

Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education: Inquiry into Building Asia Capability in Australia through the Education System and Beyond

Submitted by: Dr Zane Goebel, Associate Professor of Indonesian, University of Queensland

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This submission represents my personal views only. It does not represent the views of any University with which I am or have been affiliated.

Dear Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry. I have been involved in Indonesian language education and research for over three decades, including extensive time living and researching in Indonesia. My experience spans teaching at four Australian universities and conducting many years of fieldwork in Indonesian communities and government offices. This submission draws on that experience to offer practical recommendations for strengthening Australia's Asia capability—particularly through Indonesian language education.

Australia's relationship with Indonesia is vital to our national interest. Whether we're talking about trade, regional security, disaster response, or climate cooperation, we need people who understand Indonesia deeply—its languages, cultures, and societies. Yet, the number of Australians learning Indonesian is in steep decline. Without action, we risk losing our current Indonesia-literacy capabilities while also ensuring that there is no means of renewing these capabilities.

Below I offer fifteen recommendations, all of which see building Asia capability as not just about language, but about how fluency in Indonesian enables the building of relationships, trust, and long-term engagement. Indonesian language education is a strategic investment in Australia's future. With bipartisan support and targeted funding, we can reverse the decline and ensure that Australia remains a respected and capable regional partner.

I welcome the opportunity to clarify or expand on any of these points.

Cordially,

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1. Structural Enablers and Barriers

Recommendation 1: Make Indonesian language skills a core requirement in relevant federal government roles.

Currently, Indonesian fluency is rarely listed as a key selection criterion in government job ads. Making it a core requirement in departments like DFAT, Home Affairs, and Defence would send a strong signal and create demand for graduates.

Recommendation 2: Provide targeted funding to universities to grow Indonesian programs. Indonesian language programs are often small and vulnerable to cuts. To survive, they need funding at a scale that reflects their strategic importance—not just student numbers. For example, a multiplier of 10–20 times the usual funding per student could help sustain these programs.

Recommendation 3: Support leadership pathways for Indonesia specialists in universities. Encouraging the appointment of Indonesia experts to senior academic roles (e.g. Deans, Heads of School) would help ensure institutional support for language programs.

Recommendation 4: Prioritise Indonesia-focused research in national funding schemes. Agencies like the ARC should incentivise collaborative research with Indonesian partners. This builds academic ties and enhances Australia's soft power.

Recommendation 5: Reintroduce federal scholarships for Indonesia-focused PhD and Honours students.

These scholarships would help build a pipeline of future experts and address the competitive disadvantage faced by Indonesian studies students.

Recommendation 6: Partner with state governments to reinvigorate Indonesian in schools. Federal support can help states incentivise school leaders to invest in Indonesian language education. Queensland's recent decline in Indonesian programs is a cautionary tale (see Hudgton, Hopp, Nataprawira, Pohlman, & Goebel, 2021).

2. Good Practice Models

Recommendation 7: Fund intensive summer Indonesian courses at universities.

Short, immersive courses can boost student confidence and retention. A trial at La Trobe University doubled second-year enrolments, but funding constraints ended the program.

Recommendation 8: Develop a national Indonesian curriculum for schools and universities. Freely available, high-quality materials—co-designed with students—would support teachers and attract learners. Past examples like *Suara Siswa* and *TIFL* show this is achievable.

3. Current State and Strategies to Stimulate Demand

At the University of Queensland, beginner enrolments have grown modestly from three in 2018 to six in 2025. However, intermediate and advanced classes remain very small. Without intervention, these numbers will not support sustainable programs.

4. Promoting Cultural Literacy and Diplomacy Skills

Recommendation 9: Fund language maintenance sabbaticals for public servants.

Allowing Indonesia specialists in government to spend 3–6 months in-country would maintain fluency and deepen engagement. ACICIS could help coordinate these placements.

Recommendation 10: Support cultural events in schools and universities.

These events foster interest and community engagement. The Indonesian Embassy and consulates have historically supported such initiatives.

Recommendation 11: Streamline research permissions for Australians working in Indonesia.

A one-stop shop—possibly coordinated by ACICIS—would save researchers months of administrative work and encourage collaboration.

5. Whole-of-Government Coordination

Recommendation 12: Establish a monitoring and evaluation team of Indonesia specialists.

This team could track progress on Asia capability initiatives and provide regular updates to government.

6. Additional Recommendations

Recommendation 13: Encourage politicians to learn Indonesian.

Fluency among elected officials would set a powerful example. A structured pathway—including intensive courses and in-country immersion—could be offered as part of professional development.

Recommendation 14: Enable a standalone Diploma of Languages.

Currently, students must be enrolled in a Bachelor's degree to enrol in a Diploma of languages. Allowing standalone diplomas would broaden access.

Recommendation 15: Partner with ABC and SBS to showcase Australia–Indonesia collaboration.

Media stories about joint research, cultural exchange, and community partnerships would raise public awareness and support.

References cited

Hudghton, F., Hopp, H., Nataprawira, H., Pohlman, A., & Goebel, Z. (2021). *The strategic importance of Indonesian literacy to Queensland: reinvigorating Indonesian language learning*. Retrieved from Brisbane: