

University of Sydney, submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education's Inquiry into Building Asia Capability in Australia through the education system and beyond, November 2025

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Introduction

The University of Sydney welcomes the opportunity to assist the Committee with its inquiry into building Australia's Asia capability. Our submission draws on the deep expertise of academic and professional staff in Asian languages, Asian Studies and our extensive education and research engagement across the region.

We particularly acknowledge the expert insights and advice provided by Professor Michele Ford (**Individual Submission 78**), the Deputy Head of School (Research) in our School of Languages and Cultures, Professor of Southeast Asian Studies, Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia, and former Director of the Sydney Southeast Asia Centre. The parts of this submission that are based directly on content from Professor Ford's individual submission are marked with an asterisk.

We must also thank the following leaders of key University portfolios, schools, institutes and centres, who have contributed their expertise to this submission, support its content and recommendations, and are keen to assist the Committee as required:

Kirsten Andrews	Vice-President (External Engagement)
Professor Kathy Belov AO	Pro Vice-Chancellor (Global and Research Engagement)
Professor Avril Alba	Head, School of Languages and Cultures
Professor Ken Cruickshank	Director, Sydney Institute for Community Languages Education, Sydney School of Education and Social Work
Professor David S G Goodman	Director, China Studies Centre
Professor Greg Fox	Director, Sydney Southeast Asia Centre.

In addition to providing analysis of the key issues that threaten Australia's Asia capacity from the perspective of our experts and offering twelve recommendations as solutions, our submission provides an overview of the University's Asia expertise and activities, as well as data on student enrolments in our Asian language programs (Chinese, Indonesian, Korean, Japanese and Sanskrit) over the last decade. The University of Sydney has been involved actively with national efforts to strengthen Australia's Asia capability and levels of educational and research engagement with the region for decades. We have included an overview of our engagement with past relevant advocacy and policy processes going back almost twenty years. See the following attachments for these details:

Attachment A: Overview of enrolment trends in University of Sydney Asian language programs 2015-2025.

Attachment B: Overview of the University of Sydney's Asia engagement, expertise and activities.

Attachment C: Summary of the University of Sydney's engagement with past relevant inquiries, reviews and policy processes.

We trust our submission is helpful and stand ready to assist the Committee by, for example: providing further data and information; supporting our expert Asia-relevant educators and researchers to meet with the Committee; facilitating Committee engagement with our students, alumni and regional partners; or hosting informal briefings, roundtables and site visits.

Summary

The University of Sydney fully supports the Committee Chair's call for urgent action, as outlined in his article [Complacent nation: Australia in the Asian Century](#) (22 September) and the '[Choose Asia](#)' Declaration (23 October) jointly signed with other leading voices on Asia capability. The challenges discussed and solutions proposed in both publications are directly relevant to the University's operations as they affect our current and future ability to deliver the University's legislated mission for the benefit of the people of New South Wales. We agree that Australia faces an urgent crisis in its Asia capability, which is crucial for national security, social cohesion, prosperity, and effective statecraft. Despite past efforts, key indicators such as Asian language

study, cultural knowledge and competency have declined further, threatening Australia's ability to engage effectively with its dynamic and complex region.

Recent Australian government policy demonstrates a strong rhetorical commitment to Asia capability. [Invested: Australia's Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040](#) (2023) positions closer economic integration as a national priority. The Australian Government's [2025 reforms to the New Colombo Plan](#) explicitly target 'Asia capability' through enhanced student mobility and language learning. The Australian Public Service Commission's [Engaging with the Region](#) framework seeks to build whole-of-government regional capacity. **Yet these ambitious initiatives rest largely on a flawed assumption: that Asia capability can be generated without addressing the collapse of the university infrastructure and domestic student enrolments that produces the expertise.***

With this submission we analyse the key demand, supply and policy challenges to building Australia's Asia capability, and propose twelve recommendations that would target available resources and effort at the tertiary education sector for the following strategic reasons:

Speed: University interventions produce capable graduates within 3-4 years. School-level reform, while important, takes at least a decade to show results and requires university-trained teachers who do not currently exist in sufficient numbers.*

Multiplier effects: University graduates become teachers, public servants, business professionals, researchers, and community leaders, multiplying the initial investment across sectors and generations.*

Integration with professional capability: The combination of Asia expertise with professional qualifications produces graduates who can operationalise regional knowledge in practical contexts. This is what government policy documents identify as essential but currently lacking.*

Knowledge development and exchange: High-quality impactful research collaborations between Australian and Asian institutions, businesses and NGOs develop new knowledge, enduring people-to-people links, and expertise regarding issues of mutual interest and importance to the region. Such deep expertise is required for effective and sustained engagement and builds the knowledge base upon which government and business can engage deeply in the region.

