

# ASIA LITERACY AND EMPLOYABILITY

REFRAMING  
ASIA SKILLS



A new research collaboration mapping  
the challenges and opportunities for  
Asia-engaged young Australians

# KEY FINDINGS

- We must recognise and champion diverse forms of Asia literacy in our young people; equip employers to value these skills; and support opportunities to learn about and experience Asia beyond formal study and throughout careers.
- For example, more Australians – including citizens and non-citizens, across all age groups – are using languages other than English at home, including Asian languages.
- 410,000+ Australian citizens, aged 18 to 35 years, use an Eastern, Southern or Southeast Asian language at home, which is more than the combined population of Hobart and Darwin.
- In NSW, VIC and the ACT, at least 1 in 10 Australian citizens, aged 18 to 35, use an Asian language at home.
- Nationally, the most used Asian language at home by Australian citizens aged 18 to 35 years is Mandarin, followed by Vietnamese, Cantonese, Punjabi and Hindi. Tagalog and Filipino, when combined, account for nearly 31,000 language users which would place them fourth nationally:

1. Mandarin	2. Vietnamese	3. Cantonese	4. Punjabi	5. Hindi
6. Tagalog	7. Urdu	8. Korean	9. Nepali	10. Tamil

- The usage of Asian languages by young Australians differs across states and territories. **Mandarin** leads in the ACT, NSW, QLD and WA; **Vietnamese** in SA and VIC; **Tagalog** in the NT; and **Nepali** in TAS.
- Between 2014 to 2019, the number of Australian undergraduates studying in the Indo-Pacific increased by 83%, from 8,437 students to 15,440 students, with the Australian Government’s New Colombo Plan a key driver.
- Only 21 out of 2,300+ postgraduate coursework programs offered by Australian universities offer an Asia-focused specialisation, highlighting an opportunity to support life-long learning opportunities related to Asia.
- ‘Employability’ is a useful framework through which to consider Asia literacy and employment in Australia. In addition to academic disciplines, Asia literacy is a set of achievements that enhance the employability of young people in Australia.
- There are opportunities for greater business engagement in young Australians’ Asia literacy. We need to better understand demand for Asia literacy in Australian workplaces, particularly for graduate, entry-level and early career positions.

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# ASIA LITERACY AND EMPLOYABILITY

## INTRODUCTION

This report provides unique, data-informed insights into the diversity of young Australians; their Asia-related skills and knowledge; and the potential of young people from across the Asia Pacific who are living, studying and working in Australia. This report reframes 'Asia literacy' and broadens perspectives of what Asia literacy means, how it can be measured and how it links to employability.

As borders reopen, young people from across Australia and Asia are charting their futures in a region that is more complex than ever before. Defined by disruption, economic challenges and tensions in diplomacy and trade, we must foster Australia-Asia youth connectivity and equip our next generation leaders with the knowledge and skills to thrive in a new era of regional relations.

This is the second report in a series of three which have been commissioned by Asia Society Australia to map the challenges and opportunities for Asia-engaged young Australians in COVID-19 contexts. The first report, [Keeping Connected](#), explores the impact of COVID-19 on Australia-Asia youth engagement and presents an evidence-based framework for an Australia - Asia Pacific Youth Engagement Index. [Keeping Connected](#) also highlights a number of creative solutions to sustaining youth engagement, many of which were generated by [youth-led organisations](#) throughout the pandemic. The final report in this series will explore how the talent of young, Asia-engaged Australians as well as young people from across the Asia Pacific who live, study and work in Australia, can be acknowledged and championed in the future.

The first part of this report explores Asia literacy, which is also referred to in Australia as 'Asia capability' or 'Asia competency' and encompasses Asia-related knowledge and skills practised by Australians. This section presents data from the 2021 Australian Census to explore the linguistic diversity of young Australians and also discusses recent growth in experiential learning in Asia by Australian university students. The second part of this report links Asia literacy to employability and argues for further research which

interrogates workplace demand for Asia literacy by Australian employers.

## DEFINITIONS >

There are three key terms used in this report which are important to define from the outset:

### Youth

refers here to young people aged between 18 and 35 years.

### Asia

is intentionally used as an umbrella term to cover the following regions, nations and economies:

- Southeast Asia: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste and Viet Nam.
- Northeast Asia: People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, Japan, Macau, Mongolia, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Republic of Korea and Taiwan.
- South Asia: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.
- In this report, Pacific uses the Australian Bureau of Statistics classifications of [Melanesia](#), [Micronesia](#) and [Polynesia](#), and excludes New Zealand.

### Asian languages

refers in this report to 'Eastern Asian languages', 'Southern Asian languages' and 'Southeast Asian languages' as listed in Appendix A.

# ASIA LITERACY AND THE DIVERSITY OF AUSTRALIAN YOUTH

## REFRAMING ASIA LITERACY >

The term 'Asia literacy' was first used by Dr Stephen FitzGerald, then Chairman of the Asian Studies Council, a body established by the Australian federal government, in an address in 1988:

**Our being proximate to Asia can only work to our advantage if our closeness persuades us that as a nation we must become 'Asia-literate'; that is, have a populace in which knowledge of an Asian language is commonplace and knowledge about Asian customs, economies and societies very widespread<sup>1</sup>.**

Numerous Australian government policies and reports, since as early as 1970, have cast Asia literacy as a need to encourage more Australian students to learn Asian languages and Asian studies in Australian education systems, encompassing primary and high schools as well as training and vocational education institutions and universities. 'Measurements' of Asia literacy reflect this and typically articulate enrolments of Australian students in Asian languages and Asian studies courses. Young Australians cannot become Asia literate, it seems, outside of these places of formal learning.

