

Submission to the Inquiry into Building Asia Capability in Australia through the education system and beyond: Chad Birks

Dear members of the House Standing Committee on Education,

I write to you as a long-standing practitioner in Asian language education, with decades of experience spanning diplomacy, international education, classroom teaching, and cultural consultancy. My intent is to contribute meaningfully to your deliberations by offering both a personal perspective and a systemic critique—grounded in lived experience and informed by years of direct engagement with Asian language learners, educators, and institutions across Australia and the Asia-Pacific region.

My academic foundation was laid with an Asian Studies degree at the Australian National University, during which I received a number of awards and scholarships culminating in a Dean's Award for Asian Studies. I also completed a second degree in Economics, which broadened my understanding of global systems and complemented my language studies.

My professional journey began at the Australian Embassy in Beijing, where I was quickly promoted due to my strong language skills and—more importantly—my ability to build effective working relationships with Chinese colleagues and government officials. I concluded my tenure as Head of Permanent Migration, overseeing operations across northern China, Mongolia, and North Korea. This role offered deep insights into the cultural, political, and social dynamics of East Asia.

Following my time at the Embassy, I transitioned into international education. I worked closely with agencies, parents, and students from across Asia—including China, India, Indonesia, Thailand, Korea, and Japan. My responsibilities centred on problem-solving, cultural mediation, and helping schools develop systems that support the integration of international students. Encouraged by colleagues who saw my potential as an educator, I entered the teaching profession.

Over the past 20 years, I have enjoyed a rewarding career as a Chinese language teacher, working across both primary and secondary levels in public and private schools. A significant portion of that was within the Mandarin Immersion Program at Mawson Primary School in the Australian Capital Territory. Over the course of that time, I have tried many different strategies to build high levels of engagement and strong learning environments. I introduced Mandarin learning into after school care programs, ran regular parent and teacher classes, and organised

inter-school peer mentoring sessions with international student volunteers. My teaching methodologies have evolved with experience and gained international recognition in being incorporated into Mandarin-as-a-second-language programs at universities in Taiwan.

In parallel with my teaching career, I have contributed to a range of consulting projects. These include designing culturally appropriate signage for Chinese tourists at Parliament House, training Chinese engineers at General Electric on Western workplace norms, and improving language outcomes in immersion childcare centres. I have also taught Chinese language and culture to members of the Australia–China Free Trade Agreement team, consultants involved in the Three Gorges Dam project, and early-career diplomats. I instigated, and worked hand in hand with the Taiwanese Education Office, to establish an intern program placing Taiwanese teaching assistants in schools across Australia—a program that has now run successfully for 15 years.

I trust that this overview demonstrates the depth and breadth of my experience in Asian language education and intercultural engagement, and provides context and legitimacy to my further comments. There are many systemic issues in the teaching of Asia Capability and languages in Australian education institutions, and I am glad to see submissions already raising many of these. I focus here on the issues I have observed to most negatively impact the teaching of Asian languages and which can be usefully targeted to bring about significant shifts in our schooling system.

There persists an historical and largely unanalysed cultural bias in the leadership, administration, and resourcing of the Australian Education sectors. Despite stated commitments to diversity and inclusion, in practice these ideals are not reflected within the leadership of Australian educational institutions. The persistence of Anglo-Celtic dominance is clearly documented by AITSL’s 2019 Report, *Spotlight: Diversity in School Leadership*¹. This lack of diversity in leadership roles results in an unexamined imposition of Anglo-Celtic norms and priorities throughout the system. One result is that other cultures and languages are perceived as marginal, and resources are rationed accordingly.

Left to their own devices, educational leadership—often inadvertently but sometimes purposely—tend to devalue language learning within schools. A cogent example is the adoption of the International Baccalaureate PYP program in Australian schools. Although designed to be bilingual and foster cross-cultural understanding, Australian schools have largely declined to implement its bilingual components. Another example is the ACT education system’s attempt to remove language learning from its “Every Chance to Learn” curriculum by introducing the concept of “learn *about* a language”—a subtle but significant shift that deprioritises actual language acquisition.

