

## Standing Committee on Education

### Inquiry into building Asia capability in Australia through the education system and beyond

Policymakers are acutely aware that Australia faces challenges to its security and prosperity. At the same time, shifting economic, diplomatic and military weight in the Indo-Pacific means that Australia's influence will decline in relative terms – all while the government endures a constrained fiscal environment.

This demands a more coherent and coordinated statecraft from Australia, one that can do more with relatively less by realising the multiplying effects of various instruments and actors working together in concert. This [whole-of-nation](#) approach recognises that global engagement is not just done by Australia's core international policy actors, but is the role of a far wider constituency.

Whole-of-nation language carries a sense of urgency that Australia's people, economy, society and public institutions must become more alert to their role in the international sphere and better organise themselves to meet these exceptionally challenging times. This will require that the depth and diversity of Australia's resources, assets and capabilities — across both the state and civil society — be identified, harnessed and applied to secure our future, in a way that increases their productivity and effective service of Australia's objectives.

This whole-of-nation approach is particularly pertinent with respect to Asia capability and literacy, with several respected analysts [recently warning](#) Australia is facing an immediate crisis. A [recent report](#) published by AP4D notes that 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. There currently exists a clear whole-of-nation opportunity for Australia to redefine Asia literacy for the 21st century — integrating these alternative pathways together with the education system.

*The Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue (AP4D) creates a new dimension in Australia's international policymaking by bringing together the development, diplomacy and defence communities to achieve new insights, develop new ideas and promote strategic collaboration around shared interests. It is a platform for ideas that encourage more integrated statecraft to maximise Australia's ability to influence regional and global developments.*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **What would it look like for Australia to take a whole-of-nation approach to Asia capability?**

#### Education

Education is a critical tool of statecraft in how Australia engages with the world. There is the opportunity to make quality education geared towards both Asia literacy and future skill sets a national ambition. A whole-of-nation approach would see Australia develop a more coherent method to how it develops these capabilities across schools, vocational education and universities, with a keener recognition of how these feed into industry and government.

Neighbourhood literacy also assists with social cohesion and better aligning the country with its current – and emerging – demographics. It helps to correlate Australia's foreign policy with its internal perspectives and knowledge.

A whole-of-nation approach would have a greater awareness of future industries and the educational pathways that lead to them. It presents an opportunity to identify the industries that Australia will require for the future, how these industries relate to the country's economic and security interests and environmental responsibilities, and how Australia's education systems can best facilitate these desired outcomes.

The New Colombo Plan and Building Relationships through Intercultural Dialogue and Growing Engagement (BRIDGE) School Partnerships Program are both examples of existing Asia capability programs that are designed and delivered in a cross-sector way. These provide models and lessons that can be replicated in developing other whole-of-nation approaches.

#### Beyond the education system

A whole-of-nation approach encourages a focus on a range of groups as vectors for international engagement. Australians see themselves as active in the world, both as individuals as well as associations and groups that work globally. They are often interested and energetic, but this is not harnessed as effectively as it could be.

A whole-of-nation approach can coordinate this activity to drive clear and tangible results, tied to Asia capability and Asia literacy goals. This requires a shared vision and objectives for what Australia's Asia engagement is trying to achieve. From there the opportunity flows to understand the unique skill sets that different groups can contribute. The key is to provide a vision for groups to understand and embrace.

#### Include Pacific literacy

The Pacific will always be an area of great strategic significance for Australia. There are opportunities to increase people-to-people engagement through increasing Australians' Pacific literacy. Promoting education, civil society and peer-to-peer linkages to increase knowledge of the Pacific among Australians will help create more mutual relationships. It supports enhanced movement of Pacific people and increased economic flows in both directions.