

Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education: *Inquiry into Building Asia Capability in Australia through the education system and beyond*

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In 2012, as the Young Australian of the Year (NSW) and Founding Director of Tara.Ed - an international education NGO providing Australian pre-service teachers with opportunities to build Asia capabilities and intercultural understanding through an overseas practicum - I made a submission to the *Australia in the Asian Century* White Paper.

In my submission, I called for Asia literacy to be recognised as a national priority in formal, compulsory education so that **every** Australian child is equipped with the skills and knowledge they need to thrive in the Asian Century. In 2012, I argued that developing Asia literacy in Australian students must start with the teacher, and if Australia were to reap the benefits of the Asian Century, we must commit to building teacher capacity so educators have the skills and confidence to teach to the Australian Curriculum's cross-curricular priority of Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia, and build the general competency of intercultural understanding.

Thirteen years on, Australia has seen a steady decline in the teaching of Asian languages, knowledge and culture in schools, alongside weakening social cohesion, rising incidents of racism at home and abroad and the most volatile world since the Cold War. As a consequence, an Australian child who began school in 2012 will graduate in 2025 without the skills, knowledge, or capabilities needed to thrive at home and in our region.

Yet the case for building Asia capabilities has never been more urgent. Our region faces a shifting global order, economic uncertainty, intensifying conflict, and the growing impacts of climate change. Against this backdrop, I find myself again calling for Asia capabilities to be made a national priority in our schools. Will we fail another generation? Because this time it is personal: my six-year-old son's future is on the line.

My son is in year one at our local state school in Brisbane's outer suburbs. The school is highly sought after, consistently performs well in NAPLAN, and has a diverse student body - 79% of the school population were either born overseas or had at least one parent born overseas. My son's friends are more likely to be Tien, Ikuko or Hrihaan than John, Paul or George. Despite its reputation for academic excellence and diverse student cohort, no second language is offered at the school and skills, knowledge and perspectives from Asia rarely make it into the classroom.

Earlier this year, my son came home from school with a question that stopped me in my tracks: “Mum, what culture am I?”

We talked about his German-Jewish great-grandparents, his Dutch-born Oma, his Australian-born parents, and his own birthplace—India—where his first language was Hindi, now almost forgotten. We spoke about how culture can shift and change, and be many things at once. He nodded thoughtfully before asking, “That’s all good, Mum—but which flag should I be at the Harmony Day parade? The school says I can only be one.”

In the end, he carried the Dutch flag - a country on the other side of the world, to which he has never been - because that meant he was able to wear his dutch clogs for the costume parade.

As he trudged around the school oval in the “Parade of Culture” he marched alongside his classmates in Sarees, Lungis, Salwar, Hanbok, Kimonos, Qipao and Broncos Jerseys. The MC, a member of the teaching staff, presumably representing Australia, wore a swagman’s corked hat, a piece of grass hanging out of their mouth, and boisterously asked students “Where do you come from!?”

Afterwards parents were invited to share a “cultural morning tea” to which my son and his classmates contributed dishes from their country or culture. In keeping with his flag, my son’s contribution was poffertjes, small dutch pancakes. By 11am, it was all over. Costumes were packed away, parents returned to work, and my son’s class returned to the classroom for ‘real learning’.

Reducing cultural competence and intercultural understanding to the three empty stereotypes of fashion, flags, and food, is all too common in Australia’s schools. When we limit cultural learning in this way, we risk defining our Asian neighbours through the prism of the other. Without genuine opportunities to build Asia capabilities - networks, experience, expertise and language skills, my son and his peers will graduate with only scant superficial understanding of the region in which they live—and of their fellow Australians - and Australia will be left behind.

The good news is that the foundation for building Asia capabilities already exists within our school education system. It is not another add on to an already bursting curriculum.