Alignment with existing policy infrastructure: The interventions we propose work with and through existing programs (New Colombo Plan, Australia Awards, development partnerships, public sector capability frameworks) rather than creating parallel structures. They address the missing foundation that currently undermines those programs' effectiveness.*

Sustainability: Long-term institutional funding creates stability, allowing programs to plan multi-year curricula, maintain teaching quality, conduct outreach, and build the networks essential to area studies expertise.*

Our expertise, contribution and strategic engagement with Asia

The University has welcomed students and scholars from Asia for more than 100 years, establishing a distinguished record in Asian language instruction, Asian Studies, and the cultivation and support of diverse partnerships across the region. Today, we host thousands of students, academics and other visitors from across Asia each year, and have a large and growing alumni network making a positive contribution across the region, many in leadership roles in government, business, educational institutions and the not-for-profit sector.

We operate one of the larger and stronger languages and cultures schools nationally, delivering Asian Studies programs alongside language award courses in Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese and Korean. We also help preserve the community languages of migrants in NSW through the Sydney Institute for Community Languages Education and offer non-award Asian language courses to the wider community through our Centre for Continuing Education. We offer one of the largest Australian university student exchange and study abroad

programs for students interested in Asia, including under the Government's New Colombo Plan. We host two multi-disciplinary area-specific research centres – representing nationally significant collections of expertise about China and Southeast Asia. Between 2022 and 2025, our researchers co-authored more than 12,800 publications with countries in Asia, mostly in the subject areas of Medicine (33.6 per cent), Computer Science (19.5 per cent) and Engineering (19.4 per cent). The number of publications published on average annually has increased by 33 per cent in the period of 2022-2024 compared with pre-COVID-19 (2017-2020). We have physical premises for the University in China, Vietnam and Cambodia, and deep institutional partnerships and enduring people-to-people links across Asia built on decades of education, research and engagement.

Further information on trends in enrolments in our Asian language programs, current Asia capability and activities, and our engagement with past relevant inquiries and policy processes, is included in the **attachments**.

Analysis of key issues

The critical role Australia's public universities play in building and sustaining Asia capability

University-based language and area studies programs and research centres serve three functions essential to national capability*:

- **Universities conduct research and maintain the networks that inform policy and business strategies, and address major regional priorities.** When governments speak of contextual understanding and regional literacy, they are describing knowledge produced through university-based area studies – knowledge of political systems, economic structures, social dynamics and historical contexts that shape how the region operates. The erosion of university-level language and area studies capacity has left government and business without the deep contextual insight needed for long-term strategy.* Despite these challenges, university research centres continue to focus on Asia and provide the broad multidisciplinary expertise required to address major regional priorities - such as climate change and the energy transition, healthy societies, food security, sustainable economic development, digital transformation and AI, and natural resources.
- **Universities educate the professionals who deploy Asia expertise across government, business and education.** A policy analyst requires knowledge of Vietnam's political economy to assess regulatory developments that affect Australian trade interests. A lawyer with Indonesian language and political knowledge brings strategic value to international negotiations. An engineer with Korean language skills can manage complex technical partnerships. These combinations of professional expertise and deep regional knowledge are what policy documents mean when they reference 'Asia capability', but they can only be produced systematically through university programs.*
- **Universities educate the next generation of language teachers and area studies academics.** The school-level teacher shortage is a direct consequence of universities no longer producing enough graduates qualified to teach Asian languages. The problems with Asian language education in our schools cannot be fixed without first addressing the structural challenges facing universities' language and area studies programs.*

The demand-side challenge: making Asia studies strategically attractive to domestic students

The fundamental challenge to Australia's Asia capability is the fact that university-level Asian Studies programs no longer attract sufficient numbers of high-quality Australian students and current settings actively discourage their participation. The absence of explicit government endorsement signals that Asia expertise, despite the rhetoric, is not genuinely valued. Without targeted incentives and a sense of the importance of Asia to Australia, rational students choose degrees with clearer employment pathways. The lack of financial support

means that language majors are disproportionately accessible only to students with sufficient family resources for extended study and overseas immersion.*

The severity of the situation demands acknowledgment. Australia's strategic Asia capability depends on deeply contextualised knowledge far beyond the important contributions of Australians of Asian heritage or first-generation migrants, and certainly beyond what artificial intelligence translation tools can deliver in the language domain. Professional engagement at the level required for effective policymaking, diplomacy and business demands graduates trained in rigorous language *and* area studies programs at the tertiary level that develop both linguistic proficiency and sophisticated cultural understanding.*

