



Innovative
Research
Universities



Inquiry into Building Asia Capability in Australia

November 2025





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Recommendations:

- Recognise Asia capability as a sovereign capability, included as a priority area of research through mechanisms such as the National Science and Research Priorities.
- Recognise Asia capability as part of the National Skills Taxonomy, to better reflect its status as an essential skill for Australia's future.
- Reform Job-Ready Graduates (JRG) policy by restoring government funding for humanities and social sciences (HASS) and reducing student fees (currently in the highest band)
- Reinststate a broad program of international mobility and engagement that complements the New Colombo Plan (NCP)
- Incorporate Asian languages and culture education and research, as appropriate, in new university mission-based compact agreements with government.

Context

The Innovative Research Universities (IRU) and its members have a long and proud history of engagement with the Indo-Pacific and we welcome the Government's inquiry into building Australia's Asia capability.

The inquiry aims to identify reforms that may support Australia's Asia capability, including structural reforms and barriers to its development, best practice models, the current state of Asian language and culture education, opportunities for promotion of Asian cultural literacy, and expectations of government coordination and collaboration.

IRU members have been engaging with Asia since the 1960s (when our universities were first established). This began with the arrival of Colombo Plan scholars, and was followed by Australia's first undergraduate programs in Asian studies (Griffith University's Bachelor of Asian Studies in 1975, Murdoch University's Southeast Asian Studies in 1975, and Flinders University's Asian Studies in 1976) and the early formation of Asia-Pacific research centres in the 1990s. These centres—still going strong today—include the Griffith Asia Institute, La Trobe Asia, The Cairns Institute at James Cook University, and Murdoch University's Indo-Pacific Research Centre.

We recognise that Asia capability is part of a wider regional focus that stretches from the countries of South Asia to the Pacific, as recognised by multiple government departments including DFAT and Defence. The IRU identifies engagement with the Indo-Pacific region as a key priority in its 2022–27 strategy, reflecting its shared focus for our members.

As a group, we have engaged in joint initiatives in India, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Pacific Island states to scale up our engagement with the region beyond what any one university can do on its own. Our universities have been active participants in government-supported student mobility initiatives including AsiaBound and the New Colombo Plan (NCP), establishing the IRU Scholars In Asia initiative in 2013 that aimed to increase the number of students engaging with Asia through consortium projects.

However, despite successive governments' attempts to increase Asian language learning and Asian cultural competencies, these goals have not been achieved. Instead, as highlighted by the Hon Tim Watts MP, there was a 75 per cent decline in enrolments in Southeast Asian languages at Australian universities between 2004 and 2022.

Our members offer studies in Japanese, Indonesian, Mandarin Chinese, Hindi, Korean, and Arabic, and across the IRU, around 50% more students are studying Asian languages compared with European languages. However, enrolments across all language groups are decreasing.

Research in Asian languages and culture fall under the banner of the humanities and social sciences (HASS), a discipline area that does not [receive the same level of support as STEM or medical sciences](#). Furthermore, the study of humanities (at undergraduate level) has been in decline since the 2010s, which could be attributed to it being undervalued for its perceived lack of utility in society and the workforce, and concerns about cost/misunderstandings about its economic value.¹ The Job-Ready Graduates funding model has contributed to the rhetoric that HASS does

1 Bradshaw, W., & Croft, J. (2025). Situating Narratives of Decline: Surveying the Literature of Crisis from a Regional Humanities Student Perspective. *Australian Humanities Review*, 73, 203–218. <https://doi.org/10.56449/14631928>

Norton, A. (2023, July 4). The decline of the humanities. *Andrew Norton: Higher education commentary from Carlton*. <https://andrewnorton.id.au/2023/07/04/the-decline-of-the-humanities/>

not produce graduates who are employment ready, and although foreign languages were tabled under Band 4, Asian studies was included under Band 1. This means that even if students major in a foreign language, they are still subject to the highest student fees for the rest of their subjects in Asian Studies. ([See IRU recommendations on options for JRG reform here.](#))

Recommendations

1. Recognise Asia capability as a sovereign capability, included as a priority area of research through mechanisms such as the National Science and Research Priorities.

