

## **Submission to the Inquiry into Building Asia Capability in Australia through Education and Beyond**

**by Indonesia Council, Herb Feith Indonesian Engagement Centre  
and Acicis, 31 October 2025**

Attention:  
The Committee Secretariat  
House Standing Committee on Education  
Parliament of Australia

“There is no country more important to Australia than Indonesia. If we fail to get this relationship right, and nurture and develop it, the whole web of our foreign relations is incomplete.”

— [Paul Keating, 1994](#)

“Not just close neighbours – but great friends. Thanks for the warm welcome [@jokowi](#).”

— [Scott Morrison, 2018](#)

“Australia and Indonesia, as the closest of neighbours, have a shared destiny.”

— [Joint statement: Australia and Indonesia, 2024](#)

“There is no country more important to Australia than Indonesia. We have a long history of cooperation and friendship, celebrating 75 years of diplomatic relations last year.”

— [Anthony Albanese, 2025](#)

“Indonesia is one of Australia's closest and most important partners.”

— [Richard Marles, 2025](#)

Successive Australian governments have rightly recognised Indonesia as one of our most vital international partners. Yet these words ring hollow when contrasted with the lack of meaningful investment in Asia, particularly Indonesian, capability.

The steady erosion of funding for Asian language programs stands in stark contrast to the rhetoric of partnership and shared destiny. As [Professor Tim Lindsey has observed](#), “performative post-election prime ministerial visits have become an essential, symbolic part of Australia’s bilateral relationship with Indonesia, but they too often lack substance.”

The current lack of investment in Indonesian language education risks sending an unintended message: that Australia’s commitment to a shared destiny with Indonesia does not extend to linguistic and cultural fluency. If we are to honour the spirit of partnership articulated by successive governments, we must ensure that our education system reflects this priority in practice.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Australia’s strategic relationship with Indonesia demands more than rhetoric—it requires investment in language and cultural capability. The following recommendations outline practical steps to strengthen Indonesian capability across education and professional sectors

and are designed to align with national priorities including those identified in *Invested: Australia's Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040*.

A detailed mapping of current policy settings, gaps, and opportunities across the education pipeline—from pre-kindergarten to postgraduate—is provided in the **Appendix**. This mapping identifies key stakeholders, outlines the limitations of existing approaches, and proposes ideal policy settings to support strategic investment in Indonesian language education. It serves as a practical framework for implementing the recommendations outlined below.

Given the political and strategic significance of Indonesia to Australia, we propose that Indonesian be used as a pilot for a broader national approach. Lessons learned from targeted investment in Indonesian can inform scalable approaches to other Asian languages, helping build Asia capability across the education system.

**1. Recognising that *without teachers, there is no pipeline*:**

**Strengthen the Indonesian Language Teaching Workforce**

- 1.1. Invest in pre-service and in-service training for Indonesian language teachers to address the current shortage, improve pedagogical skills, and ensure contemporary, culturally authentic materials are used.

**Boost Tertiary Engagement and Opportunities**

- 1.2. Introduce an Asian Language Bonus for university admissions—either through university admissions authorities or direct agreement among universities—to encourage continuity from secondary to tertiary study. This would help counteract subject scaling disincentives that currently discourage students from pursuing Indonesian through Year 11 and 12.
- 1.3. Provide funding and incentives to universities to strengthen Indonesian studies, including research, scholarships, and student mobility programs. These initiatives should be designed in close consultation with those delivering the programs and include dedicated support for the associated workload and time commitments required to administer such programs.
- 1.4. Waive HECS-HELP contributions for Indonesian and Asian Studies subjects at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and expand Commonwealth Supported Places (CSP) for postgraduate students.
- 1.5. Implement a demand-driven carve-out to universities' Commonwealth Grant Scheme (CGS) funding caps for domestic enrolments in Indonesian and Asian Studies subjects, ensuring universities receive full funding for every domestic enrolment in these disciplines regardless of where a university sits with respect to its institutional CGS funding cap. This would align with existing carve-outs for First Nations and low-SES students and reflect the strategic importance of Indonesian.
- 1.6. Encourage interdisciplinary approaches combining language, cultural studies, diplomacy and policy to prepare graduates for diverse professional roles.