In the absence of domestic student demand, the benefits to Australia's national Asia capability of university-level Asian Studies and Languages programs are greatly diminished. Larger country-focused programs in Chinese, Japanese and even Korean are increasingly dominated by international students, for example, Korean students taking Japanese language units as electives rather than pursuing systematic expertise. Smaller country-focused programs are rapidly disappearing. According to Acicis, just 0.05 per cent of domestic university students were studying a Southeast Asian language in 2024. At the University of Sydney and other universities, domestic students often undertook whole degrees focused on Indonesia, including studies of regional Indonesian languages, history, culture, politics and economics. Indonesian Studies programs now only exist in ten universities, where they have largely contracted to language majors, eliminating the context-specific coursework essential to develop genuine regional competence. Other strategic Asian languages including Vietnamese and Thai (available only at the Australian National University) and Hindi (taught only at ANU and La Trobe) remain inaccessible to most Australian students, including heritage speakers who could build on existing family knowledge.*

The supply-side challenge: rebuilding institutional capacity in our public universities

Rebuilding Asian language programs in schools remains critical for long-term success but cannot succeed without universities producing qualified educators at the necessary scale and quality. Even excellent school programs cannot create the strategic capability policy documents envisage; that requires the sustained, intensive study available only at tertiary level, where students develop both advanced linguistic competence and the contextual knowledge essential for professional deployment of Asia expertise.*

Demand-side incentives will fail if universities lack the capacity to deliver quality programs. Small language programs in particular face fundamental sustainability challenges: they depend entirely on cross-subsidies and the goodwill of deans and senior university leadership for survival, operate with skeleton staffing (often one or two academics carrying all teaching, research, administration, and outreach responsibilities), and lack resources for curriculum renewal or community engagement.*

Without immediate structural intervention at the tertiary level, Australia's ambitions for its Asia capability will remain aspirational. Universities have little influence over the demand side for Asian Studies and Languages programs. And, at a time when the budgets of many universities are stretched further than ever, they cannot be expected to solve the supply problem for Southeast Asian languages independently. East Asian languages such as Chinese, Japanese and Korean achieve financial sustainability but predominantly serve international students, rather than meeting Australia's strategic needs for greater Asian literacy amongst its citizens. Despite their enormous strategic importance, Indonesian, Thai or Vietnamese Studies programs do not, and may never, generate tuition revenue sufficient to sustain quality programs, even in major metropolitan universities. Market logic ensures these programs will continue closing unless the government intervenes decisively.*

Fortunately, Australian universities are well-positioned to deepen engagement with Asia beyond the traditional domains of language and cultural studies. While linguistic proficiency and cross-cultural understanding provide foundational support for engagement with Asia, the full potential of Australia's academic contribution to regional engagement lies in harnessing disciplinary and interdisciplinary expertise across the university sector.

Research that addresses pressing regional priorities – such as public health, environmental sustainability, infrastructure development, legal reform, and technological innovation – requires collaboration across diverse

academic fields. This type of engagement can foster broad, multi-sectoral partnerships with Asian counterparts. Few universities currently support links between social sciences and other disciplines to enable the development of this capability more widely within the University's community. Moreover, embedding Asia-relevant language learning and cultural competency into undergraduate and postgraduate education across a wide range of disciplines is critical. Graduates in fields such as health, law, engineering, and science must be equipped not only with technical expertise but also with the cultural literacy required to operate effectively in regional contexts.

The solutions

We would suggest that the demand- and supply-side challenges at the tertiary level are perhaps best addressed through a targeted **Southeast Asia Capability Program**, run by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), as the Australian Government department with direct stake in Southeast Asia capability.*

- **Targeted languages and area studies programs for Indonesian should be supported at one metropolitan university in each mainland state and territory.** Additional streams should be developed for Thai and Vietnamese in Sydney and Melbourne, where there are large heritage communities and substantial business interests, while support for existing programs at the Australian National University could also be strengthened.*
- Each of these institutions should be required to have **outreach capability to regional universities** (and in Victoria's case, to Tasmania) through a hub-and-spoke model, where the funded university provides synchronous and asynchronous instruction to students in regional locations, supported by local tutors. In the past, this model was successfully used for Indonesian Studies by the University of Sydney and University of Wollongong. National adoption would ensure that all Australian students with the necessary interest and skills could access high quality programs, regardless of their geographic location.*

This state-based model would contain costs while ensuring that high-quality face-to-face instruction and research-led teaching was available in every mainland state and territory. In addition, it would guarantee that state-based heritage and business communities had access to local expertise, and that government messaging around Asia Capability maintained visibility.*

To operate effectively, the program would require:

- **Initial federal funding** for a national community of practice focused on curriculum development, renewal, and outreach.
- **Long-term federal funding** for 3-4 academic positions per hub institution, combining language and area studies expertise (approximately \$1,300,000 per state or territory annually).
- **Long-term federal funding** for regional tutors and hub-and-spoke model maintenance.*

Other solutions could include expanding support for exposure to Asian context, including supporting institutional research partnerships and capacity-building for researchers.

