

Parliamentary Inquiry on Building Australia's Asia Capability ATN Universities

11 November 2025

Key takeaways:

1. Australia should leverage the Asian expertise already existing within our community and prioritise practical, in-country exposure, both physical and virtual, to build authentic and enduring Asia capability.
2. Sustained baseline funding for school and community engagement is essential to preserve national Asia awareness and develop long-term talent pipelines.
3. Deep expertise must be cultivated through targeted support for high-potential students and cluster programs or centres of excellence in priority Asian languages and regions.

ATN Universities' Asia Capability Expertise

The Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN Universities) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the examination of building Australia's Asia capability at this quarter century mark. ATN Universities members are Curtin University, Deakin University, RMIT University, The University of Newcastle, University of South Australia and University of Technology Sydney. Our members specialise in workforce development, applied research, and global education partnerships. We collectively educate 300,000 or one in five students, and 18% of international students.

ATN Universities' Transnational Education in Asia

ATN member universities have the largest international footprint of any Australian university group, with 12 campuses and centres overseas, and collectively offer a broad and diverse portfolio of transnational education (TNE) programs across key global regions, with a particular strength in Asia. Each member university has established offshore delivery in the 1990s and early 2000s, which have continued to grow into the present.

- Deakin was the first foreign university to establish a presence in India in 1994, which has grown into a full campus in Gujarat.
- UTS co-founded the Shanghai University – UTS SILC Business School (SILC) in 1994.
- Curtin operates one of the most extensive offshore networks among Australian universities, with fully-fledged campuses in Malaysia (from 1999), Singapore, Dubai, Mauritius and Sri Lanka.
- RMIT has long maintained a global presence through RMIT Vietnam, established in 2000, with Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi campuses serving as key hubs for education, innovation and research collaboration.
- Newcastle has had a major campus in Singapore for over twenty years.

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ATN Universities' TNE networks already provide scalable platforms for authentic regional engagement.

- RMIT Vietnam's Global Experience program enables overseas study, partner-university exchanges and cross-campus enrolment with RMIT Melbourne, while its Asia Pacific Smart & Sustainable Cities Hub supports grant-funded research and training mobility between Vietnam and Australia.
- Curtin Singapore and Newcastle Australia IHE (Singapore) offer industry engagement and work-integrated-learning opportunities, particularly in engineering and the built environment.
- Deakin's GIFT City (India) campus delivers industry-linked postgraduate programs with hybrid, technology-enabled delivery and local internship placements.
- UTS provides online postgraduate programs in Modern Standard Chinese for offshore learners in China, expanding access to Asia-facing education.
- Newcastle's Pacific Node based in Samoa is a crucial hub for partnerships in our immediate region.

Taken together, these examples show how meaningful exposure can be delivered efficiently through existing offshore and digital infrastructure.

ATN Universities' Language Capability and Regional Expertise

ATN Universities also house leading regional expertise and teaching capacity that directly support Australia's Asia capability. All our members are part of the Australian Consortium for 'In-Country' Indonesian Studies (ACICIS). Our members also deliver language courses to thousands of students annually.

- Newcastle offers Indonesian (introduced in 2023), Chinese (Mandarin) and Japanese through its Diploma in Languages.
- Deakin delivers a dedicated Diplomas of Indonesian, Chinese (Mandarin) and Arabic.
- Curtin currently teaches Chinese (Mandarin), Japanese and Korean on campus.
- RMIT supports Arabic, Chinese (translation), Mandarin (interpreting), Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Malay, Persian, Punjabi, Thai, Turkish, Vietnamese within its NAATI-endorsed translating/interpreting programs, alongside language offerings in Chinese (Mandarin) and Japanese.
- UTS offers six language options for its Diploma in Languages; its current language suite includes Chinese (Mandarin) and Japanese.

RMIT's newly created Australia-Vietnam Policy Institute is a concerted effort to fill a gap in one of our most critical relationships in Southeast Asia. We also host a network of research centres and partnerships that strengthen regional literacy and applied collaboration, including but not limited to:

- RMIT's Asia Hub and the Australian APEC Study Centre,
- UTS' Australia-China Relations Institute (ACRI),
- The Curtin Korea Research & Engagement Centre (KRC),
- The Deakin India Research Initiative (DIRI), and
- Newcastle's partnership with Nihon University through its campus in Newcastle.

Through these transnational partnerships, research centres and language concentrations, we demonstrate how Australian universities can build enduring regional literacy and collaboration, deliver globally relevant curricula, industry placements, and applied research projects that build Asia capability in practice.