Australia's Asia literacy is often reported as being in decline and sometimes 'in crisis' with very low participation rates of Year 12 students in, for example, Indonesian, Hindi and Korean. Australia's school system, across eight states and territories and three education systems (Government, Catholic, Independent) is both complex and fragmented, making

it very difficult to obtain and compare enrolments in languages education, let alone participation in more generalised Asian studies subjects. Furthermore, recent results of the OECD's 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), show that in comparison to their OECD peers, a mere 12% of whom do not learn a foreign language at school, 64% of Australian 15 year old students reported not learning a foreign language at school.

Conventional responses to low participation in Asian languages education in Australia tend to emphasise our deficits, not our assets. The teaching and learning of Asian languages and Asian studies in Australian schools, vocational training institutions and universities is undoubtedly important and Australian students should be provided with these educational opportunities. However, what if we were to broaden our perspective of Asia literacy and consider other ways that young Australians learn about and experience Asia?

The significance of this is twofold. First, by focusing on Asia literacy as it is acquired in Australian schools, vocational training institutions and universities we mask the diversity of young people in Australia, including Australian citizens, permanent residents, international students and other temporary migrants and visitors. We take meaning away from the ways in which they may *already* know about particular countries across Asia and their ability to communicate in particular Asian languages. Second, by focusing on student enrolments in Asian languages and Asian studies, we only measure one type of Asia literacy. As this report demonstrates, there are indeed many ways that young Australians are exposed to, experience and learn about Asia during their formal education and into their early careers.

<sup>1</sup> S FitzGerald, 'National education policy and Asian studies', in E M McKay (ed), Towards an Asia-literate society, Current Issues in Asian Studies Series: No. 3, Asian Studies Association of Australia, 1988, p. 9.

A broader approach to Asia literacy could include the following, often inter-related, ways that Australian young people learn about Asia:

- Family background and heritage, for example, using an Asian language at home or having a parent, grandparent or other family member from a country in Asia.
- Experiential learning in Asia, for example, through an outbound student mobility experience or virtual student mobility program; participation in a formal youth dialogue<sup>2</sup>; or an extended holiday or other time spent in Asia.
- Participation in an internship or volunteer program or undertaking paid work in Asia.
- Engagement in social media and digital platforms, including popular media and streaming services as well as [online innovations](#) that emerged during COVID.
- Teaching or learning in community language programs and other related settings.
- Other networks, friendships and personal connections through which young people learn about and experience Asia, including participating in Australia-Asia youth-led organisations<sup>3</sup>.

These points build on the four key enablers of Australia-Asia youth connectivity that were outlined in the first report of this series, [Keeping Connected](#): tourism, international education, employment and civic engagement. Of course, these points above do not always lend themselves to straightforward measurement, in the same way that counting enrolments in schools, vocational training institutions or universities does.

This report aims to not prescribe the ways that young Australians can become Asia literate or to become entangled in definitions of Asia literacy. Rather, this report aims to recognise and celebrate the multiplicity of ways in which young Australians have opportunities to learn about and experience Asia.

This section presents two important data sets that provide insights into Asia literacy and the diversity of Australian youth in line with the scope of our research. First, we consider Asian languages as they are used by young Australians in their home environment, captured through the Australian Census. Second, we explore outbound learning experiences, which have become a distinctive feature of Australian university education, to destinations across the Asia Pacific.



<sup>2</sup> A sample of these can be found in the first report in this series, [Generation Asia Report 1: Keeping Connected](#), Asia Society Australia, 2022, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

## ASIAN LANGUAGES IN AUSTRALIA >

This section presents an analysis of the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data on the demographics of young Australians and their use of Asian languages 'at home' as reported in the last four Australian Censuses, including 2021. For the purpose of our analysis, 'Asian languages' include all Eastern, Southern and Southeast Asian languages as outlined in Appendix 1<sup>4</sup>.

### A note on the Australian Census

Every five years, the ABS counts every person and household in Australia in the 'Census of Population and Housing' (known as 'the Census'). The ABS [describes the Census](#) as 'the most comprehensive snapshot of Australia' in relation to the economic, social and cultural composition of society, and one which tells the story of how we are changing.

In using the Census to explore reported languages used in Australian homes, it is important to note:

- Census data does not distinguish between Australian citizens and permanent residents. The possible relevant categories in the Census are 'Australian citizen', 'non-citizen' and 'not stated', meaning that Australian permanent residents cannot be captured in this analysis. A number of countries across the Asia Pacific, including China, Indonesia, India, Japan, Malaysia and Singapore, do not permit dual citizenship for adults. It is highly likely that there are substantial communities of Australian permanent residents who would report using an Asian language at home in addition to those who are Australian citizens and are included in this analysis. We posit that our analysis reflects a minimum number of young people in Australia who use an Asian language at home and that Asian languages are used in many more homes in Australia which comprise permanent residents.
- The data collection method used by the Census is primarily self-reporting via a survey. [In relation to languages used at home](#), respondents can provide only one language other than English and cannot list multiple languages. There are many, complex sociolinguistic reasons that Census respondents report a particular language used in their home.
- Language use across Asia, and indeed globally, does not conform to national boundaries. For example, Mandarin and Cantonese are used widely across China and the Special Administrative Regions of Hong Kong and Macau as well as in Malaysia, Singapore and Taiwan. Hindi is an official language in India and in Fiji. Urdu is used widely across India and Pakistan. English is also a common first language among specific demographic groups in Hong Kong, India, Malaysia, Pakistan, Singapore and Sri Lanka.