We propose the following twelve recommendations to transform Asia-related study from a niche and dwindling interest into a recognised, and valued, pathway to professional advantage and national contribution.

These demand- and supply-side measures would secure the institutional foundations required to sustain capability development not only in the long term, but with immediate results.

Recommendations to boost demand for tertiary level Asian studies programs

1. **Asia Capability Scholarships:** The Commonwealth should establish substantial, multi-year scholarships for Australian citizens who commit to:
 - A three-year double major combining language and area studies, OR

- A language major alongside a professional degree (education, law, commerce, engineering, etc.).

These scholarships must be of sufficient value to genuinely influence university choices and cover the full three years, contingent on maintained performance. They should explicitly signal that the Commonwealth considers Asia expertise a strategic national asset worthy of direct investment.*

2. **A transformed New Colombo Plan (NCP):** The NCP should shift from project-based funding to guaranteed, multi-year allocations to institutions, enabling universities to plan comprehensive short-term and semester-length immersion programs with confidence.* One of the key goals of the NCP is to broaden participation and create opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds. Requiring students to commit to a longer period abroad is likely to deter those unable to afford extended stays, potentially limiting access and reducing the diversity of students benefiting from the NCP. Students with little or no knowledge or interest in the region are unlikely to commit to a longer-term option and, through exposure, build their interest. Several participants in our shorter NCP projects went on to add study of a language, or even an Asia-related PhD as a direct consequence of their participation.
3. **Targeted semester exchange scholarships:** A dedicated scholarship program should support semester-long language immersion exchanges, distinct from but complementary to the NCP.* This program should support intensive language and cultural immersion across Asia, with dedicated streams ensuring robust participation in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian, Thai, and Vietnamese immersion programs. This should include enhanced funding for exchanges in high-cost destinations (China, Japan, South Korea) where living and study expenses create participation barriers.* Universities and governments could cooperate to promote and support the enduring value of these semester-long exchanges to students, potentially engaging philanthropy and business as sources of funding to support students with living and travel costs.

Recommendations to strengthen school level Asian languages and culture education

4. **Incentives for schools to maintain, or establish, high-quality Asian language programs:** Dedicated funding to support high-quality, secondary school language programs across all Asian languages to ensure that current compulsory language hours do not act as a disincentive for further language learning.*
5. **Professional development immersion programs for teachers:** To learn well, Australian school teachers require expertise in language, culture and Australian pedagogy. In the 1990s, in-country immersion programs were used to great effect to establish a talented core pool of teachers when Indonesian was introduced in Queensland. Reinvigoration of this model, and its extension to all states and all Asian languages, would ensure that school-level programs attract, and serve, high-quality Australian students.*
6. **Immersion programs for school students:** Funding for school trips for students in Year 7 to focus countries and for in-country immersion programs for language students in Years 10, 11 and 12, run at a state level. Direct experience of focus countries is the most effective way to generate interest and commitment to foreign language learning, and positions languages in their cultural contexts.*
7. **School–university partnership and articulation programs:** Dedicated funding to support partnerships that ensure smooth transitions to tertiary study and create clear pathways from school through university.*

Other recommendations to build Australia's Asia capability

8. **Leverage migrant community links:** Australia has an obvious advantage in developing links through its migrant communities from Asia. There is a need to develop an understanding of cross-cultural communications alongside developing new synergies and capacities.
9. **A bi-partisan and long-term Asia engagement communications strategy:** Ongoing government and cross-parliamentary leadership is needed to promote positive attitudes to dealing with Asia, and the development of understandings and people-to-people links to ensure sustainable relationships with countries and cultures of the region.
10. **Regional symposiums and joint events:** University-led research symposiums focused on issues of mutual interest to Australia and countries in Asia are effective platforms to create opportunities for deep immersion and reciprocal learning through collaboration and exchange.
11. **Targeted research funding:** Robust Australian research on Asia – its peoples, cultures, governments, and political, social, economic and environmental systems – is essential for generating the detailed knowledge and fresh insights needed to guide Australian governments and businesses in the region. Given the critical role Asia will play in shaping Australia's future prosperity, dedicated funding should target disciplinary and cross-disciplinary research in Asia, developing expertise across a wide range of areas. Government can support this through existing research funding schemes including: the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR); National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC); Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF); and Australian Research Council (ARC).
12. **Support for institutional partnerships between Australian and Asian universities:** Collaborative academic partnerships will enable Australian students and researchers to develop linguistic and cross-cultural understanding, co-developing knowledge that will benefit both countries. This can be integrated with the educational exchange described above.

