



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

*A Future-Ready Nation Begins with Asia-Capable Learners —
Connecting Learning, Culture, and Capability for Australia's Future.*



Submitted by:

Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO)

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Public Education | Family Voice | National Impact

Australian Council of State School Organisations – www.acsso.org.au

Acknowledgement of Country

ACSSO acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and recognises their continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and extend this respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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Confidentiality:

This submission is not confidential.

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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Executive Summary

The Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry. Together with families and communities, ACSSO champions the voice of public-school families to ensure every child can thrive in a fair and forward-looking education system.

Asia capability, which is the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to communicate, collaborate, and lead effectively in our region, is not a luxury. It is a sovereign capability, fundamental to Australia's prosperity, security, and social cohesion. Yet despite decades of policy recognition, Asia capability in education has eroded. Asian language enrolments have collapsed, continuity is fragile, and access is deeply inequitable.

Parents are clear: they want their children to:

- graduate with the confidence to engage in a multicultural society and a regionally interconnected world;
- access programs that are consistent, sustained, and of high quality;
- know that opportunity does not depend on postcode, income, or school sector.

While government investment in interfaith and intercultural programs, particularly those with a Middle Eastern focus, has expanded, comparable attention has not been directed to Asia capability. Similarly, national attention to First Nations language revitalisation, which ACSSO strongly supports, must be complemented by recognition of the strategic and economic advantages of Asian cultural and language knowledge. Families stress these priorities must coexist: learning the languages of Country builds identity and reconciliation, while learning the languages of Asia prepares young Australians for the economic and diplomatic realities of the Asian century.

As one parent told ACSSO during consultation: "My son started Japanese in Year 5, but by Year 8 the program had disappeared. Families like mine don't want token lessons; we want continuity so our children actually become confident users of another language." Another noted, "It shouldn't be just the private schools that can afford exchanges. Public school kids deserve the same doors opened to them."

National reporting shows languages remain the lowest-enrolled learning area in senior secondary, with Year 12 languages participation comparatively small and uneven across jurisdictions, while NSW

and Victoria data confirm the multilingual reality of public schools and the rapid influx of newly arrived EAL learners¹.

The urgency is clear. In 2023, only 7.6% of Year 12 students studied any language, and just 3.3% studied Japanese, Chinese, or Indonesian. At the tertiary level, enrolments in Southeast Asian languages have fallen by 75% since 2001, threatening the teacher pipeline. These declines are occurring even as classrooms become increasingly multilingual, with over one-third of students in NSW and Victoria coming from language backgrounds other than English.

This submission identifies the barriers, highlights effective practice, and proposes solutions. ACSSO urges the Committee to recommend:

- A national entitlement to Asian language and intercultural learning, embedded in the National School Reform Agreement.
- A national workforce strategy to address shortages and build teacher capacity.
- A National Equity Fund with a scholarship scheme for government school students, ensuring immersion, study tours, and exchanges are not limited to affluent families.
- A National Asia Capability Framework spanning early learning through to tertiary education and the workforce.
- Renewed spotlight on Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia as a Cross-Curriculum Priority, ensuring consistent delivery across subjects and jurisdictions.
- Transparent, nationally consistent data and accountability mechanisms to track progress.

For families, Asia capability is about fairness, relevance, and the future. Embedding it in public education is essential to ensure every child, in every community, is prepared to live, work, and lead in the Asian century.

1. Structural Enablers and Barriers

From the perspective of families in public education, the development of Asia capability in Australia is both a matter of equity and of national necessity. While significant policy and curriculum levers are already in place, structural barriers continue to limit access and impact, particularly for students from public schools in regional, rural, and low-socioeconomic backgrounds.

Enablers

1. Curriculum Frameworks

The *Australian Curriculum* includes *Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia* as a Cross-Curriculum Priority and *Intercultural Understanding* as a General Capability. These formal inclusions create a national platform for Asia capability, embedding it within every student's learning entitlement. When delivered consistently, they provide a solid foundation for understanding Asian histories, cultures, and societies.

Despite this formal recognition, the Asia priority has become less visible in practice under the current Australian Curriculum (v9.0). While it remains one of three official cross-curriculum priorities, its treatment is often broad and inconsistently embedded across subjects and jurisdictions. Families report that Asia-related content is frequently sidelined or absorbed into generic multicultural or interfaith learning, rather than providing the explicit Asia focus intended. This has diluted its impact and made it harder for families to see a clear progression of Asia capability throughout schooling. A renewed spotlight is therefore

¹ <https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/year-12-subject-enrolments?>

needed to ensure the Cross-Curriculum Priority delivers on its original intent and is not lost in translation between curriculum documents and classroom practice.

2. Established Programs and Resources

National initiatives, such as those developed through the Asia Education Foundation (AEF) and Asialink, have created a bank of curriculum resources, teacher professional learning opportunities, and school partnership models. Programs like BRIDGE (Australia-Indonesia school partnerships) have demonstrated how digital technologies and people-to-people connections can enrich student learning and make Asia capability tangible.

DFAT's independent strategic review of the BRIDGE Indonesia program (2019–2025) finds that sustained school-to-school partnerships lift intercultural confidence and provide replicable models for regional engagement.²

3. Community and Diaspora Strengths

Australia's rich multilingual context and large diaspora communities represent a powerful, often underutilised resource. Families who speak Asian languages at home bring cultural knowledge and motivation that can be harnessed in classrooms. Where schools have engaged with diaspora communities as co-educators and mentors, students report higher engagement and stronger intercultural confidence.

Australia's linguistic diversity provides a strong latent capacity. In New South Wales government schools, approximately 39.3% of students (309,446 students) come from language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE) as of March 2024.³ Victoria reports a similar figure: 36 per cent of government school students were identified as LBOTE in the 2022 census, with 8,020 newly arrived EAL learners enrolling in 2023⁴. These numbers highlight the opportunity to leverage family and community multilingualism to build system-wide Asia capability.