The number of people living in Australia, including citizens and non-citizens across all age groups, who use 'English only' in Australian homes is decreasing. In 2021, this was 72% of the entire population, as shown below. This means that the number of people using languages other than English at home in Australia is increasing. This includes the usage of Asian languages by Australian citizens aged 18 to 35 years, which is the age group of interest to this research.

**Figure 1: Proportion of Australian citizens and non-citizens, of all ages, using 'English only' at home, 2006 - 2021**

Year	2006	2011	2016	2021
%	78.5%	76.8%	72.7%	72.0%

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics

<sup>4</sup> Pacific languages, which include Oceanian Pidgins and Creole, Austronesian and Papua New Guinea languages were not included. These languages have very limited usage in Australia. 'Southwest and Central Asian languages', including Arabic, are also not included in this analysis in line with the definition of 'Asia' used in this series of reports.

When we focus on young Australians as shown below, in 2021 'only English' is used at home by 82.7% of this age group. Asian languages, including Eastern, Southern and Southeast Asian languages, are the next largest grouping and are well ahead of European languages.

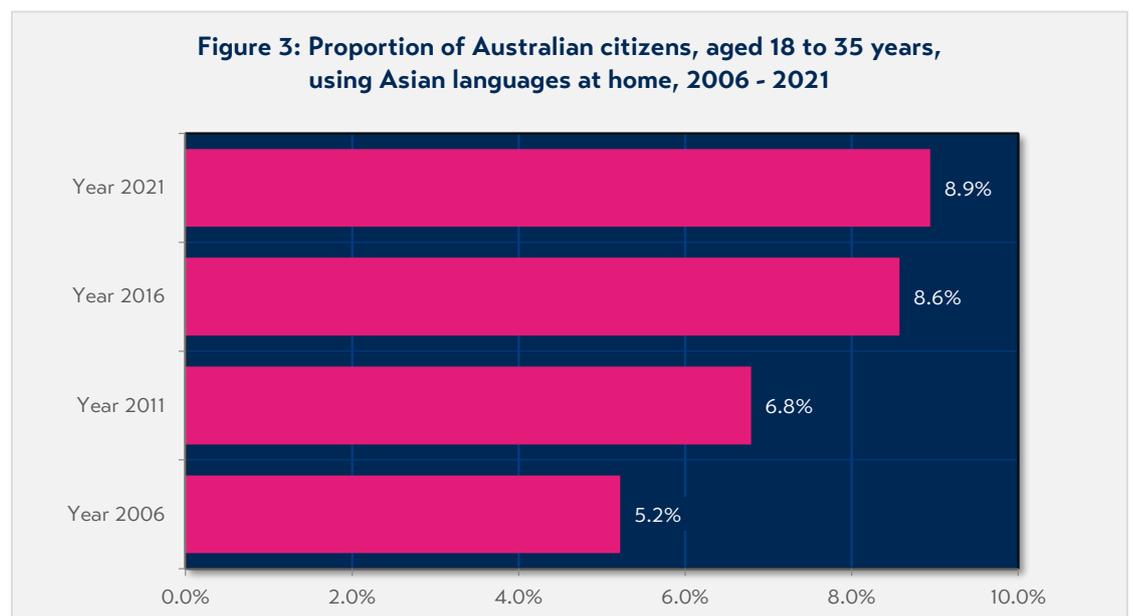
**Figure 2: Languages used at home by Australian citizens, aged 18 to 35 years, 2006 - 2021**

Languages	2006	%	2011	%	2016	%	2021	%
Northern European (including English)	3,432,121	85.5%	3,483,729	84.6%	3,569,045	83.2%	3,840,796	83.1%
Eastern Asian	85,452	2.1%	111,274	2.7%	136,483	3.2%	144,302	3.1%
Southeast Asian	86,512	2.2%	94,592	2.3%	111,742	2.6%	126,765	2.7%
Southern Asian	36,723	0.9%	73,869	1.8%	119,452	2.8%	142,348	3.1%
Southwest and Central Asian	94,056	2.4%	110,061	2.7%	119,753	2.8%	133,381	2.9%
Southern European	133,824	3.3%	108,847	2.6%	92,201	2.1%	84,924	1.8%
Eastern European	74,726	1.9%	69,137	1.7%	58,463	1.4%	52,446	1.1%
Other and Not Stated	39,187	1.0%	48,353	1.2%	62,362	1.5%	75,432	1.6%
Australian Indigenous	16,582	0.4%	18,480	0.4%	18,958	0.4%	22,492	0.5%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>3,99,186</b>		<b>4,118,342</b>		<b>4,288,459</b>		<b>4,622,886</b>	
<b>Total Asian Languages</b>	<b>208,687</b>	<b>5.2%</b>	<b>279,735</b>	<b>6.8%</b>	<b>367,677</b>	<b>8.6%</b>	<b>413,415</b>	<b>8.9%</b>

Source: Based on Australian Bureau of Statistics data

According to the 2021 Census, 8.9% of young Australians use Eastern, Southern and Southeast Asian languages at home. This equates to more than 410,000 people, which is more than the combined population of Hobart and Darwin. The number of young Australians who use an Asian language at home has been growing, as a proportion of the total population, from 5.2% in 2006 to 8.9% in 2021. Over the last five years, the use of Southern and Southeast Asian languages at home by this demographic has grown faster than languages from Eastern Asia, which includes Mandarin and Cantonese