Conclusion

Australia's Asia capability cannot be purchased through technology, outsourced to consultants, or improvised through short-term mobility programs. It requires sustained, university-based infrastructure to produce graduates with deep linguistic competence and genuine regional expertise.*

The current policy environment acknowledges this intellectually while failing to act on it structurally. We have ambitious strategies that assume we have capabilities that we have allowed to erode. We fund student mobility to the region while defunding the programs that prepare students for and employ them after those experiences. We declare Asia engagement essential to national interests while treating university Asia programs as expendable.*

System-level reform requires matching resources to rhetoric. By reinvesting decisively in university language and area studies the Commonwealth can position multilingualism and regional literacy as defining characteristics of Australian national identity and strategic capability.*

The University of Sydney urges the Committee to recommend bold, federally led interventions at the tertiary education level to restore the intellectual and institutional foundations of Australia's engagement with Asia.

Attachments

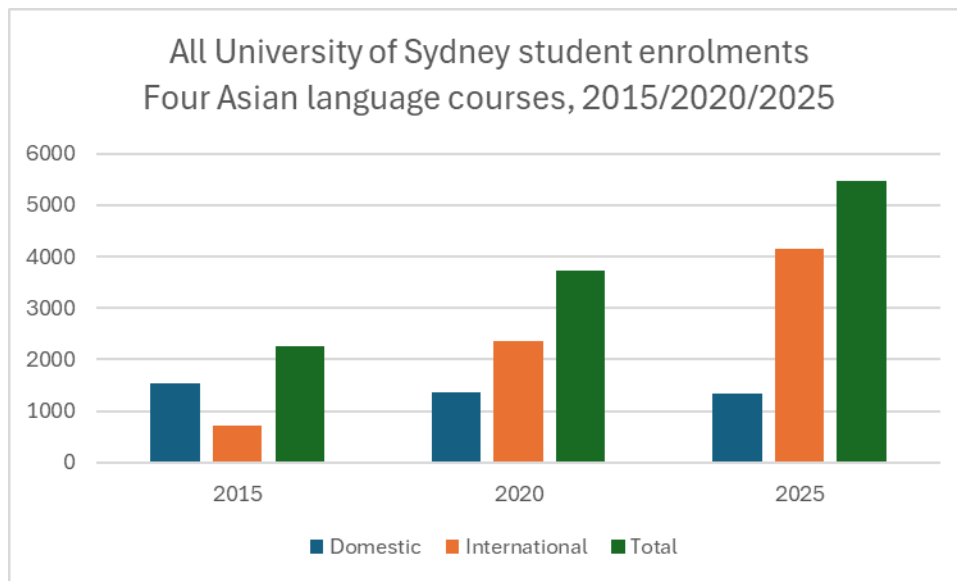
- A. Overview of enrolment trends in University of Sydney Asian language programs 2015-2025
- B. Overview of the University of Sydney's Asia engagement, expertise and activities
- C. Summary of the University of Sydney's engagement with past relevant inquiries, reviews and policy processes

Attachment A

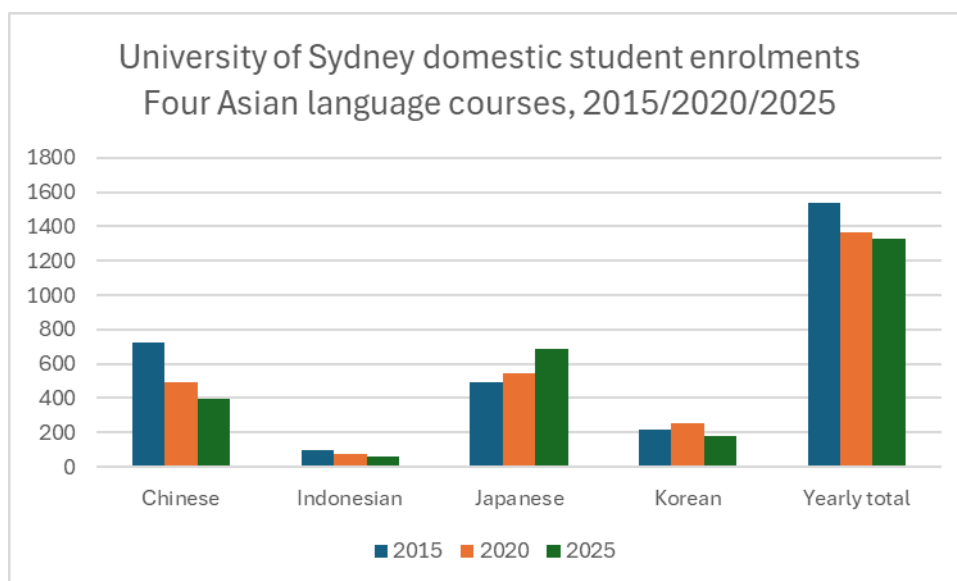
Overview of enrolment trends in University of Sydney Asian language programs 2015-2025

Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese and Korean

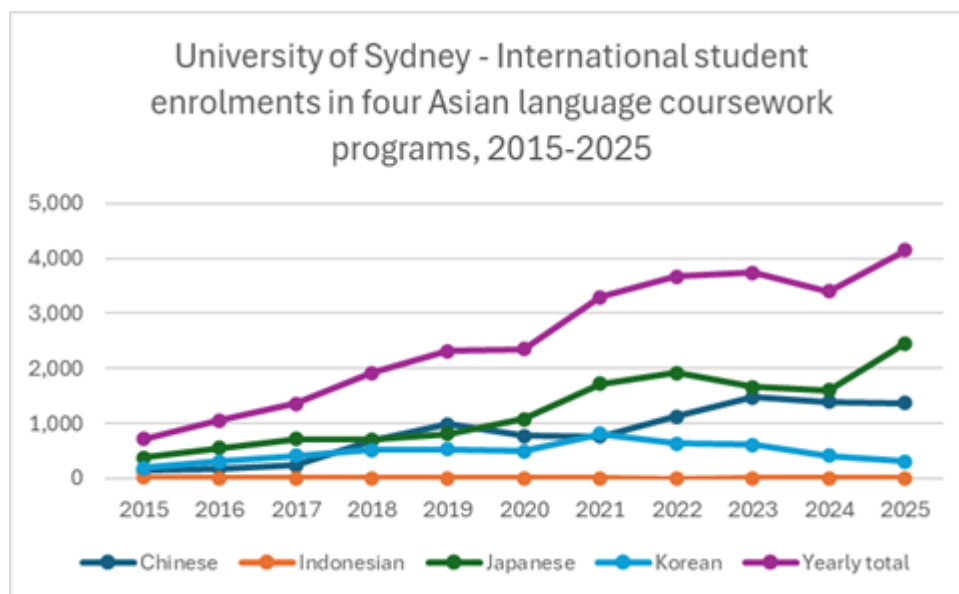
- Students are able to major in Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese and Korean at the University of Sydney.
- In the 10 years to 2025, domestic student enrolments in Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese and Korean declined by 14 per cent (2015, 1,539; 2025, 1,328). At the same time, international student enrolments in those same language courses increased by nearly 480 per cent (2015, 716; 2025, 4,145). Those international student enrolments have resulted in an overall increase over 10 years, of 143 per cent (2015, 2,255; 2025, 5,473).



- The decline in the domestic student enrolment is not universal. The one subject to see an increase in enrolment was Japanese (39 per cent) while the other three declined by various amounts - Korean (negative 17 per cent), Indonesian (neg. 40 per cent) and Chinese (neg. 45 per cent).

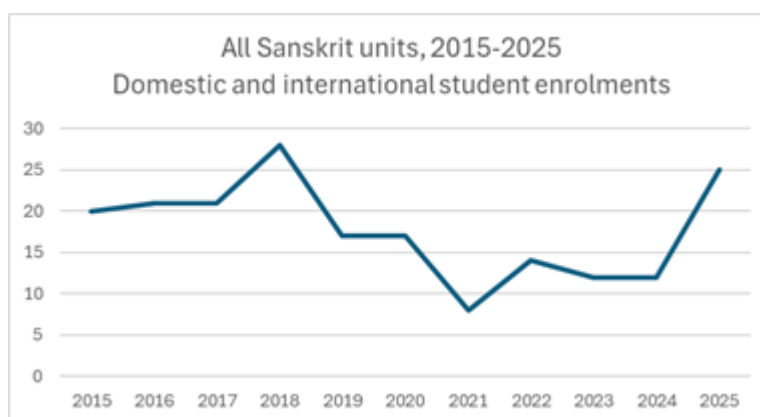


- Similarly, the increase in the international student enrolment was not universal. The one subject to see a decrease in enrolment was Indonesian (negative 56 per cent) while the other three increased by various amounts - Korean (63 per cent), Japanese (551 per cent) and Chinese (893 per cent).



