute**, for qualified language teachers.

Any expansion of digital approaches must be accompanied by investment in workforce development, professional learning for teachers, and safeguards to ensure cultural integrity, quality and student wellbeing remain central.