



Studies in Statecraft

The Renewed Case for Asia Literacy

Philipp Ivanov

Executive Summary

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.

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. The critics of Asia literacy need to look no further than the Cold War – won as much by Western scholars of Kremlin politics and Soviet economics, as by diplomats, spies and generals.

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 paper argues that Asia literacy must be redefined for the 21st century – as an integrated capability combining language skills, policy expertise, cultural intelligence and professional experience, enriched by technology, deep diasporic links and mobility.

The paper calls for a coherent national strategy to connect fragmented efforts, incentivise demand, and embed Asia capability across sectors. Australia's resilience will depend on deep, sustained knowledge of our region – across government, business and civil society – to manage risk, build trust and influence in a far more complex environment. Leadership, bipartisan support and integration of Asia capability-building with our national security and economic agenda are essential to ensure that Australia is not alone and illiterate in Asia.

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The Problem

Australia's economic and security future is tied to Asia, yet our capability to understand the region is in decline. Despite decades of policy effort, **Asia literacy - language study, cultural knowledge, and policy expertise** attained through the formal channels of the Australian education system has stagnated.

At the same time, informal or “**Track II**” literacy emerged driven by demographic change, Asian diaspora networks, technology, and mobility. However, these channels of literacy remain underutilised and disconnected from our institutions and education system.

This fragmented approach leaves Australia ill-prepared to navigate an era of strategic competition, economic fragmentation, and eroding social cohesion.

The Solution

Reframe Asia literacy as a core national capability for the 21st century – on par with Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) education.

Broaden the definition of Asia literacy: Expand beyond language learning to integrate cultural intelligence, digital skills, policy expertise and experiential learning.

Harness Track II potential: Mobilise Asian diaspora communities; leverage new technologies for engagement and communication; and scale, deepen and connect youth mobility and professional exchange programs.

Create a coherent national strategy: Align education policy, leadership development and industry partnerships to embed Asia capability as an essential element of Australia's security, trade, social cohesion and diplomatic infrastructure.

Why it Matters

In 2025 Australia finds itself amid tectonic geopolitical shifts. Donald Trump's upheaval of US foreign and trade policy collides with Russia's aggression in Ukraine and China's systemic remodelling of the global economy, security and statecraft.

Australia's policy response to this new era of geostrategic competition has been to boost its security and economic resilience, while defending the global trade system.¹ This shift required a wholesale reset of national policies and capabilities. At the heart of Australia's national resilience strategy is the need to maintain a complex balance between capturing abundant economic opportunities and managing the gravest security threats – both emanating largely from our region, as the engine of global economic growth and the main arena of great-power competition.

This requires the current and new generations of Australia's defence and national security professionals, policymakers, diplomats, aid and climate change specialists to have an in-depth understanding of global and regional politics, economies, cultures and environment.

The paradox is that right when Australia is forced to be on the front foot in Asia, our systemic capacity to educate our leaders about the region is fragmenting. Decades of underinvestment in language and regional studies,² weak institutional frameworks, and a lack of coherent national strategy have created a structural Asia competency deficit.

The deficit is particularly stark in our approach to studying China – Australia's number one trading partner and security challenge. The decline in Australia's China capabilities³ risks leaving our nation overexposed and underprepared managing a complex balance of risks and rewards of engagement with Asia's pre-eminent power.

Yet there is an opportunity: Australia's changing demography, revolutionary advances in technology, youth mobility, and rising interest in Asian culture create a second-track experiential literacy. Directing these natural advantages and acquired skills into a strategic national effort can transform our approach to Asia capabilities from a passive drift by natural forces of demography and geography to an active leadership, based on our competitive advantages as a middle power, a sizeable and dynamic economy and our position as Asia's multicultural powerhouse.

Australia has arguably built the world's most successful and coherent multicultural society – driven in part by progressive immigration, and trade and economic policies of the 1980s and 1990s which correctly recognised the rise of Asian economies and their impact on the global distribution of power. The push for Asia literacy by the Keating Government was a part of that policy thinking.

Asia literacy is not only about how we see Asia, but also how Australia is perceived in our region. Without deep, sustained Asia expertise across government, business and civil society, Australia risks marginalisation and strategic irrelevance in its own neighbourhood.

Asia literacy is not a niche ambition or a soft cultural exercise; it is a central pillar of Australian statecraft. It enables Australia to manage risk, seize economic opportunities, and build durable regional partnerships. Failure to act on Asia literacy now consigns us to an increasingly reactive, second-tier role in shaping the region's future.