Mr Watts correctly points out that Asian languages and cultural competencies are a sovereign capability, however they are not treated that way in the public and political narrative. It is essential for this narrative to change if this next phase of building Asia capability in Australia is to be successful. Government communication on what is included in priority research and skills agendas needs to clearly and intentionally include Asian languages and cultural competencies under sovereign capabilities.

National science/research priorities are set by the Department of Industry, Science and Resources (DISR), and non-STEM skills are not emphasised in the narrative. An example of where a focus on science has missed an opportunity to highlight Asia capabilities is Priority 5: building a secure and resilient nation. We have recommended that a new national coordinating body is needed for research and innovation, and it should be this body that sets whole-of-government priorities.



Similarly, the Strategic Examination of Research and Development (SERD) has focused on STEM and industry innovation, something that we highlighted in [our submission to the review](#), where we argued for the need for more engagement with the humanities and Social Sciences. [As we noted in our response](#), public funding of HASS is now a fraction of what is available for STEM.

The SERD process has also lacked a focus on the importance of international capabilities, engagement and collaboration for ensuring R&D outcomes for Australia. DISR is currently consulting on a proposal for Australia to join the EU's Horizon Programme for research collaboration, but there has been no analysis of the opportunity cost of focusing investment on Europe rather than on our region. Australia needs a broader strategy for international research that includes a clear focus on our partners and neighbours in the Indo-Pacific region, as well as the traditional research powerhouses in the northern hemisphere.

Domestically, Australia has seen a remarkable expansion of research capability in universities across the country over the last 20–30 years. As young universities have grown and become more research intensive, communities across Australia can benefit from the creation and diffusion of new knowledge. The Group of Eight universities remain our largest research universities, but they [no longer represent the bulk of Australia's research output](#).

For example, IRU members Griffith University, La Trobe University, and Western Sydney University are all in the top ten for research outputs in Asian studies (over the last decade), along with Group of Eight colleagues. This demonstrates a need to understand where contemporary capabilities sit and to ensure that research funding is fairly distributed among universities and fields of research, to most effectively build upon the capabilities we have.

Our vision is that all students and communities can benefit as much as possible from research-informed teaching and opportunities to engage with the Indo-Pacific. Decentralising investment in research will ensure students and communities are not disadvantaged by geography. These regional and outer-suburban students interested in research careers in Asian studies also need support to pursue this interest without relocating from their communities. Investment in their research futures, through fair distribution of funding, will aid this coursework-to-research pipeline. It is also important that teaching and research in Asian studies and languages are connected to local communities across the country, including diaspora communities (see IRU examples below).

Similarly, Ministerial Direction 107 (which limited the number of international students coming to Australia) disproportionately affected smaller outer-metropolitan and regional universities. We welcome the government's efforts this year to ensure that there is a more equitable and sustainable distribution of international student places across the country, so that all communities enjoy the benefits of internationally engaged teaching and research.

Currently, there is no clear definition of Asian studies within Australia's Field of Research framework. Asian studies is a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary field incorporating fields such as geography, politics, anthropology, and history. Indonesia is recognised as the world's largest Muslim democracy, therefore disciplines such as Islamic studies are also of relevance to Australians. A clearer definition would assist in benchmarking the status of Asian studies research in Australia.

The IRU is actively involved in international partnerships to strengthen our international collaborations through more meaningful engagement and cultural understanding.

For example, we are working with the University of the South Pacific (USP) on a program to connect staff members between the Pacific and Australia for professional development. We have provided a proposal to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (for mobility from Australian universities to the Pacific region), and conducted a small-scale pilot program in October (for USP staff to come to spend time in our universities in Australia). We are also liaising with the Pacific



Island Universities Research Network (PIURN) on ways our two groups can work together on new models of collaboration that will include more institutions than the existing Pacific Research Program. Targeted support for initiatives such as these will assist in increasing regional capabilities and partnerships.