¹ <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/research-evidence/spotlight/diversity-in-school-leadership.pdf>

To give a personally observed example, Mawson Primary School has notionally operated as a Mandarin immersion school for 40 years. During that time, it has never had a senior leader of Chinese descent or one who speaks Mandarin. The resulting deficiency in the linguistic and cultural understanding necessary to evaluate program success, have resulted in the prioritisation of visible student ‘enjoyment’ above specific language and cultural proficiency as a measure of program and teacher effectiveness.

As quickly as successful and flourishing Asian language programs are developed, disinterested administrators are able to deconstruct them to fit their own priorities and values. As a result, learning environments become fragmented and new language teachers struggle to develop essential pedagogic skills. Meanwhile, students lack the continuity to feel successful in acquiring spoken language. They, as well as their parents, are also influenced by the subtle messaging that such language acquisition is unimportant anyway (see [supporting research here](#)²). These factors contribute substantially to the poor student retention within language learning programs.

I have outlined below my thoughts on important methods to help bring about genuine and effective changes to current practices and policies.

Recommendations

1. Introduce checks and balances into decision making at the system/ school level.

Establish a mandatory process to be completed, documented, and reviewed by a skilled independent professional drawn from outside the particular school or system before decisions affecting Asian language programs are finalised.

A sample list of basic considerations:

- Have expected requirements as set out in the Australian curriculum been met?
- Have teachers been given all the mandatory resources, training and support, adapted for teaching a language, required under the EBA and/ or similar relevant instruments?
- Has there been open and fair consultation with teachers regarding best practice, expectations, timelines, measurable and achievable goals and involvement of teachers in decision making.
- What extra resources past the minimum required have been put in place to help the program flourish?

² Chapter 10, 2025, An investigation of Australian students’ choice and motivation to study languages at elective levels <https://hdl.handle.net/2123/33829>

- Has the local situation been analysed to identify and mitigate factors that might impact optimal performance and outcomes – for example: racism, systemic bias, poor allocation of resources, adverse workload expectations, and appropriate understanding by management of the curriculum, goals and achieved outcomes with reference to the target language.
- Has an outside professional successful in this space been consulted, and what response has been made to any recommendations?

A further step could be to identify, fund, and empower independent bodies suitable to audit programs prior to major decisions. Such bodies could include language teacher associations and consultants with extensive language teaching experience, such as myself. These independent bodies could provide recommendations to schools and system-wide authorities regarding staffing, program outcomes, and best practices. They could also serve as advocates and mentors for teachers requiring additional support.

2. Incentivise leadership competency in language learning

Promote an expectation that school leaders should have at least a basic understanding of the languages taught in their schools. Prepare an online program to teach competency in the 200 most commonly used words of target languages and introduce material incentives for leaders who complete the courses and actively use the languages in school settings. This would not only improve communication and program oversight, it would signal to students, staff, and communities that language learning is valued at every level of leadership.

3. Match the commitment, resources, and structures of other curriculum areas

Consider the amount of time and resources devoted to developing and celebrating acquired skills in other areas of school curricula such as physical and arts education. Examine models through which these subject areas are supported beyond the mandated teaching hours, such as school sports carnivals, interschool sport competitions, music classes, band programs, and large events such as the Schools Spectacular. These are often featured by schools, government, and private organisations, drawing wide audiences and much acclaim. Some are even televised. There are few comparable supports among language programs. Competitions and awards do exist but they are often not well promoted, even within schools where students are actually participating, let alone to the wider community.

There is room here for a small revolution in marketing language education in Australia. With a little imagination and entrepreneurial talent, there are many more ways that the profile and effectiveness of school Asian language and culture programs could be raised at the same time as making them more valuable and relevant to participants.

Summary

Asian language education in Australia has long relied on the passion of individual educators and the goodwill of communities, but passion alone cannot overcome systemic barriers. The dominance of near-monocultural leadership, the absence of linguistic and cultural competency in decision-making, and the lack of structural support and promotion have created an environment where Asian language programs are vulnerable – built slowly, dismantled quickly, and often incompletely appreciated by those in power. This is not a matter of isolated oversight. It is a pattern – one that undermines student outcomes, teacher morale, and Australia's broader engagement with our region. If we are serious about preparing young Australians for the future, we must be serious about embedding Asian language, literacy and culture into our education system.

Thank you for taking the time to read and consider my submission. Please feel free to seek further clarification or information that would assist in your deliberations.

Sincerely,

Chad Birks