**Figure 3: Proportion of Australian citizens, aged 18 to 35 years, using Asian languages at home, 2006 - 2021**



Source: Based on Australian Bureau of Statistics data

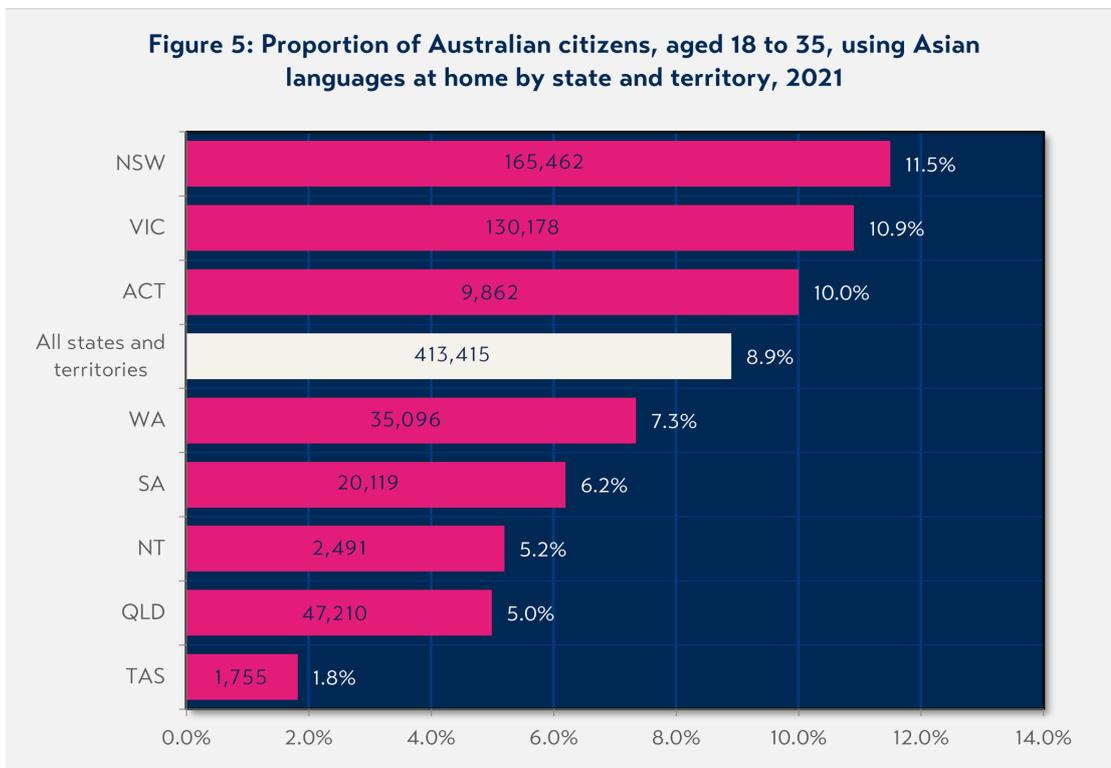
**Figure 4: Australian citizens, aged 18 to 35 years, using Eastern, Southeast and Southern Asian languages at home, 2006 - 2021**

2006	2011	2016	2021
208,687	279,735	367,677	413,415

Source: Based on Australian Bureau of Statistics data

The proportion of young Australians using Asian languages across different Australian states and territories is not uniform. As shown below, the 2021 Census reported that the state with the highest percentage of young Australians using Asian languages at home was New South Wales (11.7%), followed by Victoria (10.9%) and the Australian Capital Territory (10.0%). This compares to 7.3% in Western Australia, 6.2% in South Australia, 5.2% in Northern Territory, 5.0% in QLD and 1.8% in Tasmania. The proportion of young Australians using Asian languages at home has increased in all states and territories since the last census.

**Figure 5: Proportion of Australian citizens, aged 18 to 35, using Asian languages at home by state and territory, 2021**



Source: Based on Australian Bureau of Statistics data

410,000+ Australian citizens aged 18 to 35 years - or more than the combined population of Hobart and Darwin - use an Eastern, Southern or Southeast Asian language at home.

Data from the 2021 Census also highlights the diversity of Asian languages used in Australian homes – nationally and by state and territory. Nationally, the most used Asian language by young Australians is Mandarin, followed by Vietnamese, Cantonese, Punjabi and Hindi. When combined, Tagalog and Filipino, which are both used widely in the Philippines, account for nearly 31,000 language users, which would place them fourth nationally. Rounding out the top ten languages are Urdu, Korean, Nepali and Tamil.

**Figure 6: Most used Asian languages at home by Australian citizens, aged 18 to 35, 2021**

1. Mandarin	66,028 people	9. Nepali	11,281 people
2. Vietnamese	62,759 people	10. Tamil	11,259 people
3. Cantonese	50,903 people	11. Filipino	10,631 people
4. Punjabi	30,823 people	12. Bengali	10,416 people
5. Hindi	23,910 people	13. Sinhalese	10,373 people
6. Tagalog	20,307 people	14. Gujarati	9,806 people
7. Urdu	14,856 people	15. Malayalam	7,964 people
8. Korean	14,276 people	16. Other	57,832 people

Source: Based on Australian Bureau of Statistics data

This attests to the diversity of Asian languages used by Australian young people at home. The top 15 Asian languages listed above are used across China as well as the Special Administrative Regions of Hong Kong and Macau; Viet Nam; India; the Philippines; Pakistan; North and South Korea; Nepal; Sri Lanka; and Bangladesh. Mandarin and Cantonese are also used widely across Malaysia, Singapore and Taiwan; Hindi in Fiji; and Tamil in Malaysia and Singapore.