4. Policy Recognition and Precedent

Past initiatives, such as the National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSAS), demonstrated that when governments commit resources and establish clear national goals, enrolments and program sustainability improve. These historical successes show that systemic investment and coordination can yield measurable outcomes.

Barriers

1. Fragmented Responsibilities and Inconsistent Implementation

Education is a shared responsibility between states, territories, and the Commonwealth. While national frameworks exist, implementation varies significantly by jurisdiction. From a family's perspective, this inconsistency is deeply frustrating: some schools provide robust Asia-focused learning, while others offer little or none. Without national minimum benchmarks, students' opportunities depend too heavily on postcode or sector.

2. Workforce Shortages

The shortage of qualified Asian language teachers is one of the most significant barriers. Many schools struggle to sustain programs due to staff turnover, reliance on temporary appointments, or limited preservice preparation. Families repeatedly highlight the

² <https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/development/independent-strategic-review-bridge-school-partnerships-program-indonesia-2019-2025>

³ NSW Department of Education. Language Diversity in NSW Government Schools – Annual Bulletin 2024. Available at: <https://education.nsw.gov.au/about-us/educational-data/cese/publications/language-diversity-in-nsw-school>

⁴ Victoria Department of Education. Annual Report on English as an Additional Language in Victorian Government Schools 2024. Available at: <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/research/EAL-annual-report-2024.pdf>

frustration of children beginning a language in primary school only to see it discontinued in secondary years due to a lack of teachers.

3. **Unequal Distribution of Resources**

Schools in metropolitan and higher-income areas are more likely to sustain multiple Asian language offerings and exchange opportunities. In contrast, public schools in low socioeconomic, regional, and remote communities often face severe limitations. This inequity is revisited in Section 6, where families stress that access to Asia capability must be a national entitlement, not a privilege

4. **Unequal Access**

While enrolments in NSW government schools are nearly 40 per cent LBOTE, only a small fraction of those students continue into senior study of Asian languages. Similar disparities exist in other states, with higher-fee schools sustaining robust programs while many disadvantaged public schools offer none.

5. **Curricular Disincentives and Competing Priorities**

Senior secondary subject structures and university entry incentives often push students away from continuing with languages. Without clear ATAR or vocational benefits, students drop out of languages at high rates. This undermines continuity and leads to the steep attrition observed between junior secondary and Year 12 enrolments.

6. **Lack of Data and Accountability**

Australia does not currently collect or publish consistent national data on participation, retention, or outcomes in Asian language and cultural programs. Without clear reporting, it is difficult to measure progress or hold governments accountable for stated commitments.

7. **Cultural Perceptions**

Persistent societal attitudes that Asian languages are “too hard” or less valuable than other learning areas reduce motivation among students and families. In some schools, Asia capability is still treated as an optional “add-on” rather than a core entitlement.

At the same time, national priorities have increasingly highlighted the importance of First Nations languages, with programs to support revitalisation and the teaching of Language on Country. ACSSO strongly supports these efforts and affirms the cultural and educational significance of embedding First Nations languages in schools. However, this growing focus has not been matched by equal recognition of the strategic and economic advantages of Asian language and cultural knowledge. Families note that both priorities must coexist: learning the languages of Country strengthens cultural identity and reconciliation, while learning the languages of Asia equips students with critical skills for Australia’s economic prosperity, regional engagement, and workforce readiness.

8. **Imbalance in Government Priorities**

In recent years, government policy and funding have strongly promoted interfaith and intercultural initiatives, particularly with a Middle Eastern focus. While these programs are valuable, the scale of investment has not been matched by equivalent attention to Asia capability. From a family perspective, this imbalance is striking: despite Asia’s critical role in Australia’s economic, social, and security future, students’ access to sustained Asia-focused learning remains limited. Families have noted that intercultural engagement is often framed through Middle Eastern partnerships or religious dialogue, while explicit Asia-related programs receive less visibility and support.

ACSSO Policy Alignment

ACSSO policy affirms that every child in public education is entitled to equitable access to learning opportunities that prepare them for a changing world. Families expect that national priorities, such as Asia capability, are not optional extras, but guaranteed as part of their child's schooling. Current barriers, including inconsistent implementation, workforce shortages, and inequitable access, are therefore a direct concern for families.

Recommendations

To address these barriers and leverage existing enablers, ACSSO recommends that the Committee:

1. Establish a national entitlement to Asian language and cultural learning across the schooling years, embedded within the National School Reform Agreement and supported by agreed benchmarks across jurisdictions.
2. Develop a national workforce strategy for Asian language teachers, including scholarships, targeted recruitment, and permanent appointments in public schools.
3. Create an equity fund to ensure students from low socioeconomic, regional, and remote schools have access to immersion experiences, exchanges, and high-quality programs.
4. Mandate national data collection and public reporting on participation, retention, and outcomes in Asian languages and intercultural programs.
5. Embed Asia capability more explicitly into senior secondary and tertiary pathways, with clear incentives for continuation into Year 12 and beyond.
6. Rebalance government priorities by ensuring Asia capability receives sustained investment equivalent to other intercultural and interfaith initiatives, with targeted funding for Asian languages, cultural studies, and school partnerships across Asia.
7. Reinforce Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia as a visible and consistently delivered Cross-Curriculum Priority in the Australian Curriculum, ensuring it is not diluted into generic multicultural programs but provides explicit Asia-focused learning across subjects and year levels.