One way in which Australia could promote the value of Asian cultural literacy is to establish a nation-wide prize for Asia Engagement, similar to the Prime Minister's Prize for Science. This would serve to communicate the value of research in these disciplines and support those researchers to continue in the field.

2. Recognise Asia capability as part of the National Skills Taxonomy, to better reflect its status as an essential skill for Australia's future.

HASS capabilities need to be viewed as critical skills in the same way that STEM capabilities are. Students graduate from these fields with skills in analytical thinking, resilience, agility and creative thinking—all of which are in demand from employers.² Research from the Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social

² World Economic Forum (2025). *Future of Jobs Report*. https://reports.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs_Report_2025.pdf



Sciences and Humanities show that 89% of graduates from undergraduate degrees in humanities, culture and social Sciences were in full-time employment within three years of graduating, similar to that of graduates in STEM.³

Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) plays a valuable role in highlighting skills shortages across Australia. Accordingly, JSA has a role to play in changing the narrative around the utility of Asian languages and cultural literacy. Asian capabilities should be included on the list of priority skills and recognised as part of the National Skills Taxonomy.

The pipeline of language education also needs to be viewed within a wider skills framework. A decline in language graduates from higher education contributes to a lack of teacher supply in the school system. States typically required a three-year major in a language, sometimes above an introductory level of study (that is, they must have come to the major from Year 12 studies in that language) to be able to teach it in schools. This is not an unreasonable requirement. However, it demonstrates the precarity of the entire pipeline of foreign language education in Australia, and highlights the need for a whole-of-education approach to driving increased language study. This includes ongoing language education at universities, which can be improved through recognition of language literacy as a priority skill for Australia's future.

Additionally, the perception of utility for HASS degrees could be improved with increased engagement between students and the workforce, as it already done with law and accounting (although it is worth noting these are needed for accreditation purposes). Many universities already offer work-integrated learning (WIL) and this could be further extended to students in Asian studies and

other related disciplines. A challenge remains the identification of partners (businesses and, critically, partners in the public and community sectors) that offer the relevant international experience, particularly for those in regional and outer-suburban areas.

3. Reform Job-Ready Graduates (JRG) by restoring government funding for humanities and social sciences (HASS) and reducing student fees (currently in the highest band)

Although languages subjects are classified under the lowest student contribution band under the Job-Ready Graduates policy, Asian studies, and other subjects that contribute to Asian cultural literacy, have been included under the highest fee-paying band. This disincentivises students to study these degrees. University enrolments have declined since JRG was introduced in 2021 and the declines are more pronounced among key groups, including students from low-SES backgrounds and from regional/rural areas. Asia capabilities should not be limited to students from affluent, capital-city backgrounds, and diverse engagement across all demographics is essential for meeting skills shortages and strengthening engagement with Asia.

The Universities Accord recommended reforming JRG to make student contributions more equitable. However, this is yet to be enacted. We have provided [step-by-step modelling for JRG reform](#) and we urge the Government to adopt it without further delay.

4. Reinstate a broad program of international mobility and engagement that complements the New Colombo Plan (NCP)

The IRU strongly supports opportunities for all students to be able to engage with the Indo-Pacific region. However, as we noted [in our](#)

3 Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (2025). *Impact & Outcomes: Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities in Australia*. <https://dassh.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2025-Impact-Outcomes-Australia-1.pdf>

[response to the New Colombo Plan Advisory Group](#), there is a risk of NCP becoming an elite program that is out of reach for students from equity group backgrounds and non-school-leaver backgrounds—demographics that are more common in regional and outer-suburban universities. We believe all students should have the opportunity to engage regardless of their geographical location or socioeconomic status. Australia also needs a coherent, long-term commitment to a flagship international education, mobility, and exchange program.

The NCP is now the only international program supporting mobility. 2024 changes to the guidelines for NCP mobility grants, in particular the doubling of the minimum time period for projects, make it harder for students and universities to participate in this beneficial initiative. This in turn reduces the ability of the program to achieve its stated objectives and inhibits access for students to increase their Indo-Pacific capability and literacy.