1 Address to the Lowy Institute, Sydney. The Hon Dr Jim Chalmers, Minister for Treasury, 1 May 2024, <https://ministers.treasury.gov.au/ministers/jim-chalmers-2022/speeches/address-lowy-institute-sydney>

2 Asian Studies Association of Australia, *Australia's Asia Education Imperative*, November 2022: <https://asaa.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Australias-Asia-Education-Imperative.pdf>

3 Australian Academy of the Humanities, *Australia's China Knowledge Capability*, March 2023: <https://humanities.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Australias-China-Knowledge-Capability-report-1.pdf>

Systemic Deficit in Asia Literacy

The debate about Australia's Asia literacy cuts to the core of our Australian identity⁴ and worldview⁵ as our security landscape, demography and trade flows continue to shift, while our geography remains constant. Yet as Asia's economic power dramatically expanded over the last four decades – and with it our trade and immigration from the region – a sustained measurable breakthrough in Asia literacy never happened.

For the last four decades, Australian political leaders – especially on the centre-left – have been making a case for greater national proficiency about Asia through a steady flow of reports, strategies and speeches.⁶ Yet Australia's institutional efforts to build Asia literacy have faltered; the implementation episodic and underwhelming. Calls for deeper Asia engagement – from Paul Keating to Penny Wong – have given way to a policy vacuum. Successive strategies and reviews have recognised the need for greater Asia capability but failed to deliver systemic change.

The latest report by the Asian Studies Association of Australia, 'Australia's Asia Education Imperative' in 2021, notes a systemic decline in the Commonwealth Government's focus and commitment to Asian language teaching in Australia.⁷ As one senior education leader noted in an interview for this report: "Asia literacy is a luxury when our education system is in crisis", referring to the acute shortage of teachers and the onslaught of new technologies disrupting Australian schools.

The sustained policy effort to integrate Asia capabilities into the Australian education system – which started with Keating Government's visionary National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools Strategy from 1995 to 2002,⁸ and continued under Kevin Rudd's National Asian Languages and Studies in School Program in 2009,⁹ and Julia Gillard's "Australia in the Asian Century White Paper" in 2012¹⁰ – had come to a halt by 2013. The lack of measurable progress has put Asia literacy in the bottom drawer of policy priorities.

The results of this policy failure are well documented by industry leaders and advocates and speak for themselves:¹¹

- According to the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority data compiled by the Australian Consortium for 'In-Country' Indonesian Studies, enrolments in most Asian languages are at their lowest in over a decade and have been in a steady decline since 2010.¹²
- Australia's uptake of second-language learning is among the lowest in the developed world. In a 2018 OECD survey of 15-year-olds, Australia ranked second last out of 64 countries for participation in second language study.¹³ In 2018 only 36% of Year 10 students were learning a language other than English.

The decline in Asia expertise is equally noticeable in higher education. In the last decade, Australian universities have invested next to zero in teaching and research on Asia, despite billions earned in fees from international students, overwhelmingly from the region.

Analysis of Australian Government Department of Education data shows a sustained and significant decline in domestic university enrolments in Asian languages over the past two decades:¹⁴

- **Overall decline:** Enrolments in Eastern, Southeast, and Southern Asian languages have fallen sharply since peaks in the early-mid 2010s, with accelerated drops since 2019.
- **Eastern Asian language enrolments** (Chinese, Japanese, Korean) dropped from around 12,000 students in 2016 to 7,472 in 2023 – a 38% fall.
- **Southeast Asian languages** (Indonesian, Thai, Vietnamese) experienced the steepest proportional decline, from 2,092 students in 2001 to 540 in 2023, now just 0.05% of domestic enrolments. This is despite the Government's ambitious policy agenda for Southeast Asia, including the South East-Asia Economic Strategy.¹⁵
- **Southern Asian languages** (Hindi, Urdu) are almost non-existent in our education system, despite a substantial wave of migration from the region, peaking at just over 150 students in the mid-2010s, falling to 48 in 2023.
- **Pandemic impact:** COVID-era disruptions accelerated existing declines across all Asian language groups.

Australian universities continue to close their existing Asian studies programs.¹⁶ The latest closure of the Indonesian languages program was announced by the University of Tasmania in May this year.¹⁷ The Australian National University is a lonely stand-out with the largest concentration of Asian studies and Asia policy expertise in the country. Beyond Canberra, individual academics and a handful of small university centres produce excellent research and teaching about Asia. The most dynamic of them – for example, La Trobe Asia – also actively engaged in public policy and national debates about the region. But these centres are modestly funded, and their core mission is often inward-looking: showcasing everything their universities do on Asia. Universities blame the Government for lack of funding and Australian students for a disinterest in Asia. Governments accuse the sector of not fulfilling its social license and serving national interest. And so, the blame game goes on.

Asia literacy naturally extends beyond our education system. It is meant to be a part of our national debate and policy contestation. Yet established Australian policy think-tanks have curiously thin expertise on Asia. Apart from individual experts who are world-class, there are no dedicated think tank programs on security, defence or economic policy covering Japan, Korea, Indonesia or India.