The Australian Curriculum defines and embeds the foundational skills and knowledge young Australians need to be Asia Capable through the cross-curricular priority of *Asia and Australia’s Engagement with Asia*. The curriculum itself states that “*Young Australians need to develop the knowledge, skills, capabilities and attitudes to effectively navigate and contribute to our regional neighbourhood. Asia is our part of the world. Knowing, understanding and growing*

*engagement with Asia are foundational for young people as Australia seeks to strengthen its ties in the Asia region”.*¹

As a cross-curricular priority, Asia and Australia’s Engagement with Asia takes Asia capabilities beyond the language classroom and defines the foundational skills and knowledge young Australians need to develop to become Asia Capable. It is based on three sets of organising ideas:

1. **Knowing Asia and its diversity**, which focuses on the knowledge of the history, culture, religion, beliefs and perspectives within and across Asia,
2. **Understanding Asia’s global significance** which examines the ways in which different significant nations in Asia have effected change, and;
3. **Growing Asia-Australia engagement** which is focused on relationships and explores how active connections between Australian students and Asia’s diverse communities - both diaspora and overseas - can be deepened and strengthened through lived experience.²

Simply by enacting what is already in the curriculum, we can ensure the next generation of Australian children are equipped to thrive.

As well as Cross-curricular priorities, the Australian Curriculum also has seven General Capabilities³ that are developed across the curriculum, and define a set of knowledge, skills and behaviours that will support Australian students to effectively navigate their future. While most people would be familiar with the Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy capabilities, the capability of Intercultural Understanding is just as important for young Australians to master, if they are to thrive in an increasingly complex world.

The Intercultural Understanding capability develops the knowledge, skills and dispositions students need to engage respectfully and effectively across cultures.⁴

¹ The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. (n.d.). F-10 curriculum: Asia and Australia’s Engagement with Asia (Version 9).

<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/curriculum-information/understand-this-cross-curriculum-priority/asia-and-australias-engagement-with-asia>

² The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. (n.d.). F-10 curriculum: Asia and Australia’s Engagement with Asia. Organising Ideas (Version 9).

<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/cross-curriculum-priorities/asia-and-australias-engagement-with-asia?organising-idea=AAK%2CAAU%2CAAG>

³ The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. (n.d.). F-10 curriculum Overview (Version 9). <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/help/f-10-curriculum-overview>

⁴ The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. (n.d.). F-10 curriculum: Intercultural Understanding (Version 9).

<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/curriculum-information/understand-this-general-capability/intercultural-understanding>

It is an important component of Asia capability because it enables young Australians to recognise and value cultural diversity, reflect on their own perspectives, and build the empathy and adaptability required to live, learn and work successfully in our interconnected region.

Intercultural understanding matters, not only when looking outward to the region in which we live, but also, when looking inward and thriving in a multi-cultural Australia. As the diversity of my son's school demonstrates, Australia's demographics are changing. Over half of Australians are now born overseas - or have at least one parent born overseas. The top five countries of birth outside Australia include China, India and The Philippines.⁵ It is time our education system reflected who we are.

This year for book week, my son's class read *The Wishing Chair* by Enid Blyton. Written between 1937 and 1950, one of the characters in the story is Mr. Blackie, the general of a magical toy army. Mr. Blackie is a Golliwog. Having already read the book at home and discussed stereotypes and racism with us, my son called out in class "that's very racist. It's an olden days doll of an African slave. It's a very bad picture". My son was reprimanded and had his name put on the board for calling out. The story moved on.

I am disappointed that my son's teacher allowed his comments to go unaddressed. The dismissal of his comments was a missed opportunity to enact a component of the intercultural understanding capability in which students "*Respond to biases, stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination – students examine their origin, respectfully challenging prejudicial and discriminatory behaviour, and propose action to promote the wellbeing of people while valuing their cultural identities*".⁶

This is not a failing of the teacher, but of our education system. Teachers can not teach what they do not know, and, as it stands, there is limited guidance for, or professional development to, build teacher's Asia capabilities or intercultural understanding. The few opportunities teachers and pre-service teachers have are often self-sourced and self-funded and so are only available to a lucky few.⁷ As a consequence developing intercultural understanding in Australia's students has largely become a tick-box exercise.

⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2022, June 28). *2021 Census: Nearly half of Australians have a parent born overseas* [Media release].
<https://www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/2021-census-nearly-half-australians-have-parent-born-overseas>

⁶ The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. (n.d.). F-10 curriculum: Intercultural Understanding (Version 9).
<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/curriculum-information/understand-this-general-capability/intercultural-understanding>

⁷ Star. J. (2023). *Pedagogic Encounters with India: The potential of the overseas practicum*. Unpublished thesis. Deakin University.

If the teachers of our children do not have the knowledge, language and understanding to talk about and combat racism, or engage with cultures beyond empty stereotypes, what hope do the next generation have?

The fact is that we have the curriculum policy in place to achieve Asia capabilities and intercultural understanding - but we do not have the investment in schools and teachers to ensure it is enacted in our classrooms.

My six year old will finish formal, compulsory schooling in 2037, stepping into a world that is more interconnected, and more divided, than ever before. He will face challenges that demand international cooperation, such as climate change, conflict, and economic instability, while also navigating life in the fastest-growing region in the world, shaped by the economies and populations of countries like India, China, and Indonesia.

Without strong Asia capabilities and intercultural understanding, he will graduate unprepared. He will lack the networks, knowledge, and cultural awareness to engage meaningfully with our region, and the understanding of its histories, languages, and perspectives that underpin genuine collaboration. His generation risks entering a globally competitive workforce without the skills or mindsets needed to thrive. And his ability to act as an informed and responsible Australian citizen will be reduced.

While opportunities to develop Asia capabilities are more available in tertiary education, young people's values, career choices, and subject selections are shaped much earlier. If we do not build the foundations—the skills and knowledge of Asia—during compulsory schooling, there will be little demand for these opportunities later. We will have lost our chance to prepare every young Australian, not just those who continue on to university, to engage confidently and meaningfully with our region and build social cohesion at home.

I have been advocating for Asia capabilities to be prioritised in Australian schools since 2012. Since then, we have seen the teaching of Asian languages and cultures decline, social cohesion weaken, and incidents of racism rise. A child who began school in 2012 will graduate this year without the skills, knowledge, or capabilities needed to thrive in the workplace and world.

We cannot afford to fail yet another generation. By continuing to neglect Asia capabilities in our education system, we are not only setting my six-year-old son—and his generation—up for failure, but we are holding Australia back. Without the networks, knowledge, experience and language to engage confidently with our neighbours, we risk leaving both an entire generation—and our nation—behind in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

Recommendations

1. Establish a National Action Plan and Coordinating Authority for Asia Capabilities in Schools

To ensure every Australian student is equipped to thrive in the Asian Century, the Federal Government should establish a National Coordinating Authority to lead the implementation of a National Action Plan for Asia Capabilities in Schools.

Australia's decentralised education system and lack of a coordinated national approach have seriously constrained our collective capacity to build Asia capabilities across classrooms. Although Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia is embedded in the Australian Curriculum, its implementation varies very significantly between states, sectors, and schools—meaning that whether a student develops essential knowledge and skills of Asia usually comes down to pot luck.

A national coordinating authority would provide the leadership and direction needed to:

- Monitor and report on student participation in Asian languages and studies, building a contemporary evidence base for action. We have had no evidence collected of Asia capability in our schools for over 10 years.
- Support innovative and sustainable solutions to long-term challenges, such as the decline of Indonesian language programs.
- Leverage digital technologies to connect Australian classrooms with peers across Asia and the Pacific.
- Engage parents, communities, and industry to champion Asia engagement.
- Provide meaningful incentives for students to continue with Asian languages and studies through senior schooling and tertiary pathways.

By coordinating policy, resources, and partnerships across all states and territories, this plan would build demand for Asia capabilities and ensure consistent, high-quality implementation of Asia capabilities in every Australian school—and position Australia to prosper in our region for generations to come.