Furthermore, NCP is limited to undergraduate students aged between 18 and 30 years old (35 for Indigenous students) and no similar program is available to postgraduate students, research students, or older students. This

narrow criteria reduces opportunities for students to engage with the region.

Australia has historically had strong government support for student, staff, and researcher mobility in Asia. But government support has become haphazard, prone to cuts and tweaks by politicians, and declined significantly over the past decades. John Howard's government established the Endeavour Program in 2003. This was



a flagship higher education program, established alongside a new National Centre for Language Training hosted at UNSW (in partnership with Curtin, Griffith, Monash and UniSA and TAFEs) which aimed to boost the language and cultural skills for Australian exporters, business, professionals, and the tourism industry. This built upon Australia's leadership in the University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific Program (UMAP), supported by the government since 1992. Kevin Rudd's government then introduced the Prime Minister's Australia Asia Awards and Julia Gillard's government created the AsiaBound program, both through carve-outs from the Endeavour Program.⁴ In 2018, Malcolm Turnbull's government ended the Endeavour Program, replacing it with the Destination Australia program targeting regional Australia, retaining an investment of \$59m in 2017–18—around \$71m today, accounting for inflation. However, by the 2024 Budget, Anthony Albanese's government decided there would be no further funding rounds of the Destination Australia program, with overall education investment declining to \$29m in 2023–24.

These collections of programs supported broader international engagement and student mobility objectives which complemented the NCP. Cuts and tweaks to programs, such as Endeavour and Destination Australia, have narrowed opportunities for students and researchers from both Australia and partner countries, undermining continuity and understanding of Australia's support for international education.

5. Incorporate Asian languages and culture education and research, as appropriate, in new university mission-based compact agreements with government

Australia's migrant and diaspora communities are a valuable resource for developing our Asia capabilities. IRU members are actively working with these communities in ways that will enhance both the communities and the students engaging with them.

Flinders University's Language in Action program brings language students into contact with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) community members in aged care. This provides benefits to both the students, who are learning about language and culture in a real-world environment, and the elderly residents who receive interactions that are beneficial for their mental and social wellbeing. Students who participated in this program were more likely to pursue further language studies while retaining their community engagement.

Griffith University's Pathways in Place program works with members of the Māori and Pāsifika communities to improve their participation in higher education. Culturally diverse communities are often under-represented in higher education and increasing access for them benefits both community members and non-community members through fostering cultural engagement and collaboration. However, migrant communities are not reflected as part of equity cohorts, therefore, there are missed opportunities to reach them as prospective students.

Low enrolments in Asian languages, as identified by Mr Watts, risks the future of universities' ability to offer these languages. Courses with a small number of students

4 Anderson, K., & Barker J. (2019, May 28). ale Endeavour, Long Live the New Endeavour: The End of Australia's World Leading Commitment to Internationalism and the Opportunity to Reassert Ourselves. *Australian Policy and History*. <https://aph.org.au/2019/05/vale-endeavour/>

are not financially viable, even if they are in the national interest. It is therefore necessary for the government to support universities in keeping these courses open, which could be done through institution-specific, mission-based compacts that allow universities to specialise and focus on their distinct missions and communities, as well as protecting key national capabilities (for more detail see our Universities Accord submission). The new Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) should have a role to look across the system to make sure critical capabilities are being maintained (in teaching and research) in areas of national priority, while also ensuring fair distribution and

equitable access to these courses for students outside of inner-city locations.

The ATEC could also play a valuable role in sharing best practice and supporting innovation and infrastructure (including digital infrastructure) for new approaches to teaching languages and Asian studies. This could include the adoption of new artificial intelligence (AI) and other tools in teaching, learning, and research across universities. Our vision is for a more collaborative and less competitive higher education system, with national stewardship to ensure that critical capabilities for the future of Australia are protected and nurtured.



About the IRU

The Innovative Research Universities (IRU) is a network of seven public research universities across Australia, committed to inclusive education that expands access and opportunity, and research with impact that advances our communities.

Innovative Research Universities

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