4 National Library of Australia, *The Australia-Asia relationship: An account of selected reactions to Asian immigration since 1945*: <https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/catalog/2891241>

5 National Library of Australia, *Australia's Asian contexts*: <https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/catalog/7294421>

6 China Heritage Project, *Australia and Asia: Essays and Documents*: http://chinaheritagequarterly.org/articles.php?searchterm=019_australia_asia_inc&issue=019

7 Asian Studies Association of Australia, *Australia's Asia Education Imperative*, November 2022: <https://asaa.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Australias-Asia-Education-Imperative.pdf>

8 Australian National University, *Australia needs to learn to listen in Asia, literally*: <https://www.policyforum.net/australia-needs-to-learn-to-listen-in-asia-literally/>

9 Henderson, Deborah. "A Strategy Cut-short: The NALSAS Strategy for Asian Languages in Australia." *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2007, pp. 4–22.

10 Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Australia in the Asian Century*, 2012: <https://apo.org.au/node/31647>

11 Australian National University, *Australia needs to learn to listen in Asia, literally*: <https://www.policyforum.net/australia-needs-to-learn-to-listen-in-asia-literally/>

12 Australian Consortium for 'In-Country' Indonesian Studies, *ACARA Year 12 Languages Enrolments National Data*, 29 July 2025: https://www.acicis.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/20250729_ACARA_Year-12-Languages-Enrolments_NATIONAL.pdf

13 OECD, *PISA 2018 Results (Volume VI)*: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/pisa-2018-results-volume-vi_d5f68679-en.html

14 Australian Consortium for 'In-Country' Indonesian Studies, *2001-2023 EFTSL Data Languages*, 12 November 2024: https://www.acicis.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/20241112_2001-2023_EFTSL-DATA_LANGUAGES_DECK.pdf

15 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *South East-Asia Economic Strategy*: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/southeastasiaeconomicstrategy>

16 Asian Studies Association of Australia, *Statement on closure of Asian language programs at Murdoch and Swinburne Universities*, December 2020: <https://asaa.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Statement-on-closure-of-Asian-language-programs-at-Murdoch-and-Swinburne-Universities-final.pdf>

17 Australian Broadcasting Corporation, *Australia shrinking Asia literacy universities job keeper*, 28 July 2021: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-07-28/australia-shrinking-asia-literacy-universities-job-keeper/100298350>

There are exceptions. Perth USAsia Centre – the only Australian think tank in Australia that has the word “Asia” in its name (sitting tightly and comfortably after the “US”) – produces excellent research on economic and strategic trends in the Indo-Pacific, with a strong American and Western Australian perspective. The United States Studies Centre, under the leadership of Professor Mike Green (a Japan specialist) has expanded its Indo-Pacific policy research agenda with a sustained focus on Japan, filling a stark gap in the Australian think tank scene. The modestly funded Australia-India Institute is the only policy institution doing serious work on India – despite India being hailed as a national priority by successive Australian governments.¹⁸ The newly created Australia-Vietnam Policy Institute at RMIT is the first concerted effort to fill a gap on one of our most critical relationships in Southeast Asia.

Australian media reporting on Asia is also underwhelming.¹⁹ Except for the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), the Australian media coverage of international affairs is dominated by news from the United States and Europe. The number of Australian journalists in the region continues to decline.²⁰ For a wealthy G20 country facing existential security challenges in its region and reliant on trade with Asia, Australia’s foreign policy and media discourse on Asia remains woefully shallow.

“We must invest in our own deep and direct relationships throughout our region and beyond... And we have a huge advantage in that task - quite simply because of who we are. A modern, multicultural nation, home to the oldest continuing civilisation in the world. And more than 300 ancestries, reflecting every corner of our world.... Our challenge is to take this ability and make it central to how we engage with the world.”

— Minister for Foreign Affairs Penny Wong, August 2024

18 At the time of writing, Lowy Institute announced the establishment of the inaugural India Chair and the India Program, funded by the Australian Government: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/about/careers>

19 Australian Broadcasting Corporation, *Drew Ambrose reporting from Asia, Late Night Live*: <https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/latenightlive/drew-ambrose-reporting-from-asia/104592374>

20 Australian Strategic Policy Institute, *Investment in media coverage is vital to Australia's engagement with Asia*: <https://www.aspist-rategist.org.au/investment-in-media-coverage-is-vital-to-australias-engagement-with-asia/>

Case Study: China Illiterate

In the field of China studies, the gradual erosion of expertise is particularly striking.²¹

The Australian Academy of the Humanities report ‘Australia’s China Knowledge Capability’ finds the field fragmented and depleted: “the fundamental challenge for our China knowledge capability is that the whole adds up to so much less than the parts”.²² The report calls for a new national strategy to arrest the decline in Australia’s China competency – a highly unlikely prospect given the sensitivities of the China relationship and other urgent policy priorities.

The 2024 Independent Review of Commonwealth funding for strategic policy work by Peter Varghese reached a depressing conclusion: “Australia’s falling China expertise is a systemic failure. Across our 40 universities we produce no more than five graduates in any one year with an Honours degree in Chinese studies with language”.²³

In strategic policy research, China expertise is remarkably scarce. The recent attempts to create a dedicated Australian think tank or a policy-relevant university centre on China have failed. China Matters fell victim to partisan politics.²⁴ The Centre for China in the World at ANU – which received an astonishing amount of funding from the Commonwealth Government during the first Rudd prime ministership²⁵ – has largely retreated from the public policy space into purely academic research.

The Australia Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) and the Australia-China Relations Institute (ACRI) have emerged

to shape Australia’s China policy debate. Each represents an extreme end of it, but without them, Australia’s debate on China would be devoid of substance.

Apart from ASPI and ACRI, the China policy field today is deserted — of voices, ideas and funding. This is despite Australia’s track record of producing world-class China scholars and analysts, such as Wang Gungwu, Chris Buckley, John Fitzgerald, Jane Golley, Kevin Rudd, Louise Edwards, and many others.

At the same time, from Washington to Berlin, from Singapore to Seoul, governments, businesses and universities continued investing in China expertise. Australia’s former prime minister and leading global China watcher Kevin Rudd has built one of America’s largest China centres at Asia Society.²⁶ In 2025, the new Institute for America, China, and the Future of Global Affairs opened at John Hopkins University.²⁷ The Council of Foreign Relations,²⁸ the Hudson Institute²⁹ and RAND³⁰ are likewise building up their China expertise. In the UK³¹ and continental Europe³² there is a growing recognition of the need to invest in China expertise in government, universities, think tanks and corporations.

This debate does not exist in Australia. Having declared China as its most complex geopolitical challenge, Australia has largely stopped short of building viable and policy-relevant institutions and programs that support vital research, education and outreach about our number one trading partner and chief geostrategic challenger.

21 John Menadue, *China studies in crisis: time for change*, May 2024: <https://johnmenadue.com/post/2024/05/china-studies-in-crisis-time-for-change/>

22 Australian Academy of the Humanities, *Australia’s China Knowledge Capability*, March 2023: <https://humanities.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Australias-China-Knowledge-Capability-report-1.pdf>

23 Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Independent Review of Commonwealth funding for strategic policy work*, 2024: <https://www.pmc.gov.au/resources/independent-review-commonwealth-funding-strategic-policy-work>

24 Inside Story, *Think-tanked*: <https://insidestory.org.au/think-tanked/>

25 Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Transcript 17242*: <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-17242>

26 Asia Society, *Center for China Analysis*: <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/center-china-analysis>

27 Johns Hopkins SAIS, *Institute for America, China, and the Future of Global Affairs*: <https://acf.sais.jhu.edu/getting-china-right.html>

28 Council on Foreign Relations, *China Strategy Initiative*: <https://www.cfr.org/initiative/china-strategy>

29 Hudson Institute, *Hudson Institute launches new China Center*: <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/hudson-institute-launches-new-china-center>

30 RAND Corporation, *Tang Institute*: <https://www.rand.org/global-and-emerging-risks/centers/international/tang-institute.html>

31 Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, *Reimagining the UK’s China Capabilities: A Joined-Up Approach to an “Epoch-Defining Challenge”*, 2024 <https://institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/reimagining-the-uks-china-capabilities-a-joined-up-approach-to-an-epoch-defining-challenge>

32 The Diplomat, *Europe’s dangerous gap in China expertise*, July 2025: <https://thediplomat.com/2025/07/europes-dangerous-gap-in-china-expertise/>

Second Track Literacy

Despite the policy and education system inertia, the grinding work of Asia literacy continues — driven by enthusiastic and committed policy champions, advocates and increasingly our young people.

Asia advocacy organisations such as Asialink and Asia Society continue to build deeper Asia awareness in business, government and communities outside Canberra, despite the constant stress of shifting policy priorities and diminishing funding. Both institutions are looking for a new vision amidst the geopolitical upheaval and securitisation of Australian foreign and economic policy. Their relevance will be severely tested by the intensification of geopolitical competition and economic fragmentation. But their role as Asia literacy ecosystem builders is critically important.

The Turnbull and Albanese Governments deserve credit for **maintaining policy focus** on India³³ and Southeast Asia.³⁴ The India and Southeast Asia economic strategies led respectively by Peter Varghese AO and Nicholas Moore AO are delivering tangible economic outcomes and lifting risk acceptance and capabilities of our firms. They have been successful in mobilising the resources of government, the private sector and industry bodies in a coherent “Team Australia” approach to raise awareness, build capabilities and generate a positive momentum in economic engagement with India and Southeast Asia.