2. Teacher Workforce Supply

The single greatest barrier to sustaining Asia capability in Australian schools is the shortage of qualified and confident teachers of Asian languages and cultures. Families consistently report that children may begin learning an Asian language in primary school, only to find that programs disappear in secondary years due to staff turnover, unfilled positions, or the discontinuation of courses when enrolment numbers fall below thresholds. This inconsistency undermines family confidence, erodes student motivation, and perpetuates inequity.

National Shortages and Instability

Across the country, schools face significant challenges in recruiting and retaining teachers of Japanese, Mandarin, Indonesian, and Korean. While community demand exists, programs are fragile because they often rely on a single teacher, sometimes employed on a part-time or temporary basis. When that teacher leaves, entire programs collapse.

The instability of provision creates a cycle of decline: families are reluctant to enrol children in a program perceived as unreliable, enrolments fall, and schools then discontinue offerings altogether. For public schools in low socioeconomic and regional communities, where staffing challenges are already acute, this cycle is particularly entrenched.

Preservice Preparation and Professional Learning

Another critical issue lies in preservice teacher education. Many graduates enter the workforce with limited preparation to teach Asian languages or embed Asia literacy across the curriculum. While the

Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia cross-curriculum priority is embedded in the Australian Curriculum, its delivery relies heavily on teacher confidence. When teachers themselves feel under-prepared or under-supported, implementation is patchy and superficial.

Professional learning opportunities are available through providers such as the Asia Education Foundation; however, access is inconsistent. Teachers often need to self-fund professional development, particularly in regional areas where release time and travel costs are significant barriers. Families have a direct stake in this: they want assurance that their children are taught by teachers who are confident, culturally competent, and supported to succeed.

Reliance on Temporary and Volunteer Programs

Some schools have turned to short-term solutions such as visiting tutors, overseas volunteer programs, or digital-only delivery. While these may provide short bursts of enrichment, they cannot replace sustained, high-quality teaching embedded in the school's daily life. Families are clear that they want continuity and depth, not “one-off” cultural experiences.

Equity and Workforce Distribution

The uneven distribution of the teaching workforce compounds inequity. Metropolitan schools, especially in higher-income areas, are more likely to secure and retain specialist teachers. By contrast, public schools in rural and low socioeconomic communities often go without. This inequity means that the very students who stand to gain the most from access to intercultural learning, those without the means to access private tutoring, overseas immersion, or community networks, are the least likely to benefit.

This shortage is compounded by uneven distribution. WA public schools, for example, enrol more than 326,000 students⁵, yet face documented difficulties in filling specialist positions. In the Northern Territory, teacher shortages are particularly acute in remote schools, where vacancies and turnover regularly disrupt continuity⁶.

ACSSO Policy Alignment

ACSSO's policy emphasises that families in public education expect their children to have equitable access to high-quality learning experiences, delivered by qualified and confident teachers. The workforce shortages in Asian languages and intercultural studies represent a systemic failure to deliver on that expectation. Building Asia capability cannot rest on sporadic initiatives or temporary measures; it requires sustained investment in the teaching workforce.

Recommendations

To address these challenges, ACSSO recommends that the Committee:

1. Develop a National Workforce Strategy for Asian Language Teachers, including:
 - Scholarships for pre-service teachers specialising in Asian languages, with bonded placements in public schools.
 - Incentives for practising teachers to upskill in Asian languages and intercultural pedagogy.
 - Funded partnerships with diaspora communities to act as cultural mentors alongside qualified teachers.

⁵ Western Australia Department of Education. Annual Report 2023–24. <https://www.education.wa.edu.au/about-us/annual-report>

⁶ Northern Territory Department of Education. Annual Report 2023–24. <https://education.nt.gov.au/about-us/corporate/annual-report>

- Fund bonded scholarships for Asian language pre-service teachers with guaranteed permanent placements in priority public schools, plus rural retention loadings and sponsored upskilling for existing staff.

Given the 75% contraction in Southeast Asian language enrolments at universities since 2004, a school workforce strategy must be paired with university program stabilisation funding to keep teacher pipelines viable⁷

2. Stabilise Employment Conditions, ensuring that Asian language teachers in public schools are employed in permanent, not casual or short-term, roles. Stability in staffing is essential for continuity in student learning.
3. Guarantee Access to Professional Learning, by funding high-quality, ongoing training for teachers in both language instruction and intercultural capability, with particular support for teachers in rural and regional communities.
4. Strengthen Pathways into the Profession, by aligning university teacher education programs with national Asia capability goals, embedding Asia literacy into preservice curricula, and offering financial and professional incentives to attract teachers into the field.

Families know that teachers are at the heart of education. Without a sustained, skilled workforce, Asia capability will remain uneven and fragile. Addressing workforce shortages and ensuring teacher confidence are, therefore, the most urgent priorities for system reform.

3. Good Practice Models

While structural barriers and workforce shortages limit progress, there are also strong examples of good practice in building Asia capability. These demonstrate what is possible when schools, communities, and systems commit to embedding language learning and intercultural understanding in meaningful and sustained ways. Families consistently highlight the positive difference these programs make, particularly when they combine academic rigour with lived experience.

Integrated Language and Culture Programs

Language never stands alone. The most effective models link it with history, culture, and society. A student learning Indonesian, for example, might also explore trade patterns, geography, or contemporary politics. Families tell us that when learning feels connected to real life, motivation grows.

School Partnerships and Exchanges

Partnerships matter. A video call with peers in Hanoi or a visit to a sister school in Japan makes Asia come alive for students. Families see the difference: children come home with stories, friendships, and confidence that no textbook can provide. Initiatives such as the BRIDGE program demonstrate how authentic, ongoing collaboration with peers in Asia can transform students' understanding and make intercultural learning real. Families value these opportunities because they move beyond textbooks, enabling their children to form genuine relationships across borders.

