

## Response to The Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper

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The Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper signals the importance of the higher education sector in contributing to Australia's "sovereign capability" in such areas as "advanced expertise, critical technologies and enduring strong cultures of scholarship and critical enquiry". It further notes that "geopolitical tension and challenges to globalisation" pose challenges that needs to be addressed in future developments (see p.7).

The ability of Australian universities to develop national expertise in the societies, cultures and languages of our region is a key component of building resilience in meeting future geopolitical challenges. Past experience demonstrates that student demand for Asian languages and studies begins at school level and, if successful, carries over into the university sector. Federally coordinated programs supporting school Asian language programs were terminated in 2012. Subsequently, the number of universities offering Asian languages in higher education also declined.<sup>1</sup> University programs in Northeast Asian languages increased in enrolments during this period, but this was due to strong growth in the enrolment of international students. Domestic enrolment in these same languages fell below the growth rate of the domestic student cohort as a whole.<sup>2</sup> Further, enrolments in advanced language programs teaching critical thinking using Asian language sources have declined even more sharply. In the case of advanced Chinese language study, Australian universities graduated only 17 students in Chinese Honours between 2017 and 2021.<sup>3</sup> The generational pipeline that has provided Australia with its China specialists is now in sharp decline. As argued in a recent report: "This is an extraordinary gap at a time when we need Australian perspectives to help navigate out future".<sup>4</sup>

Looking to future needs (see Accord Discussion Paper, Q.4), it is argued here that Australia needs the university sector to monitor and develop educational programs addressing critical gaps in our sovereign capability in meeting geopolitical challenges in our region. A key expertise that needs to be monitored and promoted is the teaching of Asian languages and Asian literacy to domestic students, and the active encouragement of domestic students to undertake advanced studies in Asian languages and related disciplinary and critical studies. Asian literacy should be a requirement for the majority of Australian university graduates. Advanced Asian language and related study skills should be readily available for a particular cohort of students with career aspirations relating to public service, business, the

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<sup>1</sup> Aspinall, E & Crouch, M. 2023, *Australia's Asia Education Imperative: Trends in the Study of Asia and Pathways for Reform*, Asian Studies Association of Australia, Canberra <http://doi.org/10.26190/ha4q-dm52>  
See Executive Summary, p.2.

<sup>2</sup> Aspinall and Crouch, *Australia's Asia Education Imperative*, p.36.

<sup>3</sup> Australian Academy of the Humanities, 2023, *Australia's China Knowledge Capability: University teaching, research, and future needs*. Canberra.  
<https://humanities.org.au/our-work/projects/australias-china-knowledge-capability/>

<sup>4</sup> Anne McLaren, 2023, "How well does Australia know China?" *Melbourne Asia Review*, Asia Institute, University of Melbourne  
<https://melbourneasiareview.edu.au/how-well-does-australia-know-china/>

professions, and research in international fields (see Q.8 and 9 relating to skills and knowledge for the labour market).

Specific strategies to promote the role of Australian universities in developing national expertise in the societies, cultures and languages of the Asian region could include the following:

- Strategies to ensure transparency and accountability with regard to the revenue raised by universities from international students. A proportion of funds from international enrolments could be deployed specifically to strengthen and sustain Asian literacy and language programs for domestic students.
- The reporting and collection of data on domestic enrolments in Asian languages and related studies in the higher education sector. Currently this sort of data is very difficult to collect. Data about Asian languages and related studies from first to fourth year, and also at postgraduate level, should be reported annually to the Commonwealth in order to allow for monitoring of progress.
- Domestic students should be incentivized to undertake Asian literacy and language programs both at school and university through a co-ordinated program of monitoring and funding from the Commonwealth and state sectors.
- Universities are currently not incentivized to provide advanced Asian language and related studies to domestic students as enrolments are small. Scholarships (and fee waivers) are required to incentivize students to undertake courses such as Honours or specialist Masters by Coursework programs in Asian Studies.
- National scholarships are required for domestic students to undertake research degrees in fields that require advanced Asian language skills.

The market-based orientation of Australian Higher Education has brought prosperity to Australia and many dividends to the Australian community, but it has not led to optimal results in the case of the study of Asian languages and Asian Studies, particularly with regard to training at advanced level. Oversight by the Australian government is required to right the balance in favour of the national interest.

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