



## **Inquiry into Building Asia Capability in Australia through the education system and beyond**

### **Introduction**

The Chinese Australian Services Society Limited is an entity of the group commonly known as “CASS” in the community. We have been serving multicultural communities, primarily of East Asian background, for over 44 years. We welcome the opportunity to lodge a submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee in response to Building Asia Capability in Australia through the education system and beyond.

The inquiry seeks to identify how Australia can build Asia capability across the life course, from early learning through tertiary education and into the workforce, and the system-level reforms as well as structural enablers required to support this development.

For CASS, this inquiry addresses not an abstract policy question but an immediate operational imperative. Australia's demographic transformation has created urgent demand for Asia capability that far outstrips current supply. As of June 2024, 31.5% of Australia's residents, approximately 8.6 million people, were born overseas, the highest proportion since 1892 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024a). India and China now rank as the second and third largest source countries for Australia's foreign-born population, representing a fundamental shift from historical patterns dominated by European migration. Over 8.1 million visas (210,000 permanent and 7.9 million temporary) were granted during 2023-2024. Notably, eight of the top ten citizenship countries in the Migration Program were Asian, collectively representing 63.1% of all migration places (Department of Home Affairs Australian Government, 2024). The skilled migration pathway remains the dominant route to permanent residence, while student visas, employment visas, working holiday visas, age-dependent visas, and other family reunion visas continue to grow. In other words, the migrants from Asia come from all age groups and walks of life.

It is our submission reflects the views and concerns that we received from our service users, workers, volunteers and our community, through observation and service delivery over the years.

### **About Our Group**

CASS is a leading community organisation dedicated to providing a comprehensive range of social and welfare services to multicultural communities across Australia. It comprises its parent entity, the Chinese Australian Services Society Ltd (founded in 1981), and its subsidiary, CASS Care Ltd (established in 2002), which is an endorsed Public Benevolent Institution (PBI) by the Australian Taxation Office.

**CHINESE AUSTRALIAN SERVICES SOCIETY LTD** A.B.N. 85 087 248638.

Head Office: 44 - 50 Sixth Avenue, Campsie, NSW 2194 Australia  
Tel: (02) 9789 4587 Fax: (02) 9718 6357 Email: [cass@cass.org.au](mailto:cass@cass.org.au)  
[www.cass.org.au](http://www.cass.org.au) | [www.casscare.org.au](http://www.casscare.org.au)

CASS remains committed to supporting diverse communities across Metropolitan Sydney, Wollongong, and Melbourne. With a particular focus on people of East Asian backgrounds, including Chinese, Korean, Indonesian, and Vietnamese communities, CASS provides a comprehensive range of services for all ages, including childcare and early education, aged care (home and residential), disability support, settlement and health services, employment and training, volunteering, mental health support, and cultural education programs.

Currently, CASS serves over 8,500 families each week through a team of more than 850 staff and 450 volunteers from multicultural backgrounds, reflecting its deep understanding of the growing need to strengthen Australia's Asia capability and bridge the gap between workforce demand and supply.

## **Our Response to Building Asia Capability in Australia through the education system and beyond**

We welcome the House of Representatives Standing Committee's call for submissions to the inquiry on Building Asia Capability, which we believe will benefit Australia's domestic economy, social cohesion, foreign trade, and international relations. In contributing to the inquiry, we would like to raise the following issues and recommendations:

### **1. Structural Enablers and Barriers to Developing Asia Capability**

#### **1.1. Enablers: Workforce Supply and Demand**

Australia holds substantial structural advantages in developing its Asia capability. In the 2023–24 financial year, net overseas migration added approximately 446,000 people to Australia's population. Notably, Southern and Central Asia accounted for 26% of all migrant arrivals, representing the largest regional share (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024b). India, China, and the Philippines ranked as the top three source countries. In addition, the 2024–25 Permanent Migration Program allocated 70% of its 185,000 places to the skilled stream (Michalopoulos, 2024). Many of these migrants originated from Asia and played a key role in mitigating workforce shortages across the information technology, engineering, and healthcare sectors.

Despite these significant labour inflows, a critical workforce challenge persists within Australia's multicultural context. As a long-standing multicultural service provider, we experience profound demand for a culturally and linguistically appropriate workforce at all levels, driven by the wave of migrants from Asian countries and their aging and family needs. In the aged care sector, service providers like CASS face persistent challenges in recruiting assistants in nursing, support workers, registered nurses, and allied health professionals who possess the necessary cultural and linguistic competencies. This shortage is particularly critical when supporting elderly individuals and those living with dementia, many of whom experience language regression and gradually lose their ability to communicate in English, reverting to their first language.

Similarly, in early childhood education, the ability of educators and teachers to communicate effectively with Asian Australian families is essential to delivering quality education and care. The workers with Asian cultural and language proficiency are able to engage effectively with migrant parents and grandparents to achieve inclusive, culturally responsive care and education outcomes. By investing in employment pathways that enhance cultural and linguistic competence, Australia can expand local job opportunities, both in number and across diverse sectors.