**2. Recognising that *strategic relationships require strategic resourcing*:**

**Reinstate Indonesian as a National Critical Language through a National Strategy for Language Education**

- 2.1. Formally recognise Indonesian as a critical language in national education and foreign policy strategies. Such a designation would signal the strategic

- importance of Indonesia capability for national security, trade, and diplomacy, and guide targeted investment in language capability.
- 2.2. Establish a coordinated, long-term funding stream to support Indonesian language education from primary to tertiary levels. This strategy should include curriculum development, teaching resources, scholarships for in-country study, and teacher professional development.
3. **Recognising that *Asia capability begins in the classroom:***  
**Expand and Support Indonesian Language Programs in Schools**
    - 3.1. Expand access to Indonesian language programs across primary and secondary schools, with targeted support and incentives for all schools, including regional, low-enrolment and private schools.
    - 3.2. Invest in national curriculum harmonisation efforts—particularly through the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA)—to ensure consistency, efficiency, and contemporary relevance in Indonesian language teaching across jurisdictions.
    - 3.3. Fund initiatives that make Indonesian learning engaging and relevant, including cultural immersion programs, technology-supported language learning, and partnerships with community organisations.
  4. **Recognising that *Asia capability also extends beyond the classroom:***  
**Promote Lifelong Learning and Professional Pathways**
    - 4.1. Support pathways for professionals in government, defence, trade, and business to acquire or refresh Indonesian language skills. This should include short courses, executive programs, and in-country immersion placements.
    - 4.2. Mainstream Indonesian language and cultural literacy into professional education and accreditation frameworks by adapting existing models from other sectors. For example, micro-credentials in maritime law with an Indonesian emphasis could be offered to professionals working in ocean governance and regional security.
    - 4.3. Establish a targeted funding mechanism—such as a new Asia Capability Professional Stream—to support these initiatives, delivered in collaboration with universities, industry bodies, and Indonesian counterparts.
  5. **Recognising that *what gets measured gets supported:***  
**Support Monitoring, Evaluation, and Coordination**
    - 5.1. Create a national oversight mechanism to monitor enrolments, workforce outcomes, and program effectiveness. This will ensure funding is targeted strategically, gaps are identified, and investment delivers measurable national and individual benefits.

## ABOUT US

We make this submission as a coalition of leading Indonesian advocates, educators and scholars: the **Indonesia Council**, Australia's peak body for scholars and educators to promote and support the study of Indonesia within higher education); the **Monash Herb Feith Indonesian Engagement Centre**; and the **Australian Consortium for In-Country Indonesian Studies** (Acicis). Collectively, we are at the forefront of support and engaging with the Indonesian language education and research community.

Drawing on our experience and available data, we offer observations and recommendations aimed at increasing student enrolments, strengthening teacher professional development, supporting the recruitment of Indonesian language teachers, and ensuring adequate funding for schools and universities that offer Indonesian language programs.

While the inquiry addresses Asia capability broadly, our submission focuses specifically on Indonesia—reflecting its strategic significance to Australia and the pressing need to revitalise Indonesian language education as a cornerstone of regional engagement.

Australia’s institutional monolingualism undermines our ability to build trust, understanding, and influence in the region. Reinvestment in Indonesian language education would signal genuine commitment to partnership, regional responsibility, and long-term strategic engagement.

## BACKGROUND

Data from the Victorian Department of Education’s *Languages Education Report* reveal a sustained and alarming decline in Indonesian language enrolments across secondary schools. Between 2005 and 2020, enrolments fell by 9,031 students—from 23,968 to 14,937—representing an average decline of 13.9% every five years. National data collated by Acicis corroborates this trend. Its [\*Languages in Victorian Secondary Schools\*](#) report shows a drop in Year 12 Indonesian exam completions from 1,061 in 2002 to just 337 in 2024.