Use of Digital Technologies

Digital technology changes the game for remote schools. A student in Katherine can now connect with a class in Jakarta in real time. That opportunity didn't exist a decade ago. But it only works if schools have the infrastructure and teachers have the time to make it meaningful. These models demonstrate that Asia capability can be delivered equitably when technology is thoughtfully

⁷https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/House_of_Representatives/About_the_House_News/Media_Releases/Building_Australias_Asia_Capability?

integrated. However, digital programs are most effective when complemented by in-person teaching and community engagement.

What does this mean for families? It means their child in a small rural town can still form friendships across borders and gain confidence using another language.

Engagement with Diaspora Communities

Sometimes the best teachers are already in our communities. Parents, carers, and grandparents bring languages and cultural knowledge that enrich schools. Families tell us these contributions make learning authentic and inclusive. Schools that invite parents, carers, and community leaders to share language and cultural knowledge enrich the curriculum and provide students with authentic perspectives. Families note that this not only strengthens student learning but also builds inclusivity and respect within school communities.

Schools that involve diaspora communities in teaching and cultural programs harness local strengths. In Victoria, where more than 229,000 government school students are LBOTE, such partnerships build intercultural understanding and strengthen community cohesion.

Community language schools across Australia, often sustained by diaspora families on weekends, already provide thousands of students with opportunities to study Asian languages. Formal partnerships between these programs and public schools could extend reach, reduce attrition, and make better use of community expertise that is already thriving.

Regional Examples Across Australia

While NSW and Victoria highlight the scale of linguistic diversity, other jurisdictions also offer instructive models. In the Northern Territory, some remote schools employ sustained “both-ways” bilingual programs (e.g., at Yirrkala) that deliver portions of the curriculum in students’ first language alongside English, demonstrating the local benefits of language maintenance. In Western Australia, Indonesian is formally included among the languages taught in the state's public schools curriculum. Queensland’s state schools offer a wide range of LOTE languages (including several Asian languages), reflecting flexibility and community responsiveness in that system. These cases show that innovation is not unique to large jurisdictions; given policy backing and resources, smaller systems can also support Asia-capability approaches.

Intercultural Learning Across the Curriculum

Asia capability isn’t just for language classes. It belongs in history, civics, economics, literature, and the arts. When students encounter Asia across different subjects, the message is clear: this knowledge matters. Schools that weave Asia-related content into history, civics, geography, literature, and the arts provide students with multiple entry points to Asia capability. This holistic approach ensures that even students who do not pursue formal language study gain essential cultural literacy and intercultural skills.

Digitally Mediated Partnerships

Post-pandemic models, such as Digital BRIDGE, demonstrate how digitally mediated partnerships can provide students in regional and remote schools with sustained, structured engagement with their peers in Asia. Evaluations show these programs build intercultural confidence while complementing on-site teaching. To be effective, they require dedicated teacher release time, technical support, and continuity funding.⁸

ACSSO Policy Alignment

ACSSO policy emphasises that families expect education to be engaging, relevant, and connected to the real world. Good practice models align with these expectations by showing how Asia capability can be delivered in ways that inspire students, include families, and foster community partnerships. They also demonstrate that equitable access is achievable when programs are designed to be inclusive, digitally enabled, and integrated into the everyday life of schools.

Recommendations

To scale and sustain good practice, ACSSO recommends that the Committee:

1. Fund and expand proven models, such as school-to-school partnerships, immersion programs, and diaspora engagement, with a focus on public schools in disadvantaged and regional areas.
2. Support digital innovation, ensuring that regional and remote students can access high-quality language and intercultural programs through robust digital infrastructure and resources.
3. Embed intercultural understanding across all learning areas, ensuring that Asia capability is not confined to language programs but is part of every student's learning entitlement.
4. Establish national recognition for exemplary schools, showcasing models of good practice and sharing resources so that effective approaches can be replicated system-wide.

Families know that good practice exists and works. The challenge now is to move beyond isolated examples and embed these models consistently across the education system, ensuring that every child in every public school has access to engaging, relevant, and sustainable Asia capability learning.

4. Current State of Asian Language and Cultural Studies

Despite the longstanding recognition that Asia capability is a national priority, the current state of Asian language learning and cultural studies in Australian schools and universities is characterised by decline, inconsistency, and inequity. This reality has been well documented in both academic research and policy reviews, and it is a concern repeatedly raised by families who want their children to leave school prepared for a regionally connected future.

National Trends

In 2023, only 7.6 per cent of Year 12 students studied *any* language, and just 3.3 per cent studied the three priority Asian languages (Japanese, Chinese, Indonesian), the lowest proportion in more than a decade, down from 5.1 per cent in 2010¹⁰.

NSW HSC 2024 Snapshot

Recent data from the NSW Education Standards Authority shows the small scale of participation: 1,345 students enrolled in Japanese courses and 781 in Chinese courses across all levels in the 2024

⁸ <https://asialink.unimelb.edu.au/education/>

HSC⁹. For a jurisdiction of over 70,000 HSC students, these numbers highlight how far Asian language learning has receded.

Declining Participation

The most alarming trend is the long-term decline in enrolments in Asian languages. Between 2004 and 2022, enrolments in Southeast Asian languages at Australian universities dropped by 75 per cent.¹⁰ This decline has been mirrored in schools, where many students discontinue languages by the middle years of secondary schooling.¹¹ Families tell us that children often start with enthusiasm in the early years, but without continuity, strong teaching, or incentives to persist, motivation quickly diminishes.

Participation in NSW's four priority Asian languages fell from 4.25 per cent of HSC students in 2001 to 3.43 per cent in 2021¹². At the tertiary level, enrolments in Southeast Asian languages have collapsed by nearly 75 per cent since 2001¹³, undermining the teacher pipeline and limiting advanced study opportunities.