As former Prime Minister, the Hon. Dr Kevin Rudd AC (ABC News, 2007), emphasised, “*It must happen — it is a national priority that in the eyes of the developed world we become the most Asia-literate country in the Western world,*” it is therefore crucial to equip Australians with a deeper international outlook and cross-cultural understanding, which will strengthen the nation’s global engagement, and position Australia to prosper through a closer partnership with Asia.

## **1.2. Barriers: Lack of National-Level Coordination on Language Learning**

Australia faces a significant challenge in strengthening its Asia capability due to the absence of national-level coordination in language learning. Responsibilities are fragmented between the federal and state governments, resulting in duplicated efforts, inconsistent policies, and limited strategic alignment.

Since the conclusion of the National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP) in 2012, there has been no sustained national funding to support Asian language education (Prince, 2022). As a result, promising pilot programs have been unable to evolve into long-term, system-wide initiatives (Kohler, Curnow and Wardlaw, 2014).

At the local community level, language schools, which play a vital role in grassroots education, continue to face unstable and short-term funding through competitive grants. This uncertainty undermines their ability to retain qualified teachers, maintain program quality, and expand access, ultimately weakening the foundation for developing Australia’s future Asia capability.

Learning Asian languages is crucial to Australia’s long-term social and economic prosperity. Equipping the local workforce with Asia-related skills ensures that it reflects and serves Australia’s multicultural society. Proficiency in Asian languages fosters cultural literacy, regional awareness, and effective communication, which are the capabilities essential for navigating a region that continues to shape Australia’s security and prosperity. Investing in Asian language education is, therefore, an investment in Australia’s strategic engagement, diplomatic influence, and global competitiveness in the Asian century.

## **2. Good Practice Models for Building Asia Capability**

### **2.1. Formal Asian Language Education**

Beyond the provision of language programs in mainstream schools, community language schools play an essential role in building Australia’s Asia capability. These schools complement formal schooling by providing students with valuable opportunities to strengthen their language skills and cultural understanding.

For example, the CASS Chinese School, established in 1992, delivers classes for students from Kindergarten to Year 12 across five campuses in Metropolitan Sydney. This long-standing, community-led initiative demonstrates the sustainability and social value of grassroots language education. Students not only learn the Chinese language, but also gain exposure to cultural heritage, including traditional festivals, value system and historical connections between Australia and China.

However, despite their significant contribution, community language schools continue to face financial and operational pressures. Under current arrangements, such as the NSW Community Languages Schools Program, funding is largely limited to short-term, competitive grants for establishment, per-capita support, or specific projects (NSW Education, 2014). The fragmented funding model restricts the capacity of schools to plan long-term, retain qualified teachers, and expand enrolments. This challenge is particularly pronounced outside major cities.

To maximise their potential, community language schools require sustained government investment and policy support. With appropriate measures, including quality assurance frameworks, teacher training and accreditation, curriculum and resource development, and integration pathways with formal education systems, these schools could form a robust network for delivering sustainable, community-driven Asian language education across Australia.

## **2.2. Informal Cultural Education**

The concept of Asian competence extends well beyond linguistic proficiency. Traditional art forms, which are deeply embedded in Asian cultural traditions and philosophy, are increasingly recognised as vital pathways for broadening approaches to Asian education.

Beyond community language schools such as the CASS Chinese School, community organisations also play a crucial role in delivering informal cultural education and promoting cross-cultural understanding. For instance, the CASS Academy of Arts, Chinese Kungfu, lion dance, and calligraphy serve as an important community institution that builds linguistic and cultural bridges across generations through community engagement. CASS organises regular social and activity groups, including elder support programs and youth clubs, which create natural environments where language and cultural practices are shared organically through everyday interaction. Multicultural cooking and recipe-sharing activities within these groups further promote cultural understanding and appreciation, reinforcing the values of inclusion and respect that are fundamental to Australia's multicultural society.

The activities offered by the CASS activity groups, including Taichi, *Baduanjin*, Korean and Chinese calligraphy, dance, and intangible cultural heritage such as lacquer fan painting and cooking, give the community a hands-on experience of Asian culture. The CASS Youth Mentor Program connects young adults with migrant students, enhancing social engagement and fostering appreciation of multicultural identities. Intergenerational programs further bring together seniors and children, not only facilitating the transmission of cultural heritage but also demonstrating that cultural knowledge is most effectively passed on through social interaction between generations.

These initiatives collectively foster intercultural competence, which is the ability to recognise and respect cultural differences, navigate cross-cultural contexts with confidence, and cultivate genuine curiosity and empathy toward other cultures. By offering accessible and inclusive community events, they allow participants to explore and engage without significant prior experience, while simultaneously strengthening social connection and community cohesion.

However, like many community language schools, community organisations often operate with limited resources and unstable funding, reflecting a broader lack of national coordination. This systemic gap prevents proven grassroots initiatives from expanding and fully realising their potential to strengthen Australia’s Asia capability.

### **2.3. Digital Technology**

Digital technology has created new opportunities for building and sharing Asian capabilities. Online platforms allow language instruction and cultural experiences to overcome geographical barriers, reaching a wider audience. During the COVID-19 pandemic, CASS online social group gatherings and cultural events became a connection for those living alone, maintaining community connections and ensuring continuity of cultural transmission. The potential of digital technology in fostering Asian capabilities is substantial.

