

Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education Inquiry into the Development of Asia Capability within Our Nation

**Submitted by:
Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA)**

Introduction

The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into the Development of Asia Capability within our nation.

APPA represents over 7,600 primary school principals across Australia, including government, Catholic, and independent sectors. As the leaders of our nation's primary schools, principals play a critical role in shaping the learning experiences of young Australians - experiences that form the foundation for understanding, engaging with, and valuing our place in the Asia region.

Building Asia capability is not a single initiative; it is a long-term national project that must begin in early learning and primary education and be sustained through to adulthood. Primary schools are uniquely positioned to foster curiosity, empathy, and intercultural understanding, the essential dispositions for Australia's ongoing engagement with Asia.

1. The Importance of Asia Capability

Asia is central to Australia's future. For young Australians, developing Asia capability means understanding the histories, beliefs, languages, and cultures of the nations within Asia, and recognising our shared challenges and opportunities. As ACARA notes, this knowledge builds empathy, respect, and confidence, enabling students to live, work, and contribute in an increasingly interconnected world.

2. The Role of the Australian Curriculum

The Australian Curriculum Version 9 provides two key frameworks that underpin Asia capability:

- The **Cross-Curriculum Priority: Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia**, and
- The **General Capability: Intercultural Understanding**.

Together, these promote:

- **Knowing Asia and its diversity**: appreciating the experiences, stories, and perspectives across the region.

- **Understanding Asia’s global significance:** recognising the influence and contribution of Asian nations in shaping the world.
- **Growing Asia–Australia engagement:** encouraging active and respectful relationships through cultural, linguistic, and social connections.

Intercultural Understanding, organised around *reflecting on culture and diversity, engaging with cultural and linguistic diversity, and navigating intercultural contexts*, ensures students develop empathy, perspective-taking, and the ability to respond to bias or prejudice. These are not abstract skills; they are life competencies that underpin social cohesion and international collaboration.

3. Structural Enablers and Barriers

Enablers

1. **Funded professional learning for teachers:**
Sustained investment in teacher capability is essential. Teachers need opportunities to deepen their understanding of Asia and build confidence in teaching Asian perspectives and languages.
2. **Teacher and school exchange programs:**
Streamlined, well-funded programs for school leaders and teachers to participate in cultural and professional exchanges across Asia would enrich learning and strengthen understanding. Efficient and timebound processes for applications and travel approvals are essential.
3. **Digital technologies to connect schools:**
The use of tele-teachers and virtual exchanges can bridge geographic isolation, allowing students and educators in rural or remote areas to engage with Asia-focused learning and peer-to-peer collaboration. Funded educator positions to manage the logistics is required.
4. **Whole-of-government messaging:**
Consistent communication from government agencies that values Asia capability as a national priority would strengthen community understanding and support. These should include FAQs for families and the broader community as well as positive messaging promoting the benefits of children having cultural literacies and capabilities.

Barriers

1. **Workforce shortages and continuity challenges:**
Many schools struggle to access qualified language teachers, particularly in regional and remote areas. Even when programs begin successfully, teacher movement often disrupts continuity, reducing the likelihood of sustained student proficiency.
2. **Competing demands on teacher time:**
Teachers face significant pressures from mandatory professional learning in literacy, numeracy, wellbeing, compliance, and safety. While Asia capability is valued, it competes for scarce time



and resources. All schools have the same amount of time in a day; if time is spent on this, there needs to be the recognition and acceptance of the need to stop doing something else. Job demands need to be matched with job resources.

3. **Limited access to professional development funding:**

Without financial support for training, exchanges, or immersion opportunities, interest alone is insufficient to sustain engagement. Dedicated and funded time for professional learning is essential.

4. **Complex and time intensive paperwork:**

Paperwork for event / excursion/ exchange planning and approvals should be evaluated for efficiency. It should support participation and not be a barrier to it.

5. **Fragmented governance arrangements:**

Differing state and territory responsibilities, alongside federal policy fragmentation, create barriers to consistent national implementation and tracking of Asia capability outcomes.

6. **Community understanding of why Asia capability building is important:**

Questioning relevance of this in the curriculum and expressed racist views are barriers to teacher and school participation.

4. Current Practice and Good Models

Across primary schools, there are many examples of strong practice:

- **Asian language programs** (particularly in Japanese, Indonesian, and Mandarin) offer structured pathways for language learning.
- **Cultural celebrations and partnerships** foster connection with Asian diaspora communities within Australia.
- **Digital partnerships** with schools in Asia allow for shared projects and intercultural communication.

However, such initiatives are often leader-dependent and fragile. APPA notes that sustaining Asia capability requires system-level supports, not isolated school effort.

5. Opportunities for Reform and Strengthened Engagement

To build Asia capability across the life course, APPA recommends:

1. **Clear messaging about the importance of a national strategy for Asia capability** across early learning to tertiary education ensuring that it is a valued component of teacher practice and leadership development.



2. **Developing a national network of Asia-capable educators and school leaders** to share resources, research, and exemplars. This requires funded facilities to remove additional burdens from the teacher workforce.
3. **Creating incentives and recognition for schools** demonstrating interest, as well as innovation and excellence in Asia capability and intercultural learning. Provide structured opportunities for the exchange of information and to build momentum.
4. **Ensuring curriculum time and resourcing** are preserved for languages and intercultural understanding, even amid other national priorities.
5. **Highlight opportunities in Initial Teacher Education** for teachers to develop confidence as specialist language teachers and promote innovative models of language delivery to primary schools.

6. Conclusion

Developing Asia capability is both a cultural and economic imperative for Australia's future. It begins in the primary years when curiosity and empathy are most naturally developed.

Primary principals and teachers are ready to nurture this learning, but they need the enabling structures - time, resources, professional learning, and sustained policy commitment - to do so effectively.

APPA supports a national vision where every child has opportunity to understand Asia, value cultural diversity, and engage confidently with our regional neighbours. Building this capability across the life course will strengthen our communities, our workforce, and our place in the world.

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