The distribution of Asian languages used by Australian young people also differs by state and territory and reflects broader migration patterns. For example, Mandarin is the most used Asian language by young Australians in the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia; Vietnamese leads in South Australia and Victoria; Tagalog in the Northern Territory; and Nepali in Tasmania.

The top five Asian languages used by young Australians across each state and territory are listed in Figure 7. Mandarin and Vietnamese feature in the top five languages for each state and territory. Tagalog features in the Northern Territory, Queensland and Western Australia; Korean in New South Wales; and Nepali in the Northern Territory, South Australia and Tasmania.

**Figure 7: Top five Asian languages used at home by Australian citizens, aged 18 to 35, by state and territory, 2021**

Australian Capital Territory		New South Wales	
Mandarin	1,685 people	Mandarin	27,886 people
Vietnamese	916 people	Cantonese	27,429 people
Cantonese	868 people	Vietnamese	23,219 people
Punjabi	717 people	Hindi	10,102 people
Hindi	712 people	Korean	8,793 people
Northern Territory		Queensland	
Tagalog	494 people	Mandarin	8,003 people
Filipino	257 people	Vietnamese	5,965 people
Vietnamese	197 people	Punjabi	4,524 people
Mandarin	184 people	Cantonese	4,284 people
Nepali	170 people	Tagalog	3,043 people
South Australia		Tasmania	
Vietnamese	4,268 people	Nepali	397 people
Mandarin	2,399 people	Mandarin	351 people
Punjabi	2,133 people	Cantonese	130 people
Cantonese	1,488 people	Vietnamese	122 people
Nepali	1,127 people	Punjabi	96 people
Victoria		Western Australia	
Vietnamese	23,751 people	Mandarin	4,853 people
Mandarin	20,681 people	Vietnamese	4,316 people
Cantonese	13,816 people	Tagalog	3,394 people
Punjabi	13,167 people	Punjabi	2,808 people
Hindi	7,479 people	Cantonese	2,733 people

Source: Based on Australian Bureau of Statistics data

**The Census shows that the home environment is a significant site for Asian language usage in Australia, one that is usually absent from national discussions about Asia literacy.**

Asian languages and Asian studies education in formal places of learning, such as schools, vocational training institutions and Universities, is only one path to becoming Asia literate and masks latent Asia literacy within Australia's population aged 18 to 35 years. The challenge we face is to develop and practise more inclusive definitions of Asia literacy that recognise and champion these young people and their knowledge and experiences of Asia.

## EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN ASIA BY AUSTRALIAN STUDENTS >

Learning abroad, or global mobility, programs are available across Australian education systems, but it is higher education for which the most reliable data is available. Australian university students have access to learning abroad programs which give them opportunities to study about Asia in Asia, despite not necessarily being enrolled in an Asia-focused program of study. These have [diversified](#) well beyond traditional semester-long reciprocal exchange programs to include credit bearing and extra-curricular short-term experiences; global study tours, health placements, studios and research experiences; as well as global internships and work placements.

Prior to COVID-19, learning abroad had grown significantly to become a [distinctive feature](#) of Australian university education. In 2019, 58,058 students at Australian universities participated in a learning abroad experience<sup>5</sup>. At the undergraduate level, Australia had become a world leader in learning abroad; in 2019, almost one in four (23%) Australian undergraduate students participated in learning abroad, ahead of comparable cohorts in the USA (16%), Canada (11%) and UK (7%).

A primary driver for Australian students' participation in learning abroad since 2014 has been the [New Colombo Plan](#). This is a signature Australian federal government program which has the explicit goal of lifting knowledge of the Indo-Pacific region among young Australians and providing a 'rite of passage' to future career and life opportunities. The New Colombo Plan provides Australian government funding, through scholarships and mobility grants, to support learning abroad programs and internships in [40 destinations](#) across the Indo-Pacific. The Australian government has committed more than \$400 million to supporting learning abroad experiences in the Indo-Pacific through the New Colombo Plan from 2014 to 2024.

As shown below, between 2014 and 2019, the number of Australian undergraduates studying in the Indo-Pacific increased by 83% from 8,437 students in 2014 to 15,440 students in 2019. The number of Australian undergraduates studying in Indonesia and India nearly doubled, with even greater growth for Malaysia and Viet Nam.

**Figure 8: Top Indo-Pacific destinations for Australian undergraduate students learning abroad, 2014 - 2019**

Destination	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Growth 2014 - 2019
China	1,936	2,162	2,304	2,354	2,270	2,292	18.40%
Indonesia	792	1,234	913	1,181	1,402	1,545	95.10%
Japan	907	1,074	1,190	1,429	1,429	1,478	63.00%
India	737	1,032	1,195	1,277	1,459	1,406	90.80%
Malaysia	343	645	815	787	881	1,218	255.10%
Viet Nam	327	628	691	815	982	1,185	262.40%
Singapore	471	659	671	613	677	754	60.10%
Cambodia	393	728	800	856	627	685	74.30%
Other Indo-Pacific	2,531	2,995	3,859	4,187	4,795	4,877	92.70%
<b>Total Indo-Pacific</b>	<b>8,437</b>	<b>11,157</b>	<b>12,438</b>	<b>13,499</b>	<b>14,522</b>	<b>15,400</b>	<b>83.00%</b>
<b>Annual growth</b>		<b>32.20%</b>	<b>11.50%</b>	<b>8.50%</b>	<b>7.60%</b>	<b>6.30%</b>	

Sources: Australian Universities International Directors Forum (AUIDF) and L Prince, 'Investing in the future of Asian language literacy in Australia by learning from the past', [Asian Studies Association of Australia, 2022](#)

<sup>5</sup> Australian outbound mobility data is provided by [Australian Universities International Directors' Forum \(AUIDF\)](#).