A new generation of Australians are also getting involved. Interest in **Asia-focused outbound scholarships** like the New Colombo Plan³⁵ and Westpac Asian Exchange Scholarship³⁶ remain consistently high. Volunteer-based bilateral and multilateral **youth dialogues** are thriving, providing supportive networks to young Australians interested in Asia.³⁷

While it is hard to measure, there are signs our collective cultural intelligence about Asia and connectivity with the region are improving through migration, technology and mobility. Where our formal education system has failed to deliver, demography, mobility and technology have stepped in.

First, Australian demographics are rapidly changing, fuelled by migration flows from East and South Asia. Australia’s Asian diaspora has expanded dramatically, creating a powerful new vector of engagement that largely bypasses the Australian “elite” and media focus. Knowledge embedded in Australia’s Asian diasporas is no substitute for formal education about the region. But it naturally changes the scale and depth of interactions between Australia and Asia, contributing to a deeper inherent cultural intelligence in our community.³⁸

Second, the **technological revolution** and recent progress in artificial intelligence (AI) are transforming language learning, translation and interpretation.³⁹ A growing number of studies confirm that AI-supported tools and programs, when led by human educators, are significantly improving language learning outcomes.⁴⁰ While AI will never replace the depth of human communications, it makes foreign language acquisition

far more accessible. The proliferation of Asian internet platforms, along with a growing interest in Asian popular culture, gaming, food and travel, has created a robust new channel of experiential learning and engagement with Asia.

Demography and technology have created an autopilot to Asia literacy, which we must learn to harness.

Finally, there have been notable **private, federal and state government investments** in Asia competency, such as:

- Asialink Business
- The New Colombo Plan
- Westpac Asian Exchange scholarships
- Expanded and better resourced bilateral councils in DFAT (National Foundation for Australia-China Relations Centre for Australia-India Relations, and the ASEAN-Australia Centre)
- Victorian Government’s partnership with Asia Society
- Capability initiatives under the Southeast Asia Economic Strategy.

In the Australian context, these are not insignificant commitments. It shows that with the right champions in government and the private sector, progress is possible.

Scholarships for Australian students to study in Asia have been particularly impactful in providing opportunities for young Australians to experience Asia and develop foundational linguistic and cultural intelligence, as well as professional and personal networks in the region.

On the surface, the Australia-Asia ecosystem is bigger and more crowded. But it’s also more fragmented, and the impact is often less than the sum of its collective efforts. What’s missing is a long-term national strategy, policy consistency, and predictable funding.

“Recent reforms to the New Colombo Plan will ensure the program supports Australia’s strategic objectives to deepen engagement in our region and lift the capability of our people. These reforms include a greater emphasis on students learning languages and undertaking longer-term study experiences in the Indo-Pacific, and augment our reputation for world-class international education.”

- *Australia in the World 2025 Snapshot*

“While we have strong people-to-people links, an enduring challenge in both Australia and Southeast Asia is limited familiarity with each other’s economies, societies, business environments and market opportunities. Addressing this challenge will require a whole-of-nation effort across Commonwealth and state and territory governments, universities, the private sector, not-for-profits and communities. Increasing cultural literacy and capability is key to realising the breadth of opportunities in Southeast Asia.”

- *Australia’s Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040*

33 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *India Economic Strategy*: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/trade-and-investment/india-economic-strategy/ies/introduction.html>

34 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *South East-Asia Economic Strategy*: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/southeastasiaeconomicstrategy>

35 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *New Colombo Plan*: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/people-to-people/new-colombo-plan/about>

36 Westpac Scholars, *Asian Exchange Scholarship*: <https://scholars.westpac.com.au/scholarships/asian-exchange-scholarship/>

37 Asia Society, *Australia-Asia Youth Organisations Directory*: https://asiasociety.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/Australia-Asia_Youth_Organisations_Directory.pdf

38 Asia Society Australia, *Embracing Asia starts at home*: <https://disruptiveasia.asiasociety.org/embracing-asia-starts-at-home>

39 Yu Yuxiu, *Application of translation technology based on AI in translation teaching*, *Systems and Soft Computing*, Volume 6, 2024 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2772941924000012>; Centre for Economic Policy Research, *Lost in translation? AI’s impact on translators and foreign language skills*: <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/lost-translation-ais-impact-translators-and-foreign-language-skills>

40 Divekar, R. R., Drozdal, J., Chabot, S., Zhou, Y., Su, H., Chen, Y., Braasch, J. (2021). *Foreign language acquisition via artificial intelligence and extended reality: design and evaluation*. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 35(9), 2332–2360. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2021.1879162>; Xiu-Yi Wu, *Artificial Intelligence in L2 learning: A meta-analysis of contextual, instructional, and social-emotional moderators*, *System*, Volume 126, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2024.103498>

Reimagining Asia Literacy

In 2025, Australia asks whether decades of investment in Asia literacy were worth it. The answer is clear: yes, more than ever.