This decline is not just statistical—it is felt in classrooms. At Monash University’s Indonesian Language Holiday Program in 2025, one student from Ballarat described how enrolments at his school fell from around 200 students in Year 7 to just three by Year 12. His experience reflects a broader pattern of attrition that demands coordinated national attention.

While further research is needed to fully understand the causes, existing evidence points to several systemic issues:

- Curriculum design and learning materials are often repetitive and inadequately scaffolded across primary school levels, and overly complex or disengaging in the upper years of secondary school.
- Indonesian language resources lack diversity and contemporary relevance.
- Professional development opportunities for teachers are limited, affecting both retention and quality.

Without immediate and coordinated action, Australia risks losing a generation of students equipped with the linguistic and intercultural skills essential for strengthening our relationship with Indonesia—our closest Asian neighbour and one of the world’s largest democracies. **We cannot engage deeply with what we do not understand.**

## KEY CHALLENGES TO BUILDING INDONESIA CAPABILITY

### The drying pipeline of Indonesia-capable citizens

- Australia’s ability to build Indonesia capability is being undermined by systemic gaps in language education. Schools are insufficiently incentivised to offer Indonesian, with decisions to do so often resting with individual principals. **Without national**

**leadership, Indonesian language education has been left to chance.** In the absence of coordinated advocacy, Indonesian is frequently deprioritised—even when teachers are available or interest exists.

- Where Indonesian is taught, students often reach university to find no pathway to continue. Others who missed the opportunity at school face little incentive to begin at tertiary level. These gaps contribute to a shortage of Indonesian language teachers, which in turn makes it harder for schools to offer the subject—creating a reinforcing cycle of underinvestment and attrition.

### **The tendency to monolingualism in institutional and policy settings**

- **Australia cannot lead in the region if it cannot speak to it.** Despite recurring political statements recognising Indonesia’s strategic importance, Australia’s institutional and policy settings continue to privilege English monolingualism. The absence of systemic support for Asian language learning reflects a broader complacency about regional engagement.
- This mindset limits Australians’ ability to operate confidently in multilingual, multicultural environments and risks signalling to our regional partners that Australia expects engagement to occur on its terms.

### **The need for sustained and systemic whole-of-life investment**

- **Short-term programs cannot solve long-term challenges.** Building Indonesia-capable citizens requires long-term, coordinated investment across all stages of education and professional life—from early schooling through to tertiary study, teacher training, professional development, and lifelong learning. Short-term or one-off initiatives have repeatedly failed to produce lasting outcomes.
- A whole-of-life strategy, underpinned by national policy, funding certainty, and collaboration between governments, universities, and schools, is essential to rebuild Australia’s Indonesian language capacity and embed it within the nation’s strategic and cultural fabric.

## **PRINCIPLES FOR MEANINGFUL INVESTMENT**

It is no overstatement to say that strategic investment in Indonesian language and cultural education can transform Australia’s regional capability. It can develop a generation of Indonesia-literate Australians able to engage with nuance, empathy, and confidence, skills vital to diplomacy, trade, education, and security. **Successful investment is long-term and systemic.** It spans primary to tertiary education, teacher training, in-country programs, and professional pathways. The National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSAS), discontinued in 2002, and the subsequent National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP) (2009–2012), demonstrated the effectiveness of a coordinated approach, linking schools, universities, and government to build lasting capability.

### **Benefits and Enablers**

- Strategic investment strengthens bilateral ties, enhances research and education, and produces globally minded graduates. Key enablers include stable funding, curriculum renewal, professional development for teachers, and accessible student pathways from school through to career.

### **Cultural and Language Literacy in Education and Research**

- Linguistic and cultural literacy allow Australians to engage with Indonesian partners, access local knowledge, and produce research grounded in Indonesian perspectives rather than filtered through a monolingual and monocultural lens.