In addition to driving growth to the region, the New Colombo Plan has:

- Enabled mobility to new and emerging learning abroad destinations across the region and particularly in the Pacific, [including Fiji, the Solomon Islands and Samoa](#).
- Spurred participation in learning abroad across diverse academic disciplines, including those not traditionally geared to learning abroad experiences such as science and engineering.
- Fostered learning abroad programs designed to address significant challenges in the Asia Pacific including public health, climate change, sustainability, urban planning as well as diversity and inclusion.
- Nurtured innovation and broadened access in learning abroad, by providing funding for 'virtual mobility' programs throughout COVID-19.
- Amassed an alumni community of more than 70,000 since its inception in 2014.

#### Data Snapshot | Asia-focused university programs in Australia

Based on an analysis of over 6,500 programs offered across all Australian universities, in 2021, 30 out of 40 Australian universities offered programs with an explicit Asia focus.

These programs are predominantly in the broad field of study of 'Society and Culture' with a strong focus on language. Of the 145 programs identified with an Asian focus in 2021, 66% are Bachelor of Arts programs with majors in Asian studies or specific Asian languages.

The majority of these Asia-focused programs (86%) are offered at the bachelor level, meaning there is a limited offering of postgraduate programs with an Asia focus by Australian universities. Just 21 postgraduate programs with an Asia focus are offered in Australia.

This highlights an opportunity to support young Australians and their Asia literacy through life-long learning opportunities and the provision of Asia-focused postgraduate programs.

Source: Comparative analysis of programs and tuition fees in Australia, Studymove Pty Ltd, 2021.

Asia literacy is broader than Australian students learning Asian languages and Asian studies in Australian schools, vocational training institutions and universities. National discussions about Asia literacy should account for the linguistic diversity of Australian youth and their ability to use Asian languages at home as well as other places, such as in classrooms, on campus, in workplaces and in the community.

**Asia literacy should also encompass formal experiential learning programs in Asia, such as those funded through the New Colombo Plan, as well as youth dialogues; internships; volunteer programs; paid work; digital exposure; and other informal experiences.**

In taking a broader perspective of Asia literacy, the diversity of young Australians emerges along with their diverse lived experiences and aspirations related to Asia. We must increase efforts to not only understand this diversity, but also to find ways to develop, share and champion these assets for the benefit of all who live, study and work in Australia.

# ASIA LITERACY AND EMPLOYABILITY

Employability is a useful framework through which to consider the links between Asia literacy and employment in Australia. In addition to an academic discipline that leads to a specific employment outcome such as engineering, teaching or accountancy, Asia literacy can be thought of as a set of achievements that can enhance employability, much like [global competence](#).

Employability is [defined](#) as ‘a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy’. It is important to note the differences between ‘[employability](#)’ and ‘[employment](#)’; Potts argues that employability is a long-term concept that supports a person through job changes and career developments and is not solely demonstrated through the attainment of a job after graduation. Employability is developmental and builds through experiences, with the benefit of graduate employability extending beyond the individual to the organisations for which they work, the communities in which they participate and the broader economy.

IEAA’s White Paper on [Learning Abroad in Australian Universities](#) demonstrates that a key outcome of learning abroad programs is the development of employability skills and the improvement of graduate outcomes. Participation in a learning abroad program contributes to the development of students’ ‘career capital’ through the knowledge acquisition and individual growth they experience. [Learning abroad research](#) establishes that overseas study experiences support the development of key skills which are linked to future employability. There are also connections to developing career direction and building self-confidence, which are essential for young people as they take on their first full-time professional roles and transition from study to work.

[Career Outcomes of Learning Abroad](#), a recent Australian study which surveyed alumni of learning abroad programs to destinations in and beyond Asia, found that:

- 85% of respondents agreed that during their learning abroad experience they developed skills that supported their future professional roles.
- 75% of international internship and practicum alumni agreed that their experience helped them to get their first job.

- Respondents self-rated their top three skills as the ‘ability to interact with diverse individuals’; ‘communication’; and ‘capacity to adapt and learn quickly’ followed by ‘problem solving’, ‘judgement and decision making’, ‘critical thinking’ and ‘creativity / innovative thinking’ and teamwork. These skills align with those in future demand as reported by agencies such as the [World Economic Forum](#).

This positive alignment between learning abroad and employability has also been found in another [Australian study](#) which focused on participation in learning abroad programs in the Indo-Pacific funded through the New Colombo Plan. This research found that the top areas of Asia Pacific knowledge development are:

- Developing an understanding of the host country (96% of respondents)
- Becoming more confident about engaging with the Indo-Pacific (93%)
- Becoming interested in connecting with people of Indo-Pacific background in Australia (87%); and
- Becoming interested in learning an Asian language (72%)

Furthermore, up to 66% of the Australian students surveyed in this research indicated that their Indo-Pacific learning abroad experience piqued their interest in pursuing employment in the Indo-Pacific. There was also alignment between the learning abroad host country and the country that research respondents are working in or with.