The case for Asia literacy looks even stronger today than in the 1990s. Australia's security and prosperity are even more dependent on how we and our Asian neighbours navigate this new age of fragmentation and great-power competition. The Trump turmoil will likely push Australia towards more self-reliance and independence in foreign policy and defence. Trade and investment diversification will be even more important. Security alliances and economic partnerships in Asia with like-minded countries like Japan, Korea and India will be central to these efforts.

Asia is central to Australia's self-reliance. More than ever, Australia needs education, policy and civil society institutions working in partnership with governments, business and community to help our nation grasp opportunities and manage risks of a rapidly changing global order. Across regional capitals preoccupied with great-power competition, tariffs and protectionism, the Australian voice will need to be stronger and more authoritative to get the attention of Asian leaders and elites.

Asia-literate leaders such as Kevin Rudd, Frances Adamson, Tim Watts, Penny Wong, Ted O'Brien, and Shemara Wikramanayake add to our credibility and strengthen our influence as a regional player – and we need many more like them.

WHERE TO NEXT?

Firstly, a new national strategy for Asia literacy must start with **examining successes and failures** of the last forty years. We have made progress in experiential learning about Asia and harnessing mobility, demography and diasporic intelligence, but our education system has largely failed to uplift our Asia expertise.

Secondly, we must **redefine what Asia literacy means for Australia** in the 21st century.

The fundamentals of Asia literacy remain unchanged and were articulated well by a senior Australian government official interviewed for this report with direct responsibilities for advising the Government on Asia: an experiential and academic knowledge of history, geography, economy, politics, society and cultures of Asia, enriched by knowledge of Asian languages.

With this definition as a foundation, Asia capabilities in today's Australia will also need to encompass:

- *Experiential and professional literacy* — among Australian exporters, entrepreneurs, think tankers and creative industry practitioners engaging with Asia.
- *Diasporic literacy* — cultural and familial links embedded in Australian migrant communities now forming an integral part of Australian culture, identity, economy and society.
- *Technology and social media literacy* — borderless content and communication flows through social media, artificial intelligence and gaming, connecting young Australians with counterparts in Asia.
- *Literacy through mobility* — growth in international business, professional, lifestyle and academic mobility creating a cohort of Australians who experience Asia through short and medium-term visits.

These elements must converge in **one coherent strategy**. The key will be ensuring multiple tracks of Asia capacity-building complement and reinforce each other. The successful example of the Southeast Asia Economic Strategy shows that with political will, resources and focus on delivery, real progress can be achieved on such a complex issue as Australia's trade and investment connectivity with Southeast Asia.

There are other examples where the alignment of policy, resources and delivery can be impactful. The review of the New Colombo Plan is another opportunity to connect the program with other elements of our Asia engagement infrastructure. The push for cultural diversity in Australian leadership needs to accelerate. Having more Asian Australians in positions of power in our Parliament, universities and corporate boardrooms will enrich the quality of our national leadership and improve governance and decision-making. This process has already started with a record number of MPs and Senators of East and South Asian heritage entering Parliament in both the 2022⁴¹ and 2025⁴² federal elections.

Asia literacy is not only about understanding our neighbours. It's also about **knowing our communities**. It has a direct impact on our social cohesion and the success of Australian multiculturalism. The more our judges and police officers, politicians and public servants, teachers and nurses know about our Asian Australian communities, the stronger and more resilient we become.

Through **harnessing artificial intelligence** and advancements in translation technologies we can transform how Australian learners perceive and approach foreign languages. Combined with traditional education and experiential learning, AI could finally overturn Australia's stubbornly monolingual character.

Above all, funding for Asia capability programs must be **streamlined and connected**. Too often Australia has invested significant resources into policy ideas without long-term sustainability strategies. The investments in Asialink Business, the New Colombo Plan, Australian Centre for China in the World and other landmark Asia initiatives were significant. Their impact will hopefully be long-lasting. But little effort was made to connect these initiatives in a coherent national plan addressing skill gaps and talent requirements for Asia expertise.

Thirdly, we must **move beyond supply-side policies** for development of Asia expertise. The debate about Asia literacy since the 1990s focused almost entirely on the provision of Asia literacy programs, while demand remained consistently low. This policy challenge was long recognised by organisations such as Asialink and remains a reality today.⁴³ Bridging the gap between supply and demand will be critical. We must create incentives for young Australians to take up Asian languages and pursue education and careers in the region.