Sanskrit

- Sanskrit can be studied as a minor within the Discipline of Asian Studies. Current students usually attend the two first-year Sanskrit courses at the University of Sydney, then continue to second and third year via cross-institutional study at ANU to complete the minor.
- In the 10 years to 2025, enrolments in the available Sanskrit units increased by 25 per cent (2015, 20 students; 2025, 25). Noteworthy about this increase is that the fourth-year Honours and HDR units ceased from 2019. Despite the (albeit small) numbers fluctuating over the years, enrolments in the Sanskrit courses have consistently been driven by domestic student interest (comprising 86 per cent of all enrolments since 2015).



Discontinued courses in Asian languages

- Pali - units last offered in 2012
- Hindi - units last offered in 2010
- Urdu - units last offered in 2010
- Thai - units last offered in 2008

Attachment B

Overview of the University of Sydney's Asia engagement, expertise and activities

Area	Activities
School of Languages and Cultures	Delivers undergraduate and postgraduate courses including research higher degrees in Asian Studies, Linguistics and Asian cultures and languages including Chinese, Indonesian Japanese, Korean, and Sanskrit.
Sydney Institute for Community Languages Education	Supports the teaching and learning of languages spoken by migrant communities, to help preserve cultural identity, heritage and language skills across generations.
Centre for Continuing Education	Offers non-award language, culture and history courses in Japanese and Mandarin, with its China-related language and culture courses offered in partnership with the Confucius Institute at the University of Sydney .
China Studies Centre	Represents the largest collection in Australia of academic expertise who research China and Chinese culture and is a research-informed voice in Australia's public China discourse.
Sydney Southeast Asia Centre	Facilitates collaborations between the over 490 University of Sydney academics who specialise in Southeast Asia; placing researchers into fields, classrooms and labs across the region to conduct impactful work.
The University of Sydney Centre in China	Located in Suzhou, near Shanghai, provides the University interdisciplinary and cross-cultural research, education and exchange hub in mainland China, supporting the University's engagement with students, alumni academic and industry partners.
University of Sydney Vietnam Institute	Located in Ho Chi Minh City, facilitates research and engagement opportunities between Australian and Vietnamese researchers, academics and students.
Angkor Research Program	With an office in Siem Reap, Cambodia, the program is a cornerstone of the University's engagement with Cambodia, providing a multidisciplinary approach to the Angkor region, incorporating urban society, archaeology, history, heritage and environment.
Office of Global Engagement	Develops and supports international research collaborations, strategic partnerships with leading universities across Asia , and supports delegations to and from Asia and other parts of the world.
Sydney Future Students	Leads inbound and outbound student exchanges, study abroad and global mobility , international student recruitment, scholarships and awards , Australia Awards and the New Colombo Plan .

In addition to these areas focused on helping to build Asian language and cultural capability, knowledge of and engagement with the region, many other University schools, centres and institutes are also pursuing education, research, development projects, and clinical trials across Asia, including but not limited to:

[Australian Centre for Robotics](#)

[Charles Perkins Centre for Obesity, Diabetes and Cardiovascular Disease](#)

[Net Zero Institute](#)

[Sydney Environment Institute](#)

[Sydney Infectious Diseases Institute](#)

[Sydney Institute of Agriculture](#)

[Sydney School of Geosciences](#)

[Sydney School of Public Health](#)

[Sydney School of Veterinary Science](#)

[United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney](#)

Attachment C

Summary of the University of Sydney's engagement with past relevant inquiries, reviews and policy processes

For nearly twenty years, the University of Sydney has engaged with and contributed expertise to government policy processes aimed at enhancing Australia's engagement with Asia. A list of past relevant policy processes to which the University has made submissions is included at the end of this attachment.

The University was a significant contributor to the 2007 **Group of Eight (Go8) paper**, [*Languages in Crisis: A rescue plan for Australia*](#), which urged Australian Government leadership to develop an integrated long-term plan to strengthen foreign language education. At that time, the percentage of Year 12 graduates who had studied a language other than English stood at 13 per cent nationally - down from 40 per cent in the 1960s. The Go8 paper recognised that reversing the decline would require a coordinated national approach involving schools and school systems, community groups, universities and governments. It recommended, among other things:

- The staged introduction of compulsory second language education from primary to Year 10.
- The expansion of incentives to encourage the completion of language studies to Year 12 and at university.
- The provision of additional funding to support the efforts of universities to retain languages and to improve the training and the quality of language teachers.
- A campaign to promote the benefits for Australian society and its individual citizens of multilingualism.