This research also identified that while 89% of participating students agreed that their Indo-Pacific learning abroad experience was useful for their resume, only 44% agreed that it was valued by their current employer. This highlights an important gap in what we know about the links between Asia literacy, employability and employment, and in particular, how Australian employers value Asia literacy. There is limited research which explores the views of employers generally, and this [does not focus on Australia](#). Where it does, the need for [more Asia-literate individuals in leadership and senior executive roles in Australia](#) is emphasised, and not in graduate, entry-level or early career positions that are important to Australian youth and young people from across the Asia Pacific living, studying and working in Australia.

## INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS >

The [first report in this series](#) found that international education remained a primary mechanism for engagement between young Australians and youth from across the Asia Pacific during COVID-19. The buoyancy of international education during this time of 'immobility' was fuelled by international students who remained in Australia for their studies and post-graduation as well as the development and expansion of new delivery modes including remote study through online platforms and offshore study hubs. Prior to COVID-19, more than 60% of international students aged between 18 and 35 were from countries [across the Asia Pacific](#), which stayed consistent as international students engaged remotely and via offshore study options throughout COVID-19.

In early 2013, Australia introduced a more comprehensive post-study works rights visa program for graduating international students. Many in Australia's international education community attribute Australia's successes in higher education at least in part to the attractiveness of the Temporary Graduate Visa (subclass 485). This visa [embodies the promise of potentially meaningful and relevant employment](#) for international students to 'kickstart' their careers upon graduation and to develop their future employability in Australia, their home country or other places.

It has [been argued that](#) the Temporary Graduate Visa allows Australia to benefit from the productivity and participation of a young, well-educated, globally competent and highly motivated cohort of graduates, whilst at the same time, also delivering a 'return on investment' to international students and their

families. However, it appears that these visa holders, who are overwhelmingly from countries across the Asia Pacific, are not able to secure work that is meaningfully connected to their long-term aspirations aligned to their areas of study. Rather, this visa has been used for relatively unskilled entry-level jobs.

In 2019, it was found that only 44% of subclass 485 visa holders were in full-time employment with another 30% in part-time employment. Despite being younger and more highly educated than other skilled migrants, a number of temporary graduates are working in low-skilled occupations – or not at all – after their studies. Around 17% work in low skilled jobs in retail, wholesale and hospitality. More than 1 in 5 are unemployed and looking for work (10%) or are not participating in the labour market (12%).

This cohort are another Asia-focused youth asset within Australia. There is a large and growing number of international students, the majority of whom are from the Asia Pacific, who aspire to stay in Australia and gain work experience that is relevant to their careers, however, many of these young people are not able to secure a job that aligns with their skills and qualifications. By the time these students move into full-time employment they have typically spent two-to-four years studying in classrooms alongside Australian peers and other international students. Whilst their Australian peers have opportunities to study in Asia, as has been described in this report, more can be done to connect Australian students with the Asia knowledge and experience that is embodied in their classrooms and on their campuses.



## FUTURE RESEARCH >

There is a clear need to understand Asia literacy as it is viewed by Australian employers across business, government and the not-for-profit sector. Currently, it is difficult to identify Australian employers who specifically seek knowledge of Asia or proficiency in specific Asian languages through their graduate recruitment programs. Whilst some research explores the need for Asia literate [leaders and senior executives](#) in Australian business and in our [public service](#), we must better understand workplace demand in Australia for Asia literacy, particularly for graduate, entry-level and early career positions.

Future research could focus on understanding the following areas:

- How Asia literacy is valued by Australian employers, such as demonstrated by the Westpac Scholars Trust case study below.
- Are Australian employers equipped to recognise the diversity of Australian youth and their Asia literacy?
- How Australian employers evaluate Asia literacy alongside other requirements for graduate recruitment, entry-level and early career positions.
- How Australian employers attract and retain graduates as well as entry-level and early career employees who have the Asia literacy they seek, such as through PwC's Together Anywhere program.
- How Australian employers support ongoing Asia literacy development and upskilling of their graduate, entry-level and early career employees.
- Examples of benchmarking and best practice in this area in Australia and globally.

### Case Study | Westpac Asian Exchange Scholarships

Westpac Scholars Trust established the [Westpac Asian Exchange Scholarships](#) to provide Australian students with an opportunity to develop their leadership potential and their skills, experience and contacts in Asia. The Westpac Scholars Trust, at the time of its establishment in 2014, was the single largest private education scholarship program in Australia's history awarding 100 scholarships annually, in perpetuity. It is an example of bold corporate leadership as well as an exceptional gift to young Australians.

Westpac Asian Exchange Scholarships offer the opportunity for students in an undergraduate degree to spend up to two semesters in Asia. These scholarships also offer a leadership program and the opportunity to network with Australia-Asia thought leaders and support networks. The scholarship is offered to students across 14 Australian universities and is not limited to a particular area of study. The upcoming round offers opportunities for study in China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan.

The scholarship is designed to support students who seek to strengthen ties between Asia and Australia and who aspire to become Asia capable leaders. The on-award leadership program and the post-award networking opportunities for alumni provides Westpac Scholars with unique self-development and employability opportunities. By dedicating one or two semesters of their degree to the exchange experience, Westpac Scholars can embrace and explore the complexity of their host country in Asia and can develop skills, networks and ideas as part of their career capital.