2. Build Asia Capabilities Across Australia's Education Workforce

Teachers can only teach what they know, so building the Asia capability of Australia's educators is critical. This should be achieved through targeted professional learning and opportunities for teachers to engage, collaborate, and build networks with peers and schools across the region. Asia capability is relevant across all learning areas, not just Languages or Humanities. The Australian Curriculum already embeds Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia as a

Cross-Curriculum Priority and Intercultural Understanding as a General Capability. To realise these goals—and meet the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers and School Leaders—every educator, regardless of subject or stage, must be equipped with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to teach with an Asia-literate and globally competent perspective.

There are already multiple programs that demonstrate effective approaches and can be invested in and scaled to reach every teacher. For example:

- [Australia-Asia BRIDGE](#) (Building Relationships through Intercultural Dialogue and Growing Engagement): offered by Asialink Education (formerly AEF) and established in 2008, operates across 23 Asia-Pacific countries, including Indonesia, ASEAN nations, and India. BRIDGE connects school communities, empowers educators, and fosters people-to-people links between Australia and the region. To date, it has established over 500 school partnerships and engaged more than 3,000 teachers, building intercultural understanding, regional networks, and global engagement opportunities for students and educators alike.
- [Digital BRIDGE](#): Australia-China was an international school partnership program, funded by the National Foundation for Australia-China Relations and implemented by Asialink Education. Leveraging digital technologies, it connected Australian and Chinese schools, teachers, and students to build intercultural understanding, global competencies, and collaborative learning. Through online professional learning, teachers developed skills in digital pedagogy, intercultural engagement, and Asia-Australia relations, while establishing sustainable school partnerships and co-designing inter-disciplinary student initiatives.
- [Women in School Leadership, India](#) (2023-2024), offered by the Victorian Department of Education, was a hybrid professional learning program with an India immersion component. It built School leaders' intercultural capability, global engagement expertise, and networks with schools and educators in India, equipping participants to lead culturally inclusive and globally connected schools.

Investing in and scaling programs like these will ensure that all teachers—not just a select few—are prepared to embed Asia capabilities across the curriculum, equipping the next generation of Australian students to thrive in the Asian Century.

3. Integrate Asia capabilities and perspectives into initial teacher education.

Australia's future teachers must graduate equipped to teach the Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia cross-curriculum priority and the Intercultural Understanding capability.

Yet evidence shows that preservice teachers feel underprepared and unsupported in this area. Research undertaken by the Asia Education Foundation fifteen years ago indicated fewer than 5% of initial teacher education subjects include Asia-related content, and my own PhD research (2023) found little improvement over the past decade: the development of Asia capability and intercultural understanding in our future teachers remains largely dependent on unstructured immersion experiences, accessible only to those who can afford to travel.⁸ It is thus unsurprising that a study by the University of the Sunshine Coast (2023) found that preservice teachers report a lack of pedagogical guidance on how to teach Asia content across learning areas, often perceiving it as tokenistic “content knowledge” rather than an opportunity to develop deeper intercultural competence. They also report minimal exposure to Asian languages, limited engagement with Asian communities, and a lack of clarity around the university’s commitment to Asia literacy, leaving them ill-equipped to deliver this mandated curriculum component.⁹ These findings underscore the need for systematic integration of Asia capabilities into all teacher education programs, including structured curriculum, embedded pedagogy, experiential and relational learning, and nationally consistent assessment of Asia literacy. Without this, graduates will enter the profession without the skills, knowledge, or intercultural mindset needed to prepare their students for Australia’s place in the world.

⁸ Star. J. (2023). Pedagogic Encounters with India: The potential of the overseas practicum. Unpublished thesis. Deakin University.

⁹ Toohey, J., Grainger, P. and Carey, M. (2023). Measuring Australian Pre-Service Teacher’s Asia Capability and Perceived Readiness to Teach the Asia Cross-Curricular priority. Australian Journal of Teacher Education. 48(6) pp.98 - 115