## **3. Current State of Asian Language Learning and Cultural Studies**

### **3.1. The Crisis: Decline across All Educational Levels**

Despite numerous policies, programs, and substantial financial investment aimed at improving “Asia literacy” and proficiency in Asian languages, participation in the four priority languages, i.e. Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian, and Korean, continues to decline. The sustained decline was found across primary and secondary schools, universities, and community programs. Only 3.3% of Year 12 students are enrolled in a priority Asian language, down from 5.1% in 2010 (Acicis, 2025). Concurrently, universities have seen a sharp decrease in Southeast Asian language enrolments between 2004 and 2022 (Watts, 2025).

This significant discrepancy between Australia’s demographic composition and its educational priorities directly fuels the workforce challenges experienced by CASS and other service providers: a critical shortage of bilingual professionals in aged care, childcare, disability services, and community programs, where these cultural and linguistic skills are essential for delivering quality care services. Consequently, vulnerable Australians, including older adults and people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, are directly affected.

### **3.2. Strategy to Improve the Crisis**

It is recommended that the Australian government establish a coordinated national framework to reverse the decline in Asian language education. This requires creating continuous K-12 language pathways that leverage the cognitive and academic benefits of bilingual learning. Federal support should include targeted funding for educational institutions, teacher development programs, and sustained support for community language schools.

Additionally, implementing a unified data system to track enrolment, retention and outcomes across sectors would provide crucial evidence for policy development. Combined with community language schools and informal cultural education, this comprehensive approach can improve Australia's Asian language capability through educational continuity, strategic funding, and evidence-based monitoring.

A review of the community language curriculum is also recommended to incorporate practical, everyday vocabulary and conversational patterns. This would help students connect classroom learning with real-life communication, enhance engagement, and encourage sustained participation.

In addition, existing qualifications, such as the Higher School Certificate (HSC) in New South Wales, should be reviewed to place greater emphasis on practical communication skills and to introduce tiered levels of study, similar to English and Mathematics. This approach would make language learning more accessible, diverse, and rewarding for a broader range of students. It would also better accommodate their varied career aspirations and pathways for further education.

## **4. Opportunities to Develop Asian Cultural Literacy Beyond Language Learning**

### **4.1. Building an Asia Capability Ecosystem**

Developing Australia's Asia capabilities requires collaborative networks across education, workplaces, community organisations, and government. In schools, Asian history, geography, economics, and cultural studies should be integrated into the core curriculum, while universities should expand Asian cultural societies and dedicated course offerings.

Community organisations can offer a wide range of cultural programs, including traditional practices, festivals, and exhibitions. Sustained government support through funding and policy strategy is essential to enable these initiatives and create a cohesive Asia Capability Ecosystem.

### **4.2. Developing Asia-Ready Diplomatic Capability**

Australia must prioritise specialised cross-cultural capabilities to strengthen engagement with Asia. At the government level, hosting international delegations can be leveraged into cross-cultural competency training covering cultural norms, communication protocols, and value systems. At the community level, organisations like CASS have hosted government and not-for-profit representatives from China, Taiwan, and Korea across child care, aged care, disability services, and intergenerational programs. These exchanges enhance mutual understanding, inform government and peak-body policy, showcase Australian social service excellence, and build professional networks that reinforce Asia capability.

### **4.3. Supporting Community Organisations as Asia Capability Partners**

Several leading community organisations serving CALD communities, such as CASS, could play a key role in building Australia's Asia capability. For example, CASS has supported local Asian community organisations, including Auscoco, various clan associations, chambers of commerce, women's associations, and professional networks from China,

Indonesia, Korea, and Vietnam, to share and showcase their culture, generating a synergistic effect across the broader community.

Sustained multi-year funding, recognition in government planning, and capacity-building support would enable organisations like CASS to maximise their impact. Empowered community organisations can convert their cultural insight and networks into tangible outcomes, proving that enduring engagement with Asia rests on the collaborations between government and trusted community organisations.

## **Recommendation and Conclusion**

Education is one of the pillars of Australia's multicultural strength. With Asian nations as our largest sources of migration, building Asia's capability is no longer optional, it is a strategic imperative for social cohesion, economic competitiveness, and regional engagement. Yet, while our population becomes increasingly diverse, Asian language enrolments are declining, and community language schools operate with modest support, limiting their ability to leverage this diversity.

CASS has demonstrated that community organisations can effectively develop Asia capability through integrated programs spanning early childhood education, language instruction, cultural activities, and intergenerational engagement. The evidence is clear: Asia capability develops most effectively through sustained, community-based initiatives that integrate formal education with everyday cultural exchange.

At the broader level, what is needed is a coordinated Asia Capability ecosystem that recognises leading community organisations as strategic partners, provides sustained funding, and links community-based education with mainstream systems. Australia's multiculturalism is one of its greatest assets, but realising its full potential requires investment, coordination, and sustained political commitment across all levels of government.

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