The Asia Capability Challenge and Australia's Third Era of Asian Engagement

The Challenge

Australia's engagement with Asia has long shaped its national identity and capability. In the 21st Century, we are entering a third era of modern Asia engagement. In the post-war decades to the 1970s, national policy focused on 'keeping Asia out' through the White Australia Policy. This shifted fundamentally in the following three decades to a policy of 'introducing Asia' to Australians. Governments from both sides of the aisle launched initiatives such as the National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools and Program (NALSS and NALSSP), the Australia in the Asian Century White Paper, and the Columbo and New Colombo plans.

Through this recent phase, awareness has grown rapidly. Australians travel extensively in the region, Asian languages are commonly taught in primary schools, and Asian culture is part of everyday life for many Australians. Yet engagement remains superficial. While travel to Asia is high, and thousands of students learn some Asian languages in primary school, language retention, university enrolments, or career-long engagement are low. As Assistant Minister Tim Watts recently noted, enrolments in Asian languages have halved over the past decade, with fewer than one percent of Year 12 students continuing to advanced study. Partly driven by this weak demand, university Asian language programs have contracted by a third. Australia's Asia capability pipeline is in structural decline.

A new national approach is needed – one that builds genuine understanding and capability, not just familiarity. With the realities of a digital century and constrained resources, Australia must balance broad exposure with targeted investment in a smaller cohort of highly proficient Asia-literate specialists.

This is a necessary and bold shift. While many may prefer to persist with the current approach of emulating the Scandinavian model of universal English fluency through increased spending and resource allocation, Australia's context demands a different approach. This shift is essential if Australia is to remain competitive in a century where the central economic, diplomatic, and cultural gravity is in our region.

Asia at Home

The demographics of modern Australia reflect a rich and growing Asian presence. Nearly 20% of Australians now report ancestry from East, South or Southeast Asia. Asian languages such as Mandarin, Hindi, Vietnamese, and Tagalog are among the most commonly spoken at home other than English.

Despite this, our systems under-recognise and under-utilise diaspora expertise. Pathways for heritage speakers into language teaching, public service, or foreign affairs roles remain limited. In curriculum and teacher education, heritage learners are still treated as outliers rather than core contributors to Australia's capability.

Building genuine Asia capability requires harnessing this domestic strength. That includes improving data collection, enabling native speakers to become teachers, and recognising diverse learner profiles across the education system.

Language Learning

There has been an understandable focus on Asian language learning in Australia through the late 20th Century. When local capability was low, education provided a clear engagement metric. However, shifting demographics and technology require a re-think of what Asian language learning is for.

First, with more native speakers and heritage learners in Australia, policy must make it easier for them to teach and to continue study. Senior-secondary course eligibility criteria and accreditation processes can discourage both new and heritage learners from pursuing advanced study.

Second, Artificial Intelligence (AI)–assisted translation tools mean we need to re-think our language teaching aims. Where general proficiency was once the goal, AI now handles many transactional needs. This is already hollowing out the middle of the pipeline. Policy should therefore focus on both ends of the spectrum i.e. early exposure for all students and deep fluency for selected experts, rather than trying to sustain a hollow middle.

Early exposure remains important. The introduction of Asian languages in Australian primary schools helps to normalise Asia engagement and identify future talent. Where the system falters is in sustaining interest and capability beyond this stage. Teacher shortages, limited incentives and uninspiring curricula contribute to attrition, reinforcing the perception that Australians “fail” at language learning.

AI may meet basic communication needs, such as reading an email or ordering food, but it cannot replace authentic human communication. True Asia capability requires natural fluency and cultural literacy that technology cannot replicate.

Australia therefore faces an Asia capability conundrum; how do we produce fluent experts if we are relying on AI for the transactional intermediate language needs? We propose adopting a targeted expert-training approach which focuses on expert training rather than comprehensive societal fluency i.e. training a limited number of experts to a very deep level. This is similar to the post-war approach in the United States exemplified by programs such as Fulbright Fellowships, Title VI Language Resource Centres (LRC), and National Security Education Program (NSEP).

Given this broad context and moment of transition, our recommendations focus on:

1. At the broad-based and deep expertise levels emphasising authentic engagement, by leveraging diaspora within Australia and exposure to in-country experiences;
2. Maintaining a broad-based exposure through primary school programs and large community initiatives; and
3. Reinvesting and focusing resources on selective deep learning opportunities in priority languages and regions.

ATN Universities' Recommendations to Develop Australia's Asia Capability

Australia should leverage the Asian expertise already existing within our community and prioritise practical, in-country exposure, both physical and virtual, to build authentic and enduring Asia capability

Nearly one-fifth of Australians report ancestry from East, South or Southeast Asia, and languages such as Mandarin, Hindi and other Indic languages, Vietnamese and Tagalog are among the most spoken at home other than English. However, this domestic expertise is under-recognised and under-utilised.