Limited Continuity and Pathways

Continuity is one of the greatest challenges. In many public schools, children may study Japanese or Indonesian in primary school but are unable to continue in secondary years due to staffing shortages or curriculum constraints. In other cases, students who want to continue at an advanced level cannot find courses available in senior secondary or university settings. This fragmentation results in wasted effort and diminished confidence, undermining the sense that Asia capability is valued and achievable.

The Australian Government's Senior Secondary Languages Education Research Project also found that participation in senior languages had been in long-term decline and that the national target of 40 per cent of Year 12 students studying a language was never met.¹⁴ This reinforces families' concerns that continuity is fragile and systemic action is overdue.

Unequal Access

Access to Asian language learning and cultural studies is uneven across sectors and communities. Independent and high-fee schools often sustain robust programs with multiple language offerings, immersion opportunities, and exchange programs. By contrast, public schools in disadvantaged, regional, or remote communities frequently lack even a single qualified teacher. For families in these communities, Asia capability remains an aspiration rather than a reality. This inequity is particularly concerning because public education serves most Australian students. If Asia capability is concentrated only in elite schools, the nation will not build the broad-based capacity it needs..

Cultural Studies Beyond Language

While language learning is critical, cultural studies and intercultural understanding are equally essential. Yet their delivery across schools remains inconsistent. Some schools embed Asia-related content in history, civics, literature, and the arts, while others barely acknowledge it. Families stress

⁹ NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA). 2024 HSC Course Enrolments – Languages. <https://www.nsw.gov.au/education-and-training/nesa/hsc/facts-and-figures/2024-hsc-enrolment-data>

¹⁰ UTAS-ACICIS Media Release. <https://www.acicis.edu.au/blog/media-release-utas-proposal-to-scrap-indonesian-language-teaching-raises-national-alarm>

¹² Lo Bianco, J. et al. Prioritised but declining: an analysis of student participation in Asian languages courses in secondary school 2001–2021. Asia Pacific Journal of Education (2024). <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s41297-024-00240-3>

¹³ ACICIS. Enrolments in Southeast Asian Languages Have Declined by 75% Since 2001 – Media Release (2023). <https://www.acicis.edu.au/blog/media-release-utas-proposal-to-scrap-indonesian-language-teaching-raises-national-alarm>

¹⁴ <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-curriculum/resources/senior-secondary-languages-education-research-project-final-report>

that their children need to understand not only the words of another language, but the context: the histories, societies, economies, and cultural practices that shape Australia's engagement with Asia.

Tertiary Sector Decline and Flow-On Effects

The decline in universities offering Asian language majors and specialist cultural studies has significant consequences. Without strong tertiary programs, the pipeline for training future teachers, diplomats, and researchers is weakened. This directly impacts schools: fewer qualified graduates are available to enter the teaching profession, further compounding workforce shortages.

To reverse this collapse, ACSSO recommends that governments:

- Provide stabilisation funding to safeguard university programs in Japanese, Chinese, Indonesian, and Korean.
- Establish national centres of excellence in Asian languages and cultural studies to anchor teacher education and research.
- Introduce cross-subsidy mechanisms so that low-enrolment but nationally critical languages such as Indonesian are maintained regardless of market demand.

Without such measures, the teacher pipeline cannot recover, and schools will remain unable to deliver sustained Asia capability.

Families see this as a system-level failure; schools cannot deliver Asia capability if universities no longer sustain the necessary expertise.

The contraction is even more pronounced in higher education. Since 2004, university enrollments in Southeast Asian languages have declined by 75 per cent, with Indonesian enrollments reaching crisis levels.¹⁵ As the Lowy Institute notes, Indonesian is a bellwether for Australia's ability to sustain meaningful regional engagement.

ACSSO Policy Alignment

ACSSO policy is clear: all children, regardless of background or location, deserve access to an education that equips them with the knowledge, skills, and cultural literacy to thrive in a changing world. The current decline in Asian languages and cultural studies, coupled with inequitable access, represents a fundamental breach of this entitlement. Families expect governments to move beyond rhetoric and deliver sustainable, systemic solutions.

Recommendations

To address the current state of decline and inconsistency, ACSSO recommends that the Committee:

1. Establish continuous pathways for Asian languages from primary through to tertiary education, ensuring students can progress seamlessly without disruption.
2. Provide incentives for retention of students in languages, particularly at the senior secondary level, by linking language study to ATAR scaling, scholarships, and tertiary entry pathways.
3. Address inequity of access by directing targeted funding and staffing support to disadvantaged public schools and regional communities.

¹⁵ Parliament of Australia — Building Australia's Asia Capability / Committee media release
https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/House_of_Representatives/About_the_House_News/Media_Releases/Building_Australias_Asia_Capability

4. Strengthen the tertiary pipeline, including funding for universities to sustain Asian language majors and teacher preparation programs, ensuring a supply of qualified teachers into the future.
5. Embed Asia-focused cultural studies across the curriculum, ensuring that all students, not only those who pursue language study, gain intercultural literacy and an understanding of Australia's place in the region.

Australia's families want a clear signal from government: that Asia capability is not in retreat, but is a core national priority. Reversing the decline in languages and cultural studies, and ensuring equitable access across the public system, is essential if we are to build a generation of Asia-capable citizens.

5. Beyond Language – Whole-of-Nation Capability

While the study of Asian languages is fundamental, Asia capability extends far beyond linguistic proficiency. Families in public education emphasise that their children must graduate not only with the ability to communicate, but also with cultural literacy, regional awareness, and intercultural skills to thrive in a complex world. In this sense, Asia capability is a whole-of-nation challenge, not simply a curriculum strand.

Asia Capability as Sovereign Capability

Committee Chair Hon Tim Watts MP has described Asia capability as a “vital sovereign capability”¹⁶. This framing resonates strongly with families, who see that their children's futures are intimately tied to Australia's relationships with its Asian neighbours. From trade and tourism to security and higher education, our prosperity and stability depend on equipping young people with the skills and dispositions to engage constructively in the region.