Finally, an Asia literacy strategy requires **national leadership and bipartisan consensus**. The policy landscape for Asia-Australia relations has changed dramatically under the weight of China's rise and its competition with the United States, economic fragmentation and now the realignment of the US foreign and economic policies under President Trump. Carving a space for Asia capability-building will be hard as Australia is forced to prioritise defence and economic spending. The hard work of crafting a national strategy may have to start outside Canberra. But any future Asia literacy strategy must be deeply integrated with our security, diplomatic and economic agenda. Otherwise, Asia literacy risks being seen as a self-indulgent pursuit by idealists out of touch with reality.

41 Elias Clure, "Australia's 47th Parliament Features New, More Diverse Faces, Marking Turning Point in Political Representation", *ABC News*, 23 May 2022: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-05-23/federal-parliament-new-diverse-representatives/101092182>

42 Jonathan Pearlman, "Asian-Australian MPs Set to Rise in Canberra as Parliament Make-up Changes," *The Straits Times*, 24 May 2025: <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/australianz/number-of-asian-australian-mps-to-rise-in-canberra-as-parliament-make-up-changes>

43 Asialink, *Building Demand for Asia Literacy in Australian Schools*, June 2013: https://assets.asialink.unimelb.edu.au/2024-08/31_36-What-Works-report-no.1.pdf

Pathways to Progress

The new approach to Asia literacy must carry the same urgency and sustained ambition as Australia's commitment to improve its Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) capabilities. It must start with the recognition that Asia capability is not a finite project with a pre-defined result, but a multigenerational national undertaking – a permanent feature of our education, policy and socioeconomic system. It should be embedded as “business as usual,” underpinning our economic resilience, diplomacy and social cohesion.

The first step is to **undertake a comprehensive national Asia capability audit to establish a clear picture of where Australia stands** – identifying strengths, gaps, and priority areas. Armed with this evidence, Asia literacy must be reframed as an economic and security imperative at the highest levels of government. Political leadership will be essential. Asia literacy should be championed at cabinet level and given a remit, weight and resources – at the very least it should be nominated as a responsibility of a relevant Assistant Foreign or Education Minister.

The government, with support from the opposition, Greens and independents, should **commission a bipartisan National Asia Capability Strategy, reinforced by an annual statement to Parliament on the state of Asia literacy**. This would provide both direction and accountability. The New Colombo Plan, initiated by Julie Bishop and continued by the subsequent Labor governments, shows that a long-term, bipartisan commitment to a nation-building initiative is possible to achieve in Australia.

Within the public sector, **Asia capability should be embedded in recruitment, promotion and training of public service, defence and national security leaders**. Regional literacy should be entrenched into the programs delivered by the Australian Defence Force and its academies, the Australian Public Service Commission's APS Academy, State public service commissions, and the Australia and New Zealand School of Government.

The government should **encourage and incentivise key industry peak bodies** – the Business Council of Australia, Australian Institute of Company Directors, Australian Industry Group, Governance Institute of Australia, Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and others to integrate Asia capabilities in their training, mentorship and advocacy programs.

Australia should **establish its own prestigious, merit-based, multidisciplinary program of outbound and inbound senior fellowships** for policymakers, business leaders, and civil society practitioners, enabling short but high-impact professional exchanges between current and emerging leaders from across Australia and Asia. The Fellowship program would be distinctly Australian, but would draw inspiration from the success of such programs in the US – such as the Maurice R. Greenberg World Fellows Program,⁴⁴ Asia 21 Next Generation Fellows,⁴⁵ International Visitor Leadership Program⁴⁶ and Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Centre Residency Program⁴⁷ – in cultivating vital personal and professional connections between future leaders.

Board appointments to government-funded institutions should meet cultural diversity targets to reflect Australia's multicultural identity – from DFAT foundations and national museums to university councils and government advisory boards. National recognition of Asian Australian leadership through media, cultural, and educational initiatives will help shift public attitudes and inspire future leaders.

A combination of policy tools, regulatory measures and funding incentives will be needed to lower structural barriers to Asia literacy in the Australian education and policy ecosystems. It can start with the **creation of a “List of Critical Capabilities in the National Interest”** – modelled on the List of Critical Technologies in the National Interest,⁴⁸ to recognise Asia literacy as a foundational national skill.

Funding models should be reformed to support Asia literacy programs in universities, schools and think tanks. For example, a funding distribution model for strategic policy research proposed by the Varghese Review⁴⁹ can be extended to Asia advocacy organisations (such as Asialink, Asia Society, bilateral business councils and youth organisations) to create an equitable, predictable and merit-based funding base for these organisations. The multiyear funding to Asialink Education (formerly Asia Education Foundation) should be reinstated to support its mission as a national centre for Asia literacy in Australian schools

Universities should be incentivised to reinvest in Asian studies by linking international student visa caps and other Commonwealth regulatory levers to measurable commitments by universities to teaching and research on Asia.