### **Relationships and Mutual Respect**

- Speaking each other's language and understanding each other's culture fosters trust and goodwill that cannot be achieved through translation alone.
- Mutual language and cultural mastery demonstrates respect and deepens institutional and personal relationships.

### **National Interest and Security**

- Language and cultural understanding are essential to national security and effective policymaking. They offer insights into Indonesia's motivations and decision-making processes, providing Australia with the contextual understanding needed to navigate an increasingly complex region.

## **CASE STUDIES**

Australia's diplomatic resilience and regional influence have long depended on individuals with deep Indonesian language and cultural literacy. **Asia capability is not a luxury—it's a strategic asset.**

### **Diplomacy begins with understanding.**

- Penny Williams, former Ambassador to Indonesia, has spoken about how her language skills and close personal relationships with Indonesian counterparts were crucial in maintaining calm and trust during moments of bilateral tension, including the unexpected AUKUS announcement. Williams, who studied Indonesian in school and later at the Australian National University, exemplifies the strategic advantage of sustained investment in Asia capability under previous governments.
- The current Ambassador, Rod Brazier, has consistently emphasised the importance of learning Indonesian, highlighting it as an essential skill for fostering deeper diplomatic, cultural, and economic ties between Australia and Indonesia.

### **What happens in the classroom can shape a region.**

- The previous generation of Australians who benefited from government investment in Asian languages—particularly through NALSAS—demonstrates the lifelong professional dividends of Indonesia capability. Those who studied Indonesian in school and continued through tertiary and professional pathways have gone on to serve as diplomats, development specialists, defence personnel, and scholars shaping Australia's engagement in the region.
- Luke Arnold studied Indonesian in high school and later participated in Acicis' in-country programs. This early exposure laid the foundation for a career in Southeast Asia-focused diplomacy and development. He went on to work with DFAT and the UN, demonstrating how sustained investment in Indonesian language education can produce globally engaged professionals with deep regional expertise. Such success stories show how language study enhances individual careers while contributing to Australia's strategic, economic, and cultural capital.



### **In a crisis, language builds trust.**

- During Australia's leadership of the International Peacekeeping Force in East Timor (INTERFET) in 1999, Indonesian-speaking diplomats and defence personnel played a vital role in communicating with Indonesian officials and peacekeeping counterparts, helping to manage a volatile transition with professionalism and respect. As [Major Guy Warnock \(SASR\) observed](#) in the context of his service in East Timor, "Language leads to culture and then culture leads to understanding."
- Similarly, in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami, Australian aid and defence workers with Indonesian language and cultural understanding facilitated rapid humanitarian coordination and strengthened bilateral goodwill in Aceh.

### **Fluency is not optional—it's operational.**

- Ongoing security and counterterrorism cooperation between the Australian Federal Police and their Indonesian counterparts depends heavily on trust built through personal relationships and linguistic fluency, underscoring the strategic value of language and cultural capability in maintaining regional stability and mutual understanding. With the likelihood of increased activity in the region under AUKUS, language capability in shared operational zones will be imperative to the security of personnel and their missions.

## **RISKS OF CONTINUED UNDERINVESTMENT**

Australia is already experiencing the consequences of declining Indonesian language capability. A recent DFAT graduate recruitment round did not include a single Indonesian speaker—an alarming indicator of the shrinking pipeline of Asia-capable professionals within government. This diminishing pipeline threatens Australia's ability to sustain meaningful cooperation with Indonesia in trade, climate action, regional security, and education.

A simple thought experiment illustrates the stakes: when foreign delegations hold side conversations in their own languages, Australians without that capacity are excluded from critical nuance and relationship-building and rely on third-party interpretation. This is the position our nation will increasingly face unless we rebuild Indonesia capability now. **In a multilingual region, monolingualism is strategic isolation.**

Without renewed investment in Indonesian language and cultural literacy, Australia risks a weaker, less resilient relationship with its closest neighbour. **Diplomatic silence is not neutrality—it's vulnerability.** Engagement may become superficial and prone to misunderstanding, making it harder to manage future crises or seize emerging opportunities with sensitivity and trust.