Intercultural Literacy Across All Subjects

Asia capability cannot be confined to language classrooms. Intercultural understanding should be embedded across the curriculum in civics and citizenship, where students examine democratic systems in Asia; in economics, where they analyse Australia's trade partnerships; in literature and the arts, where they engage with Asian voices; and in STEM, where regional collaboration is critical. Families want reassurance that their children will emerge from school able to situate themselves in a regionally connected world, regardless of their subject choices.

Leveraging Linguistic Diversity

Australia's classrooms are already multilingual. In NSW government schools, 39.3 per cent of students are LBOTE,³ and in Victoria, 36 per cent of government students are LBOTE, including tens of thousands with home languages from East and Southeast Asia⁴. This diversity is a national strength. Yet too often, students' heritage languages are undervalued or sidelined in formal schooling. Families want schools to recognise and build on this asset, rather than treating it as irrelevant to national capability.

Recognition of Heritage Languages

Families also want to see the languages spoken at home valued as part of their children's schooling. ACSSO recommends that governments develop a national credentialing pathway for community and heritage languages, enabling students to receive ATAR credit, VET recognition, or micro-credentials for Saturday/community school study. This would acknowledge the bilingual strengths already present in public education, particularly in communities where languages such as Chinese,

¹⁶ Parliament of Australia. Media Release: Building Australia's Asia Capability (22 September 2025).
https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Education/BuildingAsiacapability

Vietnamese, Hindi, and Filipino are widely spoken, and signal that heritage languages are central to building Australia's Asia capability.

Balancing First Nations and Asia Capability

Families also emphasise that the prioritisation of First Nations languages, which ACSSO strongly supports as integral to reconciliation and cultural identity, must be complemented by equal recognition of Asia capability. Both are national priorities, but they play different roles: First Nations languages sustain cultural heritage and community connection, while Asian languages provide economic, diplomatic, and workforce advantages that are essential for Australia's prosperity and regional engagement. This is not an either/or choice. A balanced approach means students gain the cultural grounding of Country while also building the regional knowledge needed to thrive in the Asian century.

Workforce and Industry Readiness

Employers across sectors emphasise that cultural competence is as valuable as technical skill. Graduates who can navigate cultural differences, demonstrate empathy, and adapt to Asian contexts are better positioned for careers in business, diplomacy, science, and community leadership. Yet declining tertiary enrolments in Southeast Asian languages have dropped 75 per cent since 2001¹³, threatening the pipeline of Asia-capable professionals and teachers. Families see this decline as more than an academic concern; it is a lost opportunity for the nation's future workforce.

Recent Jobs and Skills Australia forecasts highlight shortages in fields directly tied to Asia engagement, including trade and logistics, education, and diplomacy. At the same time, the Government's Indo-Pacific Strategy underscores the need for a workforce fluent in regional cultures and languages. Embedding Asia capability in schools is therefore not only an educational priority but also a response to emerging labour market and strategic demands.

Families also want to see a clear payoff for students who persist with Asian languages and intercultural learning. ACSSO recommends:

- Embedding Asian language micro-credentials that are portable into VET and university study.
- Creating ATAR scaling transparency and scholarships for language continuers to reduce disincentives at senior levels.
- Recognising Asia capability in graduate recruitment and apprenticeships, so that employers signal the value of these skills to young people.

Such pathways demonstrate to students and families that their investment of time and effort yields tangible career opportunities.

Scholarships for government school students to participate in Asian language immersion and exchange programs would reinforce this payoff, signalling clearly that such opportunities are open to all families, not only those who can afford them.

Whole-of-Government Coordination

Building Asia capability cannot rest solely with schools. It requires collaboration across portfolios, Education, Foreign Affairs, Employment, and Trade, to create consistent messaging, programs, and incentives. Families want to see policy coherence: schools preparing children for university pathways that are sustained by tertiary provision, and tertiary provision linked to workforce strategies and industry demand.

ACSSO Policy Alignment

ACSSO's policy is grounded in the belief that every child should receive an education that prepares them for a changing world. Families expect their children to leave school not only literate and

numerate, but also confident in navigating different cultures, equipped to engage confidently with Asia in work and life. Embedding intercultural literacy across the curriculum, leveraging diaspora strengths, and aligning education with workforce strategies all reflect ACSSO's longstanding commitment to equity and relevance in public education.

Recommendations

To ensure Asia capability is embedded as a whole-of-nation competency, ACSSO recommends that the Committee:

1. Develop a National Asia Capability Framework, spanning early learning through to tertiary and workforce settings, embedding intercultural understanding as a core outcome.
2. Embed Asia capability across the curriculum, ensuring all students, not only those studying a language, gain cultural literacy and regional awareness.
3. Leverage linguistic diversity by formally recognising and supporting heritage and community languages in schools, particularly those connected to Australia's major Asian partners.
4. Align tertiary provision and workforce strategies, ensuring that universities sustain Asian language and cultural studies programs, and that graduates are prepared for careers in a regionally connected economy.
5. Coordinate whole-of-government approaches, with shared responsibility across Education, Foreign Affairs, Employment, and Trade portfolios to align policy, funding, and accountability.

6. Equity of Access

Equity is at the heart of ACSSO's policy platform, and it must also be at the heart of any Asia capability strategy. Families are adamant that access should not depend on postcode, family income, or school sector. Yet, in practice, access to Asian languages and intercultural learning is uneven, with disadvantaged students least likely to participate in sustained programs.

Uneven Opportunities Across Sectors and Jurisdictions

In high-fee and selective schools, students often benefit from a wide array of Asian language offerings, supported by immersion trips and exchange programs. By contrast, many government schools, particularly in low socioeconomic, rural, and remote communities, struggle to sustain even a single program due to workforce shortages and resource constraints.