Targeted investments can yield immediate impact. **New Centres of Excellence could be established in strategically important areas** such as: Australia–Japan defence cooperation, Australia–Korea energy transition, and Australia–Vietnam marine economy and security. Competitively funded Chairs of area studies – for China, Japan, Indonesia, Korea, and other priority countries – would ensure sustained academic expertise.

Prioritising Asia-focused research in the Australian Research Council's grant funding streams will add another layer of support and stimulus to home-grown Asian studies experts.

Tax, philanthropic and regulatory incentives should be created to attract private co-investment, drawing inspiration from successful models, such as the University of Melbourne–Myer Foundation partnership that led to the establishment of Asialink,⁵⁰ the BHP Chair of Australian Studies at Beijing University,⁵¹ or the Judith Neilson Institute's funding for a resident Southeast Asia correspondent for the Australian Financial Review.⁵²

To sum up, **Australia must make Asia literacy a whole-of-nation⁵³ endeavour** – a critical skill, a viable career path and a core element of our national identity. It will have to start with a vision, but it will succeed only when policies, institutions and funding work in unison. By maintaining long-term investments, aligning incentives, and treating Asia capability as an essential element of our national intellectual infrastructure – on par with STEM – Australia can cultivate a leadership class and institutional culture equipped to navigate our region with confidence, competence, and credibility.

The scope and depth of our engagement with Asia has dramatically expanded in the last four decades. On key metrics of trade, immigration, tourism and education mobility, Australia and Asia are deeply interconnected. Beneath these measures of connectivity lie deeper currents of diasporic links, proliferation of Asian cultures in Australia, technological convergence and energy and capital flows that make Australia an integral part of Asia. Asia literacy should be seen as a part of these transformational trends – not a project with an expiry date and static result. For Australia, knowing Asia must be business as usual – a continuing national priority that harnesses our natural advantages and acquired capabilities.

Australia is not alone and illiterate in Asia. The choice we face today is not about retreating from or doubling down on Asia and our quest to understand the region better. It's whether we can be an influential, competent and proactive member of the regional community, or a laggard resting on laurels of geography, demography and history.

44 Yale World Fellows: <https://worldfellows.yale.edu/>

45 Asia Society, *Asia 21 Next Generation Fellows*: <https://asiasociety.org/asia-21-next-generation-fellows>

46 U.S. Department of State, *International Visitor Leadership Program*: <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/program/international-visitor-leadership-program-ivlp>

47 Rockefeller Foundation, *Bellagio Centre Residency Program*: <https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/fellowships-convenings/bellagio-center/residency-program/>

48 Australian Government, Department of Industry, Science and Resources, *List of Critical Technologies in the National Interest*: <https://www.industry.gov.au/publications/list-critical-technologies-national-interest>

49 Australian Government, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Independent Review of Commonwealth funding for strategic policy work*: <https://www.pmc.gov.au/resources/independent-review-commonwealth-funding-strategic-policy-work>

50 Myer Foundation, *Asialink*: <https://www.myerfoundation.org.au/our-impacts/asialink>

51 BHP, *BHP Billiton sponsors new Chair of Australian Studies at Peking University in China*, 21 April 2011: <https://www.bhp.com/news/media-centre/releases/2011/04/bhp-billiton-sponsors-new-chair-of-australian-studies-at-pekings-university-in-china>

52 Australian Financial Review, *Judith Neilson Institute to support another year of South East Asia reporting*, 25 November 2020: <https://www.afr.com/world/asia/judith-neilson-institute-to-support-another-year-of-south-east-asia-reporting-20201125-p56hs4>

53 Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue, *What does it look like for Australia to take a whole-of-nation approach to international policy* (Canberra 2024): <https://asiapacific4d.com/idea/whole-of-nation/>



About the Author

Philipp Ivanov is the Founder and CEO of GRASP (Geopolitical Risks & Strategy Practice), a specialist advisory firm helping companies, governments and universities and their leaders navigate global disruption, mitigate geopolitical risk and build institutional resilience. Prior to that he was Global Chief Programming Officer of Asia Society and CEO of Asia Society Australia from 2015 to 2024. A globally recognised expert on China and China-Russia relations, Philipp has been published in New York Times, Financial Times, South China Morning Post, Bloomberg, Foreign Policy, and The Australian Financial Review. A passionate advocate for Asia literacy, he was one of the main authors of the Australia in the Asian Century White Paper – China Country Strategy, co-led the Business Council of Australia’s National Asia Taskforce, and founded and co-edited the 5-volume Disruptive Asia essay series. He speaks fluent Chinese and Russian.