The consequences extend beyond diplomacy into the cultural academic and commercial domains. Australian businesses will lose competitive advantage in Indonesia due to limited local insight, and our defence and security operations will be compromised if personnel lack intercultural expertise. Technically skilled teams entering the region without Indonesian literacy risk operational friction and strategic missteps. **Strategic gaps begin with educational neglect.**

This is also a political opportunity. This inquiry itself reflects growing recognition of the importance of Asia capability and regional engagement. Leaders from across the political spectrum, such as Luke Gosling (Labor) and Julie Bishop (Liberal), have consistently championed this agenda. However, even deeper bipartisan commitment is essential if Australia is to move beyond a monolingual mindset and build enduring regional engagement.

## CONCLUSION

Australia's relationship with Indonesia is [too important to leave to luck and student enthusiasm](#). Rebuilding Indonesian language and cultural capability is not simply an educational priority—it is a strategic imperative. With coordinated, long-term investment, we can equip future generations to engage with Indonesia confidently, respectfully, and effectively. The recommendations presented in this submission offer a practical roadmap to ensure that Australia's Asia capability is not only restored but reimaged for the challenges and opportunities ahead.

Sincerely,

Dr Natali Pearson

**President, Indonesia Council**

W: <https://www.indonesiacouncil.org/>

Dr Sharyn Davies

**Director, Herb Feith Indonesian Engagement Centre, Monash University**

W: <https://www.monash.edu/arts/Herb-Feith-Indonesian-Engagement>

Mr Muhamad Argi Afriandi

**Affiliate, Herb Feith Indonesian Engagement Centre**

Mr Liam Prince

**Director, Acicis**

W: <https://www.acicis.edu.au/>



## APPENDIX: MAPPING THE PIPELINE

Level	Current policy settings / situation	Stakeholders	Benefits of current policy settings	Limitations of current policy settings	Ideal policy settings	Impact of changed policy settings
Pre-kindy	Community language schools – diaspora led, some funding committed in the last election	Diaspora, local gov., Indonesian government – but could be more	Supports parents trying to raise bilingual kids, recognises contribution of diaspora communities to the nation	Focus on diaspora communities, limited broader impact	Fund local councils to support diaspora to deliver to the whole community	-Grow and widen the pipeline while continuing to provide value for diaspora.
Primary school	Asia literacy prioritised in national curriculum, but no specific policies or investment to support delivery	-Parents -Schools -Community (cohesion etc) -Local and state gov	- Resources available through ACARA - Committed schools/P&C have notional policy support	- National curriculum, but education is a state responsibility - Nothing to develop teaching capacity (which is very low). - No broad signalling from Government about benefits of Asia literacy - Curriculum implementation is ultimately up to principals and P&C, easily ignored, eroded or erased	- Expand community language funding remit to create Asia language bilingual schools (check out the European dominance in <a href="#">this list of VIC bilingual schools</a> ). - Incentivise specialist teacher training (retrospective PD, undergrad/masters – specialised NCP stream for teachers?) - Invest in a communications strategy (targeting parents) that promotes Asia literacy	- Grow and widen the pipeline while continuing to provide value for diaspora - Enable ongoing development of capability across generations - Increase equitable access to diversify Asia capability (rural, regional, urban)
High school	Asia literacy prioritised in national curriculum, but no specific policies or investment to support delivery	- Parents - Schools - Community (cohesion etc) - Local and state gov	- Resources available through ACARA -Committed schools/P&C have notional policy support	Gaps in State and Federal coordination - Nothing to develop teaching capacity (which is very low), especially at advanced levels	- Opportunity for Federal Government to take a coordinating role with States in terms of Indonesian language teaching	- Grow and widen the pipeline while continuing to provide value for diaspora - Enable ongoing development of