The disparity is most visible in senior secondary years. In 2023, only 7.6 per cent of Year 12 students nationally studied any language, and just 3.3 per cent studied Japanese, Chinese, or Indonesian, the three priority Asian languages¹⁰. In New South Wales, HSC data shows 1,345 students enrolled in Japanese and 781 in Chinese across all levels in 2024, a tiny fraction of the cohort⁹. These figures underscore that the gap is not only structural but also cumulative: students who miss out in earlier years rarely re-engage at senior levels.

The Multilingual Reality of Public Education

Paradoxically, some of the most linguistically diverse schools are those with the fewest formal programs. In NSW government schools, 39.3 per cent of students (309,446) are from LBOTE backgrounds³. In Victoria, LBOTE students make up 36 per cent of government enrolments (229,990), with 8,020 newly arrived EAL learners in 2023⁴. In both jurisdictions, tens of thousands of students already speak Asian languages at home, including Chinese, Vietnamese, Hindi, and Filipino.

In Queensland, Department data confirms that state schools offer more than a dozen LOTE options each semester, but enrolment and retention vary widely¹⁷. In WA, with over 326,000 public school students, coverage of Asian languages remains patchy⁵. In the NT, EALD learners make up a significant proportion of enrolments in many remote schools, yet they face structural barriers to sustained programs⁶.

Families see these disparities as wasted opportunity: Australia's linguistic diversity is a national asset that remains underutilised.

Design of a National Equity Fund

To move beyond rhetoric, the National Equity Fund should be designed with clear parameters.

Eligible uses should include:

- Permanent FTE allocations to sustain Asian language programs in low-ICSEA public schools.
- Professional learning subsidies for teachers in rural and regional schools.
- Bursaries for immersion and exchange programs so disadvantaged students can participate without financial strain.
- Digital infrastructure and connectivity upgrades to enable remote and regional schools to access partnerships and virtual classrooms.

By specifying these uses, the Fund can ensure that resources flow directly to the schools and students who are most in need, thereby closing the equity gap.

Financial and Logistical Barriers

Opportunities for exchange, immersion, and intensive programs remain prohibitively expensive for many families. Where participation requires international travel or program fees, students from disadvantaged households are excluded. Even domestic immersion opportunities (e.g., study tours or camps) are often beyond reach for families already burdened by the rising costs of schooling.

Equity as a National Imperative

Public education serves the majority of Australian students, 63.4 per cent of the nation's 4.1 million school students in 2024¹⁸. If Asia capability is delivered unevenly, concentrated in elite schools, Australia cannot claim to be building a sovereign capability. Equity is not simply a matter of fairness to families, it is a matter of national interest.

ACSSO Policy Alignment

ACSSO has consistently advocated that every child has the right to equitable educational opportunities, regardless of background. Families expect governments to guarantee that public school students have the same access to Asia capability as their peers in the independent sector. Embedding equity in program design is, therefore, both a policy and moral obligation.

Recommendations

To ensure equity of access, ACSSO recommends that the Committee:

1. Establish a National Equity Fund for Asia Capability, providing targeted support for disadvantaged schools to deliver Asian language and intercultural programs.

¹⁷ Queensland Department of Education. Languages Other Than English (LOTE) Dataset, Semester 1 2024. <https://data.qld.gov.au/dataset/languages-other-than-english-lote-in-queensland-state-schools>

¹⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). Schools, Australia, 2024. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/schools/latest-release>

2. Guarantee participation for low socioeconomic students in immersion and exchange opportunities, with subsidies for travel, program fees, and digital alternatives.
3. Establish a national scholarship scheme for government school students to access Asian language immersion, study tours, and exchange programs, ensuring these opportunities are not limited to families who can afford them.
4. Leverage linguistic diversity by formally recognising heritage languages and creating pathways for bilingual students to gain accreditation and recognition.
5. Ensure balanced distribution of resources and teachers, prioritising rural, regional, and low socioeconomic schools where the equity gap is widest.
6. Embed equity benchmarks in national reporting, ensuring transparency about who has access and who is missing out.

7. Data and Accountability

For families in public education, the value of policy commitments lies in whether they translate into real opportunities for children. To assess this, reliable and transparent data are essential. Yet, Australia currently lacks a consistent, national framework for monitoring Asia capability. What exists is a patchwork of jurisdictional reports, national snapshots, and sector-specific datasets. This inconsistency undermines accountability and makes it difficult to evaluate progress over time.

Incomplete National Picture

At the national level, headline statistics provide a sobering overview: in 2023, only 7.6 per cent of Year 12 students studied any language, and just 3.3 per cent studied Japanese, Chinese, or Indonesian¹⁰. These figures, while important, do not reveal the distribution of participation across jurisdictions, school sectors, or equity groups. Without this level of detail, it is impossible for families or policymakers to determine where opportunities are improving, where they are declining, and which communities are being left behind.

Jurisdictional Patchwork and Accessibility Gaps

The reasons for this lack of clarity become evident when examining the inconsistent and often inaccessible nature of state and territory reporting. While some jurisdictions publish detailed and timely reports, others provide only partial information, or report what subjects are offered rather than how many students actually enrol. In several jurisdictions, LBOTE and Asian language participation data can only be obtained through departmental requests or bespoke analyses. This lack of transparency makes it challenging for families, educators, and policymakers to monitor trends and evaluate whether government commitments are being fulfilled. Families put it more simply: they just want to know if their child's opportunities are improving or declining, and right now, they can't.

