

Submission

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

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It is well-documented that studies of Asia (cultures, histories, political systems, economies) are in decline across all sectors of Australia's education systems. For example, at a leading High School in Melbourne, moves are presently underway to cut the Year 11 Chinese program in 2026, on the grounds that its projected enrolment of 13 is two below the threshold requirement of 15. This is despite Chinese classes from Years 7 to 10 having higher retention rates than French classes at those levels. And it means that in 2027, there can be no Year 12 Chinese class at that school. This is a backward step and evidence that crude budgetary at a micro-educational level are undermining the national interest.

Similar cuts to Asian studies programs are occurring, or have occurred, at universities across the country. This is despite the fact that Australia's trade relations with Asian economies such as China (or largest export market), our defence cooperation with countries as diverse as Singapore and Indonesia, and our diplomacy across the entire Asia Pacific region are fundamentally important for Australia's security and prosperity. This is increasingly the case given the growing isolationist policies being pursued by the United States under the Trump administration – policies that are likely to continue post-Trump.

Australia needs to establish schools in each state that specialise in the teaching of Asian studies. Below is a briefing document that the late Dr Jane Orton and I drafted some years ago. It remains relevant today.

Educating Australians for an Asian Future

A Proposal for a Specialist School focusing on Asian Studies Curricula

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This brief outlines:

- (1) A rationale for a school specializing in the teaching of Asian languages, cultures, and societies (we are tentatively labelling this as the Australian Asia Academy – henceforth 'the Academy').*
- (2) An overview of the curricula to be offered by the Academy.*
- (3) A sketch of the structure of the program.*
- (4) A list of the physical resources necessary for the Academy to succeed.*

(5) A sketch of how development of the Academy might be advanced.

Introduction

We present here a proposal to establish an Academy with a specialist focus on studies of Asia, to be a model for future curriculum initiatives in studies of Asia in Australian schools. At the outset, we note that the Academy must be a K-12 educational institution. It is well documented that language education needs to commence at the very earliest years of schooling in order to graduate students who will be near-fluent in their chosen Asian second language (L2) by Year 12. Moreover, the cognitive benefits of learning a second language in early childhood are well known. In standardized testing, bilingual students have superior scores compared with their monolingual peers and their attention focus is significantly better than their monolingual peers. A second language also gives students broader career and life opportunities as adults and the skills to travel and connect with the world as global citizens.

(1) Rationale for the Academy

The problem the Academy would address is that nearly four decades on from the first moves towards ‘Asianization of the curriculum’, studies of Asia still remain peripheral or non-existent across the majority of Australia’s educational institutions. Where they are being offered, they are either in decline or they are being wound down for resourcing reasons, or they are being closed down altogether. A very small minority of Year 12 students are studying an Asian language. Addressing this problem has to be a high priority for the country’s immediate and future security and prosperity. It should be abundantly clear that it is in Australia’s national interest to have well-educated, Asia-literate personnel who can communicate confidently at many levels in Asian languages with their Asian counterparts in industry, banking, diplomacy and government.

In 1989 the Garnaut Report to the Australian Government (*Australia and the East Asia Ascendancy*) noted that Australia’s on-going security and prosperity were now irrevocably

related to how Australians properly understand the cultures, histories, politics, languages, and economics of their neighbours, trading partners, and contenders in the Asia Pacific. A central recommendation in the report was the adoption in Australian schools and higher education institutions of Asian studies curricula. The report noted that young Australians needed to be equipped with a broad Asian awareness ('Asia literacy,' 'Asian consciousness') to give them the confidence to be at home in Asia, enabling effective diplomatic, cross-cultural, business and security conversations to be conducted at many levels between Australians and their Asian counterparts. In 2012 another report to government, *Australia in the Asian Century*, echoed the Garnaut Report, calling for comprehensive curricula reforms across all of Australia's education systems, highlighting the importance of Asian studies.

Despite fulsome public endorsements of the recommendations in the reports (and many related public documents), from all sides of politics, very little has been achieved. Enrolments in Asian language studies in Australian schools and universities remain static or in decline. Public opinion polling (e.g., the Lowy Institute's annual surveys) show that there are widespread misunderstandings of Asia among too many Australians, while a significant (and possibly growing) minority fears perceived threats from Asian governments, while some hold hostile and racist views on Asian immigration and related issues. Clearly there is a significant gap in our education systems where Asian studies should be flourishing. To advance Australia's prosperity there is a need to train a corps of highly proficient and knowledgeable people to staff government, business and academic/research positions and to create layered-in relationships at all levels in the many other areas of Australia-Asia contact. In the area of security there is a lack of expert Asia hands with the language and content studies that would enable them to closely follow developments and understand them in contemporary and historical frameworks and thus be able to offer wise advice.

(2) Towards an Asian Studies Curriculum

The curriculum we are proposing places studies of Asia at the forefront of the teaching and learning programs that the Academy will be offering. The Asian language streams provided by the Academy will be complemented by humanities and social sciences curricula reflecting the historical, cultural, and philosophical roots of those languages: viz., Buddhism in Southeast and East Asia, Confucianism in China and Japan, and Islam in Indonesia. Asia's encounters with the West will be explored through relevant aspects of the West's histories – e.g., British imperial history (causes, conduct, consequences, etc.), Dutch history in Indonesia, China's 'century of humiliation,' Japan's 'modernizations.' Special attention will be paid to Australia's encounters with its Asian neighbours (e.g., Chinese involvements in the gold rushes of the mid-19th century, the White Australia policy, the Pacific War). In later years students will be able to take international studies with a particular focus on the Asia Pacific region.

Chinese and Japanese are estimated to take an English speaker 3.5 times longer to master than a European language. To be able to read and write either fast enough, and to have sufficient grammar and vocabulary to tackle content studies in the language from first year undergraduate level, *language programs need to be intensive and begun from the earliest years*. The program will need to be rigorous and its parameters will need to be rigorously adhered to. Enrollment will be un-zoned, with built in protection for siblings. All students will need to be proficient in English appropriate to their age to be accepted into the Academy. Students will need to be keen to attend, and their parents keen to encourage them to develop, the 'Asia awareness' the Academy will be nurturing.

(3) Structure

The Academy will offer a 50-50 bilingual program, in English and, initially, either Chinese, Japanese or Indonesian. All students will learn one second-language intensively. Students already proficient in an Asian language will not be permitted to study that language but will have to learn another second language. All areas of the curriculum (including specialist areas)

will be worked on in each language, but different aspects/topics will be studied in each. In its first year(s) the Academy will offer entry at Foundation, Year 1 and Year 2 levels. Unless they have equivalent proficiency in their Asian language (as a second language) from an alternative learning program, new students will not be admitted to the Academy after Grade 2.

(4) *Physical*

Given that this will be an F–12 Academy educating notionally around 120 students in each year (40 students in each of the L2 streams), a suitable physical location will be necessary for its development. It will need to be accessible from a number of directions, near public transport services and the location will need to be safe for small children.

(5) *Advancing the Academy*

We engaged in informal discussions with colleagues in a range of educational circles, asking for advice and opinions on the viability of the proposal that we are developing. Not once did we been met with a negative response. The rationale is clear to everyone we consulted and all encouraged us to continue with developing it.

In due course an official committee will be needed to carry the proposal forward.

References:

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