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Standing Committee on Education
Parliament of Australia

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

Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for initiating this important inquiry and the opportunity to share my views. My comments are based on over 20-year experience of working on Asia literacy and Australia-Asia relations in civil society organisations, universities and government.

Summary

Australia's security, prosperity and social cohesion are increasingly shaped by developments in Asia.

Asia literacy has long been an Australian policy ambition, yet despite over four decades of policy effort, investment and institution-building, our national education system has failed to deliver sustained progress. Meanwhile, a second track of Asia literacy has emerged through migration, diaspora networks, digital engagement and professional mobility. These informal pathways remain fragmented and disconnected from national policy.

This has coincided with a deterioration of our strategic environment and the comprehensive shift of Australian government's focus and narrative on Asia. The new age of geostrategic

competition - the argument goes - requires an unwavering focus on national security and economic resilience, less so on linguistic capabilities and regional expertise.

This is a false dichotomy. As geopolitical tensions rise, Australia's security and prosperity are even more tied to Asia, and the need for deep understanding of our region is even more urgent than in the golden age of globalisation.

Asia literacy also directly influences our social cohesion. Knowing your next-door neighbours in today's Australia means knowing the vast and diverse region they have come from.

While education policy efforts to uplift Australia's Asia capabilities have faltered, alternative pathways - driven by demography, technology, and mobility - have fostered a second-track Asia literacy. Migration from Asia has reshaped Australia's cultural landscape, while social media platforms and AI have enabled experiential engagement with Asian languages and cultures. Youth-led initiatives, scholarships, and diaspora networks are building experiential Asia competency outside our education system and institutions.

This Inquiry provides an opportunity to reframe Asia literacy as a core national capability, on par with STEM, and embed it across education, government, business and civil society. The solution lies in redefining Asia literacy for the 21st century and creating a coherent national strategy that integrates formal education with Track II literacy pathways.

The Problem

- **Stalled progress:** Participation in Asian languages at school and university has steadily declined since the 1980s. At the tertiary level, enrolment in Asian languages is at historic lows.
- **Fragmented approach:** Investments in programs such as the New Colombo Plan, Asialink Education, and the Centre for China in the World were significant and impactful, but disconnected from a coherent national plan to lift our Asia capabilities of our young people, professionals and community at large.
- **Demand-side gap:** Most of Australian policies on Asia literacy have focused on the supply of programs, while demand among students, industry, public institutions and community at large has remained weak.
- **Track II literacy potential underutilised:** Australia's rich Asian diaspora, digital connectivity and new technologies (especially Artificial Intelligence) and expanding regional mobility have created new sources of experiential Asia literacy, but these channels have not been integrated into national strategy. In fact, they became a source of policy complacency – as Asia literacy is perceived to be a given, because of Australia's changing demography.
- **Strategic risks:** Australia's ability to navigate great-power competition, diversify trade and maintain influence in regional capitals, and protect our own social cohesion is undermined by a shortage of Asia-literate leaders and institutions.

The Solution

The solution requires **redefining Asia literacy** and embedding it into a **coherent, long-term national framework**. This framework should:

1. **Redefine Asia Literacy for the 21st Century Australia:** Expand the definition and scope of Asia literacy beyond language and cultural awareness to include experiential learning, digital literacy, and policy and professional expertise and competences.
2. **Integrate formal education system and Track II literacy pathways:** Harness diaspora communities, mobility programs, and new technologies alongside schools and universities, creating complementary and reinforcing tracks of Asia capability.
3. **Generate demand and incentives:** Create clear career pathways, recognition, and incentives for students and professionals to develop Asia expertise
4. **Institutionalise Asia Literacy as a national capability, embedded in our education system** - from schools to postgraduate education: Treat Asia capability like we approach STEM education: backed by bipartisan political commitment, long-term funding, and systematic integration into education, leadership training and national policy.

Recommendations

I recommend the Committee consider the following priorities:

1. School education

- Restore and expand funding for teaching of Asian languages in schools.
- Restore funding for and provide additional mandate for change to the Asialink Education (formerly Asia Education Foundation) as a national body responsible for integration of Asia-related curriculum, teacher training and policy-development on Asia literacy in schools.

2. Universities and research institutions

- Fund Chairs of Area Studies and Centres of Excellence focused on priority countries (China, Indonesia, India, Japan, Korea).
- Tie international student recruitment levels and research funding to Australian universities' commitments to Asian studies teaching and research (among other metrics, measured by a number of honours, higher degree by research and post-doctoral graduates in Asian studies)

3. Leadership and mobility

- Establish a prestigious Australian fellowship program for inbound and outbound exchanges with Asia, connecting emerging and established business, civil society, technology and policy leaders in Australia and Asia

- Expand experiential programs like the New Colombo Plan and link them with broader Asia engagement efforts.

4. Public service and government institutions

- Embed Asia capability in recruitment, promotion and training across the public service, defence and national security communities.
- Establish cultural diversity and Asia literacy benchmarks for leadership appointments to government-funded education, cultural and community institutions (boards, advisory councils and executive roles).

5. Funding and governance

- Establish a National Asia Capability Strategy with bipartisan support, reinforced by an annual parliamentary statement on Asia literacy in Australia.
- Create sustainable, multi-year, merit-based funding for Asia capability organisations (e.g., Asialink, Asia Society, bilateral business councils, youth organisations).

6. Demand-side incentives

- Provide scholarships, recognition and industry incentives to encourage young Australians to pursue Asian languages and careers in the region.
- Run a national social marketing campaign to highlight the economic, community, career and security value of Asia literacy.

For a full list of recommendations, see the Pathways to progress chapter in “*The Renewed Case for Asia Literacy*”, Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue, 22 September 2022: <https://asiapacific4d.com/idea/asia-literacy/>

Conclusion

Asia literacy is a **strategic necessity** for Australia’s future. Our challenge is not a lack of ideas, advocacy or past investments, but the absence of an integrated, long-term national approach that connects education, policy and community.

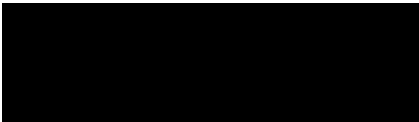
This Inquiry offers a historic opportunity to place Asia capability at the centre of Australia’s national agenda, aligning it with our security, trade and social cohesion agenda at a time of profound geopolitical and societal change. With bipartisan leadership, coordination, sustainable funding and a broadened definition of literacy, Australia can build the Asia capability it needs to thrive in the 21st century.

My submission is based on:

1. My recent paper “*The Renewed Case for Asia Literacy*” published by the Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue on 22 September 2022, and launched by Tim Watts MP: <https://asiapacific4d.com/idea/asia-literacy/>
2. Five-volume Disruptive Asia essay series which I co-founded at Asia Society Australia, <https://disruptiveasia.asiasociety.org/>
3. Reports by the Asia Taskforce – an initiative by the Business Council of Australia and Asia Society Australia, which I co-led with Mark van Dyck, Managing Director (Asia-Pacific), Compass Group, Jennifer Westacott, CEO of the Business Council of Australia, and Andrew Parker, Asia Practice Leader and Partner at PwC: <https://asiasociety.org/australia/asia-taskforce>
4. Over 70 interviews with Asia literacy practitioners, government officials and policy experts which I conducted in 2024-2025 as a part of the confidential independent institutional review on the subject of Asia capabilities.

I would be delighted to elaborate on any aspects of my submission and the reports on Asia literacy which I co-authored, on Committee’s request.

Sincerely,



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