- NSW publishes detailed annual bulletins on student language backgrounds, showing that 39.3 per cent of students in government schools are LBOTE, and HSC enrolment tables that specify how many students study individual languages (e.g., 1,345 Japanese and 781 Chinese enrolments in 2024)^{3,9}.
- Victoria reports LBOTE enrolments (36 per cent of government students, or 229,990) and the number of newly arrived EAL learners (8,020 in 2023)⁴, but does not publish disaggregated participation in Asian language subjects without custom analysis.
- Queensland publishes a system-wide dataset of languages offered in state schools each semester, but it reports offerings rather than actual student uptake¹⁷.

- WA, SA, ACT, TAS, and NT provide system enrolment statistics through annual reports, but data on language uptake is either incomplete, inconsistent, or not routinely disaggregated.

Families find this patchwork frustrating. Without comparable, transparent reporting across jurisdictions, it is impossible to know whether their children's opportunities are improving or declining.

Lack of Longitudinal Tracking

Even where data exists, it often captures a single year in isolation. There is little longitudinal tracking of student pathways, for example, how many primary students who begin Japanese continue through to Year 12, or how many LBOTE students are supported to maintain their heritage languages through accredited study. This absence makes it difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of initiatives or identify points of attrition.

Closing the Gap Between Aspiration and Evidence

Australia has repeatedly set ambitious goals for Asian language participation, such as the target that 40 per cent of Year 12 students would study a language within a decade¹². The Senior Secondary Languages Education Research Project concluded that this target was aspirational and unachievable without a consistent national data framework and stronger system-level support. Embedding clear reporting and accountability mechanisms is therefore essential to avoid repeating past failures. Yet without transparent and consistent reporting, such targets risk becoming aspirational rather than actionable. Families want assurance that progress is being measured honestly, with gaps identified and addressed.

To make progress measurable, ACSSO recommends that governments set and report against specific targets, such as:

- Lift Year 12 Asian language participation from 3.3 per cent to at least 10 per cent within a decade.
- Ensure every government secondary school offers at least one continuous Asian language pathway (Years 7–12) by 2030.
- Guarantee that all students experience intercultural capability assessment at Years 6 and 10, with results publicly reported.

These benchmarks would provide families with confidence that commitments are genuine and give policymakers clear indicators of success.

ACSSO Policy Alignment

ACSSO has long argued for transparent reporting to enable families to hold systems accountable. Policy commitments without data leave families uncertain and sceptical. Embedding robust accountability mechanisms is therefore essential for building trust and ensuring that Asia capability reforms deliver tangible results.

Recommendations

To ensure accountability and transparency, ACSSO recommends that the Committee:

1. Mandate nationally consistent data collection on Asian language and intercultural programs across all jurisdictions and sectors.
2. Disaggregate reporting by state/territory, school sector, and equity group (including LBOTE and SES) to identify gaps and inequities.

3. Track longitudinal pathways, monitoring student progression from primary to tertiary to workforce to understand points of attrition.
4. Publish annual national reports on Asia capability participation and outcomes, accessible to families, educators, and policymakers.
5. Tie program funding to evidence, ensuring that initiatives are monitored for impact and sustained only if they demonstrate results.

Conclusion

Asia capability is no longer a peripheral aspiration; it is a sovereign necessity. For Australia to prosper, remain secure, and build cohesive communities, our education system must equip every child with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to engage confidently with Asia.

Although Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia remains a formal Cross-Curriculum Priority in the Australian Curriculum, its visibility and consistent delivery have diminished. The challenge is not recognition but implementation. Unless governments renew the spotlight on this Priority, decades of investment will be lost and Australia's sovereign capability will be weakened.

The evidence is clear: participation in Asian languages has declined, pathways are fragmented, and access is inequitable. In 2023, only 7.6 per cent of Year 12 students studied any language, and just 3.3 per cent studied Japanese, Chinese, or Indonesian¹⁰. University enrolments in Southeast Asian languages have fallen by 75 per cent since 2001¹³, weakening the pipeline of Asia-capable professionals and teachers. These declines occur despite the fact that our classrooms are already multilingual in NSW, 39.3 per cent of government school students are LBOTE³, and in Victoria, 36 per cent of government students (229,990) are LBOTE, including 8,020 newly arrived EAL learners in 2023⁴.

Families view this as both a missed opportunity and a breach of equity. Public education serves 63.4 per cent of Australia's 4.1 million students¹⁸. If Asia capability is concentrated in elite schools and universities, Australia will not build the broad-based capacity it needs. For families, the issue is straightforward: their children deserve to graduate from school with the skills to thrive in a regionally interconnected world, regardless of their postcode or family income.

This inquiry, therefore, presents a pivotal opportunity to shift from rhetoric to action. What is required is a systemic approach that:

- Embeds a national entitlement to Asian language and intercultural learning;
- Delivers a workforce strategy to stabilise and grow teacher supply;
- Establishes a National Equity Fund and scholarship scheme for government school students to guarantee access to immersion and exchange;
- Rebalances priorities so that Asia capability receives investment equivalent to other intercultural initiatives;
- Renews the spotlight on Asia as a Cross-Curriculum Priority; and
- Introduces transparent national reporting and accountability.

The Committee has framed Asia capability as a vital sovereign capability requiring a whole-of-nation response. ACSSO supports this framing and recommends a National Asia Capability Framework with clear KPIs, backed by a National Equity Fund to ensure that opportunity does not depend on postcode. With ABS confirming that 63.4% of students attend government schools, equity in public education is not only fair, it is decisive for national capability

ACSSO urges the Committee to recommend bold reforms that embed Asia capability into the fabric of Australian education. Only then can we ensure that the next generation of young Australians across every school, every community, and every background are truly prepared to live, work, and lead in the Asian century.

For families, this is not an abstract policy debate. It is about whether their children will leave school with the skills to seize future opportunities. The time for partial measures has passed, Asia capability must now be guaranteed for all.

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