Pathways for heritage speakers into teaching and public service or foreign affairs roles remain limited, and community language schools struggle to maintain funding stability. Without sustained investment in early exposure and community engagement, Australia's pipeline for future Asia-capable professionals will narrow.

For non-diasporic Australians, Asia capability develops most powerfully through direct, contextual experience. Direct people-to-people connection, in-country and virtual, is the most effective driver of motivation and understanding. Immersive study, internships, research and community placements provide students with the linguistic, professional and cultural fluency necessary to navigate confidently across the region.

ATN Universities recommends that the Commonwealth consider:

- Establishing within the New Colombo Plan a specific category to support stackable mobility options, including Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), blended virtual-plus-physical programs, and micro-internships with Asian partners.
- Working with universities and regulators to improve recognition of overseas qualifications that heritage speakers of Asian languages have, which they may struggle to use in Australia.
- Recognising TNE campuses as low-risk and affordable "Asia capability nodes" for mobility, virtual collaboration, and in-country engagement, enabling participation by equity and part-time students who cannot travel for extended periods overseas.
- Partnering with local industry and governments to co-design interdisciplinary projects and internships in growth sectors such as advanced manufacturing, digital transformation, health, and energy transition.
- Supporting intensive interdisciplinary projects co-supervised by Australian and Asian universities and industry mentors, allowing students, particularly postgraduates, to apply their research in real-world, regionally relevant settings.
- Coordinating policy through an Asia Capability Council linking the departments of Education, Foreign Affairs and Trade, Employment and Workplace Relations, Austrade, and state and territory governments.

Sustained baseline funding for school and community engagement is essential to preserve national Asia awareness and develop long-term talent pipelines

Compared with other English-speaking nations such as Canada, New Zealand, UK and US, Australia has achieved exceptional reach in introducing Asian languages across its schools. Japanese, in particular, became the most widely taught language following strong government investment in primary-level introduction programs throughout the 1990s and 2000s, now accounting for around 23 per cent of all school language enrolments. These early-exposure and area-study initiatives must continue to be supported.

ATN Universities recommends that the Commonwealth consider:

- Maintaining Commonwealth and state funding for community language schools, bilingual education and early exposure programs across the school system.
- Reforming teacher accreditation to enable qualified heritage speakers to join the teaching workforce without obstacles, possibly as specialist Language Instructors, and to support fully qualified teachers with Asian language capabilities to progress into leadership roles.
- Modernising senior secondary curriculum and leaver exams to incentivise ab initio language learners, heritage learners and diaspora students.
- Incentivising universities to integrate short language micro-credentials into non-language degrees e.g. business, health, engineering.
- Using COIL and bilingual project modules to develop intercultural capabilities in students as part of university-industry collaboration.
- Establishing a national Asia Capability Data Repository to track enrolments, proficiency outcomes and participation from early learning through to tertiary education.

We must cultivate deep expertise in priority Asian languages and cultures, and we should do this by targeting additional support for students that show strong aptitude for languages and cultural studies

While students often gain early exposure to Asian languages in Australian schools, too few students progress to advanced levels. Year 12 completions and university enrolments in Japanese, Chinese and Indonesian have declined, and smaller programs in Korean, Hindi and Vietnamese face ongoing sustainability risks.

At the same time, technological change is reshaping how languages are learned and used. AI translation tools meet transactional communication needs but cannot replicate the nuance required for negotiation, diplomacy, or cultural leadership. The challenge is to sustain a pipeline that delivers both fluency and deeper intercultural competence.

A strategic national approach should therefore build broader capacity but also acknowledge we must invest in depth. We should focus additional resources on programs in priority languages and on building a pool of individuals with stronger depth of cultural understanding, supported by clear pathways into government, education and industry.

ATN Universities recommends that the Commonwealth consider:

- Creating bonded scholarship programs for students to undertake advanced study or research in Japanese, Chinese, Indonesian, Korean and Hindi, linked to future service in education, diplomacy or industry.
- Expanding the New Colombo Plan scholars program to include postgraduate and VET cohorts, embedding professional immersion and applied research experience.
- Supporting applied research and researcher mobility focused on Asia, including scholarships and exchange programs for postgraduate students and early-career researchers to collaborate with regional partners.
- Developing a coordinating hub for universities to pool expertise in curriculum, teacher training, and resource development, as well as supporting universities to pool resources to jointly teach Asian language courses which are otherwise difficult to deliver sustainably.

Australia has succeeded in introducing Asia to its public; the task ahead is to understand it deeply. Asia capability is not symbolic, it is strategic, underpinning Australia's prosperity, security and global influence. ATN Universities stands ready to partner with government to deliver practical, scalable solutions, through transnational education, applied research, industry partnerships and community collaboration, that will build a confident, Asia-literate workforce equipped for the century ahead.

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