Level	Current policy settings / situation	Stakeholders	Benefits of current policy settings	Limitations of current policy settings	Ideal policy settings	Impact of changed policy settings
				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- No broad signalling from Government about benefits of Asia literacy</li> <li>- Curriculum implementation is ultimately up to principals and P&amp;C, easily ignored, eroded or erased</li> <li>- Current teacher qualifications exclude specialists (masters of Ed) from NCP funding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Expand community language funding remit to create Asia language bilingual schools (check out the European dominance in <a href="#">this list of VIC bilingual schools</a>).</li> <li>- Incentivise specialist teacher training (retrospective PD, undergrad/masters – specialised NCP stream for teachers?)</li> <li>- Invest in a communications strategy (targeting parents) that promotes Asia literacy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- capability across generations</li> <li>- Increase equitable access to diversify Asia capability (rural, regional, urban)</li> </ul>
Tertiary – undergraduate	New Colombo Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Federal Government</li> <li>- State governments?</li> <li>- Universities</li> <li>- Indonesian Government</li> </ul>	- Promotes mobility and engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Limited to undergraduates</li> <li>- Limited to universities</li> <li>- Pipeline is already a trickle by this stage</li> <li>- Benefits beyond mobility programs offset by impact on humanities of Job- Ready Graduates Package</li> <li>- No follow-up education options (including language) in most institutions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mirror government signalling on STEM</li> <li>- Outreach (esp. at high school level)</li> <li>- Expand remit to postgraduates</li> <li>- Reconsider Job-Ready Graduates Package</li> <li>- Funding, coordination with national institutions, raise visibility!</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Increased Asia capability at graduate level</li> <li>- Improved pipeline to deep expertise at postgrad/research level</li> <li>- Increased equitable access to diversify Asia capability (rural, regional, urban)</li> </ul>

Level	Current policy settings / situation	Stakeholders	Benefits of current policy settings	Limitations of current policy settings	Ideal policy settings	Impact of changed policy settings
				- Limited signalling from government that these are valuable skills		
	Lack of Indonesian language teachers	Universities		- Limited opportunities for UG students to learn (how to teach) Indonesian	Educating the educators	

Level	Current policy settings / situation	Stakeholders	Benefits of current policy settings	Limitations of current policy settings	Ideal policy settings	Impact of changed policy settings
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Commonwealth Supported Places subsidise university tuition fees, including for language degrees, under the Job-ready Graduates Package, offering reduced contributions for “national priority” areas, including languages</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Federal Government</li> <li>- State governments</li> <li>- Universities</li> <li>- Indonesian Government</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Can incentivise enrolment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of targeted, coordinated national strategy</li> <li>- Low awareness of CSP fee reductions</li> <li>- CSP positions are capped, meaning eligible students miss out</li> <li>- Limited transparency in universities as to how CSPs are allocated</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Language units exempted from CSP caps on the basis of national interest</li> <li>- Asian Studies units put in the same funding category as Asian Languages and also exempted from CSP caps</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Relatively low cost</li> <li>- Increased institutional flexibility</li> <li>- Policy settings reflect national rhetoric re: importance of Asian language and cultural capability</li> </ul>
Tertiary – postgraduate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Australia Awards (AA)</li> <li>- Indonesia Endowment Fund for Education (LPDP)</li> <li>- University scholarships</li> <li>- Supervisory expertise limited</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Federal and state governments</li> <li>- Universities</li> <li>- Broader community</li> <li>- Diaspora</li> <li>- Indonesian Government</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lots of Indonesians studying here, enriching our universities and communities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- AA and LPDP are focused on developing capability in Indonesia</li> <li>- Few permanent residents or citizens coming through postgrad studies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Scholarships for outstanding undergrads/honours students</li> <li>- Scholarships not tied to “return home” policies</li> <li>- NCP funding targeted to areas of weakness (i.e. language teachers)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Develop deep expertise and sovereign capability for government, business, industry and education</li> </ul>
Diaspora	Indonesian diaspora		Barriers to qualifying for language teaching			