In 2008, the Australian Government committed \$65 million to reestablish an Asian languages and studies strategy for Australian schools. The *National Asian Languages and Studies in School Program* (NALSSP) provided funding to schools to support programs in priority Asian languages - Japanese, Mandarin, Indonesian and Korean - with a renewed focus on Asia's economic and strategic importance to Australia. The NALSSP set targets to have at least 12 per cent of students leave Year 12 competent in Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian or Korean by the year 2020. The actual percentage declined from 4.3 per cent in 2001 to 3.4 per cent in 2021.¹ In April 2025, the Australian Consortium for In-Country Indonesian Studies (Acicis) reported that only 3.3 per cent of Year 12 students studied Japanese, Chinese and Indonesian in 2023. Acicis also claimed that the number of students studying other priority languages – such as Korean and Hindi – at Year 12 level remains exceedingly small.²

The University made a submission to the **Asian Century White Paper** consultations in 2012, strongly advocating for the Australian Government to develop a coherent national strategic framework for engagement in the Asian Century. Our submission stressed that an Asian education and research engagement strategy should be a critical element, as people-to-people relationships formed through international education and research collaboration underpin future ties. In the early 2010s, we advanced this vision by creating two Asia-focused cross-disciplinary centres – the China Studies Centre and the Southeast Asia Centre – and encouraged the Government to improve international mobility for students and researchers, while also promoting a unified national strategy for research partnerships. This preceded the New Colombo Plan and the integration of the Endeavour Awards into the Australia Awards program.

More recently, in January 2023, the University made a submission to the Government's **Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040**, outlining the institution's deep and long-standing engagement with the region through research and education. The submission identified key trends such as Southeast Asia's rapidly growing

¹ Field, L., Wilson, R., & Cruickshank, K. (2024). Prioritized but declining: an analysis of student participation in Asian languages courses in secondary school 2001–2021. *Curriculum Perspectives*, 44(3), 263-277.

² [The Pledge for Asian Languages in Australian Schools - Acicis](#)

economy and the large youth population as opportunities for enhanced economic partnerships with Australia. Major challenges cited included a decline in Australian Government and market-specific scholarship funding, making study in Australia less accessible, and the significant bureaucratic hurdles and complex regulatory environments for foreign researchers in several Southeast Asian nations. The University also detailed its extensive current activities, including 42 active partnerships and nearly \$100 million in regional project funding over the last decade, with a focus on countries like Vietnam and Indonesia, and suggested the Government should establish incentives to support collaborative research and improve visa processes to remain competitive. The submission also highlighted that our Southeast Asia Centre (SSEAC) had run 20 field schools across seven Southeast Asian countries in the preceding 10 years, many of which were supported by the Government's **New Colombo Plan** funding.

Relevant past advocacy, policy and parliamentary processes

- [Go8] ***Languages in Crisis: A rescue plan for Australia*** (June 2007)
- [PM&C] ***Australia in the Asian Century White Paper*** (March 2012)
- [DET] ***National Strategy for International Education*** (May 2015)
- [JSCFADT] ***Inquiry into the role of development partnerships in agriculture and agribusiness in promoting prosperity, reducing poverty and enhancing stability in the Indo-Pacific region*** (Submission, November 2015; Hearing {five University of Sydney representatives}, March 2016)
- [DFAT] ***Australia's new international development policy*** (February 2020)
- [JSCFADT] ***Inquiry into strengthening Australia's relationships with countries in the Pacific region*** (April 2020 and July 2020)
- [DFAT] ***Pacific Islands Forum 2050 Strategy*** (November 2020)
- [DESE] ***National strategy for international education 2021-2030*** (May 2021)
- [DESE] ***International Student Diversity at Australian Universities*** (February 2022)
- [DESE] ***Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) Review 2022*** (April 2022)
- [DFAT] ***Establishment of a Centre for Australia-India Relations (CAIR)*** (May 2022)
- [Investment NSW] ***Securing future innovation and global competitiveness in NSW Industry Policy Green Paper*** (June 2022)
- [DFAT] ***Australia's new international development policy*** (November 2022)
- [DFAT] Australian Government's ***Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040*** (January 2023)
- [DoE] ***Australia's International Education and Skills Strategic Framework*** (June 2024)
- [DFAT] ***New Colombo Plan*** (November 2024)