UNIVERSITIES AUSTRALIA

Submission to Building Asia capability in Australia through the education system and beyond

Universities Australia (UA) recognises the significant and enduring relationship between Asia and Australia, strengthened by our 39 comprehensive universities. Australian universities are closely engaged with Asia through language and regional studies, international education, exchange opportunities, research collaborations and partnerships. Many of Australia's foremost experts in Asian languages, culture, religion, politics and society are employed as academics, teaching the next generation of Asia experts and building understanding of our closest neighbours.

Despite the critical importance of Asia capability to Australia's future prosperity and security, there has been a systematic decline in university enrolments in Asian languages. This trend has been exacerbated by reduced total funding for languages studies, and increased student fees for regional studies, under the Jobs-ready Graduates (JRG) package. UA has repeatedly called for the removal of JRG, pointing to perverse and misaligned outcomes including disincentives for building Asia capability.

Our submission focuses on existing good practice occurring within our membership, data relating to Asia capability, and opportunities for improvement. We are happy to provide additional information where it assists the inquiry.

We draw the Committee's attention to the following recommendations which are substantiated in the body of our submission:

1. **Revise Funding Models to Incentivise Asia Capability**

- Reform or remove the Jobs-ready Graduates (JRG) package to eliminate disincentives.
- Bundle fees for language and regional studies to reduce student costs.
- Increase direct funding for Asian language programs to support sustainability.

2. **Strengthen the Education Pipeline for Asian Languages**

- Invest in secondary school language programs to boost enrolments.
- Support teacher training and recruitment for Asian languages.
- Promote language learning through national awareness campaigns.

3. **Enhance Flexibility and Access in Mobility Programs**

- Restore shorter-duration eligibility in the New Colombo Plan (NCP).
- Increase NCP funding and participation targets.
- Simplify program guidelines to reduce administrative barriers.

4. **Develop a National Strategy for Asia Capability**

- Establish a whole-of-government strategy for Asia capability.
- Coordinate efforts across schools, universities, and agencies.
- Include Asia capability in national education and foreign policy planning.

5. **Support and Expand International Partnerships**

- Maintain and grow international link agreements with Asian institutions.
- Leverage research partnerships to deepen regional understanding.
- Provide incentives for Asia-focused initiatives in universities.

Challenges to developing Australia's Asia capability

Universities, alongside primary and secondary schooling, provide a common path to Asian language acquisition, cultural literacy and immersive experiences for Australian students. While many choose to develop their Asia capability at university, there has been a rapid decline in enrolments across the sector. In 2024, UA members reported a domestic student load of 1,931 studying Eastern Asian, Southeast Asian and Southern Asian languages. This represents a sharp decline of 43 per cent from the 2016 peak of 3,384, compared with total overall domestic student load which has remained flat. This is despite a 42 per cent decrease in the cost of languages courses following the introduction of JRG in 2021.

A significant challenge for teaching Asian languages in universities is a declining pipeline of secondary school enrolments in languages. The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority has reported that just 7.6 per cent of year 12 student enrol in languages, down from 10.5 per cent in 2013. The reduced number of secondary school students who study languages directly impacts the demand for higher education language opportunities. This also impacts on the training of Asian language teachers, further deteriorating the pipeline of prospective students.

Limited and inconsistent demand makes the provision of Asian language courses financially challenging for many universities. Universities' enrolments in Asian languages vary from 10 students to 190 students spread across different Asian languages, course levels (bachelor, enabling, postgraduate), units and semesters. The average class cohort is between just 2 to 38 students. The variability of these small-scale programs makes some courses financially unsustainable, restricting universities' capacity to further develop Asia capability.

While students enrolled in languages received a 42 per cent decrease in fees following JRG, this is only for the language-component of their chosen program. For example, if a student in their first semester enrolled in two languages courses and two regional studies courses (e.g. Chinese history or Indonesian politics), they would pay a greater total amount resulting from the 82 per cent increase in humanities, where regional studies courses sit. Sixty per cent of all students who undertake a language course are enrolled in humanities programs, meaning that students who seek to deepen their Asia capability through regional studies or international relations courses are penalised.

Teaching costs for language courses have also increased. Deloitte identified foreign languages as the having the second largest annual cost increase of 6.2 per cent from 2019 to 2020. The combination of declining demand and increased teaching costs has placed significant pressure on universities to offer Asia capability building opportunities at a substantial financial loss.

Building capability through the New Colombo Plan

The New Colombo Plan (NCP) is a core government initiative supporting Australian undergraduate students to develop Asia capability through programs run in the Indo-Pacific. NCP programs have supported over 55,000 students since 2014 to develop Asia capability through immersion, language training, intercultural learning, internships and networking opportunities.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has reported that in 2025, 3,463 students at UA members have received $22.4m in NCP funding to participate in programs in Asia. This has declined by 40 per cent from 2024, which has 5,820 students funded at $27.8m[1].

[1] Previous rounds of the New Colombo Plan Mobility Program

In 2024, UA made a submission to the NCP External Advisory Group outlining concerns with the 2025 Guidelines including changes to the minimum duration of an NCP experience from two week to four weeks. This has made many NCP programs ineligible for funding, impacting students who cannot commit to a longer program and staff who balance NCP programs with a full-time teaching load.

Despite the importance of NCP in developing Asia capability, these changes have introduced more complexity, limited student eligibility, and reduced flexibility, impacting universities' ability to maximise participation.

More broadly, a comprehensive strategy to develop language skills in education would greatly assist the government, schools, universities and other stakeholders to uplift Asia capability in a unified and strategic manner. This was identified by the Universities Accord as a shortcoming of government planning and policymaking and should be prioritised.

Expanding engagement and partnerships in Asia

Australian universities continue to foster strong relationships with Asian countries, assisting capability building efforts and advancing prosperity and stability in the region. In 2024, UA members have 4,417 international link agreements with Asian countries, encompassing student and staff mobility, academic and research collaborations, short-term initiatives, and other forms of exchange[2]. The volume of international links is reflective of the engagement that universities undertake with Asian partners to further teaching and research.

Research is a major component of Asia-Australia university relationships, with collaborations across a range of shared priorities. According to the OECD, in 2023 Australia participated in over 52,000 bilateral international publications with 49 Asian countries.[3] This accounted for 35 per of all bilateral international scientific collaborations, with nearly growth of nearly 5 times since 2009. Universities draw on research relationships with Asia to generate understanding and disseminate knowledge to their communities. This supports evidence-based capability uplift and greater awareness of the Asian context.

UA remains committed to partnering with Asian nations to build a strong, adaptive education networks. Ongoing support for language programs, international agreements, and mobility initiatives are essential for Australia to maintain and grow its Asia capability, in alignment with national priorities and the needs of Australian students and the broader community.

[2] International links (Member Universities), Universities Australia
[3] Bibliometric indicators, OECD Data explorer