## Data Snapshot | Trade and the Australian economy

The importance of international trade to Australia's economy is a driver for Asia literacy. Prior to COVID-19, Australia's international trade was [equivalent to 45% of Australian GDP and directly responsible for one in five Australian jobs](#). Businesses with foreign investment generated around 40% of Australian exports and foreign investment supported one in ten jobs in Australia.

Australia's exports are dominated by goods (around 80%), with services accounting for around 20% of Australia's total exports. Asian markets dominate the export of both goods and services.

Australian service exports have been earmarked [as an area for future growth](#). Asia currently plays an important role for existing Australian service industries and presents an opportunity to further boost service exports as a greater proportion of our total international trade. Since 2002, the proportion of Australian service exports to Asia has continuously increased, now representing \$52.4 billion dollars, or around 57% of total Australian service exports.

**Figure 9: Comparison of Australian service exports to Asia and the rest of the world, 2019 - 2020**

	Service Export Category	Total all countries (in \$ billion)	Asia (in \$ billion)	% Share of Asia
1	Manufactured services on physical inputs owned by owners	\$0.0	\$0.0	0%
2	Transport (Passenger, freight, postal and courier services)	\$6.9	\$3.3	47.3%
3	Travel (including education-related travel, business travel and recreational travel for tourism)	\$55.7	\$40.9	73.4%
4	Construction	\$0.7	\$0.0	0.3%
5	Insurance & pension	\$0.7	\$0.2	34.8%
6	Financial	\$5.1	\$1.8	35.1%
7	Intellectual property charges	\$1.3	\$0.1	5.6%
8	Telecommunication, computer & information	\$5.3	\$1.0	19.5%
9	Other business services	\$12.3	\$2.9	23.7%
10	Personal, cultural and recreational	\$3.3	\$1.7	53.2%
11	Government services	\$0.9	\$0.4	46.5%
	<b>Total services exports</b>	<b>\$92.0</b>	<b>\$52.4</b>	<b>56.9%</b>

Source: International Trade: Supplementary Information, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021

Our largest service export to Asia is travel services, including education-related travel, which creates an interesting challenge for Asia literacy in Australia. On one hand, international education generates economic value. On the other, international education also mobilises hundreds of thousands of young people from across the Asia Pacific to Australia to study and enhance their employability. This creates real opportunities for meaningful connections with young Australians alongside the development of human capital and our future workforce.

## Case Study | PwC's Together Anywhere

[Together Anywhere](#) is a program that allows [PwC](#) staff to work remotely in their 'home country' (or in another Australian city) for up to four weeks of the year. Post-COVID-19, this program resets expectations and workplace dynamics to support staff. While the program does support staff to spend time in offices across Australia, it is especially designed for staff to be able to return to a home country outside of Australia to re-engage and reconnect with family, friends and culture. Since being introduced in late 2021, hundreds of PwC staff have taken up the opportunity.

This program reflects key components of PwC as an employer. Firstly, with a high number of staff who have family and other connections across the Asia Pacific, it allows staff to be supported to remain engaged with their home country. It also helps to provide an environment of inclusion and belonging at work. Employees are encouraged to bring their 'whole self' to work, and Together Anywhere builds on this. The program also aligns to [PwC's own research](#) into the future of work in post-COVID-19 contexts.



## GENERATION ASIA YOUNG LEADERS FORUM 2022: REFRAMING ASIA LITERACY, BUILDING ASIA CAREERS >

On 11 August 2022, Asia Society Australia brought this research project to life by hosting 120 young people at the State Library of Victoria, and hundreds more online, for the third national [Generation Asia Young Leaders Forum](#) supported by the Victorian Government.

The messages from digital and in-person delegates and speakers were clear:

- Young people do not have a clear understanding of how they can leverage their Asia capabilities for an Asia-engaged career in and beyond Australia.
- There are opportunities for Australian employers to empower Asia literate young people when making hiring and professional development decisions.

- Young people view intercultural skills as important for their future careers in and with Asia.
- International students, from across the Asia Pacific, who are studying and working in Australia are a key source of human capital linking us to the region.
- Personal relationships are an important outcome of Australia-Asia youth connectivity and can lead to a diverse range of opportunities.
- We need to grow Australia's pool of Asia literate and Asia-interested young talent, particularly in the current global climate.

These themes will be further explored in the third and final report of this series.



# CONCLUSION

This report reframes Asia literacy by exploring the diversity of Australian youth and the potential of youth from across the Asia Pacific who live, study and work in Australia as well as the connections between Asia literacy and employability. Young people in Australia must also be able to access life-long opportunities to learn about and experience Asia beyond formal education, post-graduation and throughout their early careers.

It is undisputed that Australia's future prosperity and security is linked to the Asia Pacific. Asia literacy is important not only for the future employment of our young people and the specific jobs they will undertake but also for their broader employability

and the careers they will build. Australia's immediate, post-pandemic future will also bring significant economic and security challenges; a re-framed Asia literacy will help Australian businesses and Australian communities navigate these complex issues.

The next report in this series examines the ways in which the diversity of young Australians and young people from across the Asia Pacific region who are living, studying and working in Australia, can be celebrated and championed. This current report has provided an evidence base for this diversity by drawing on the most recent Australian census data and also by exploring other ways that young people in Australia can learn about and experience Asia.



# CONTRIBUTORS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The Advisory Group for this project was chaired by Professor Ren Yi, IEAA Board Member, Chair of [IEAA's Research Committee](#) and Pro Vice-Chancellor (International) at the University of Southern Queensland. Other members include:

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## Victorian Government

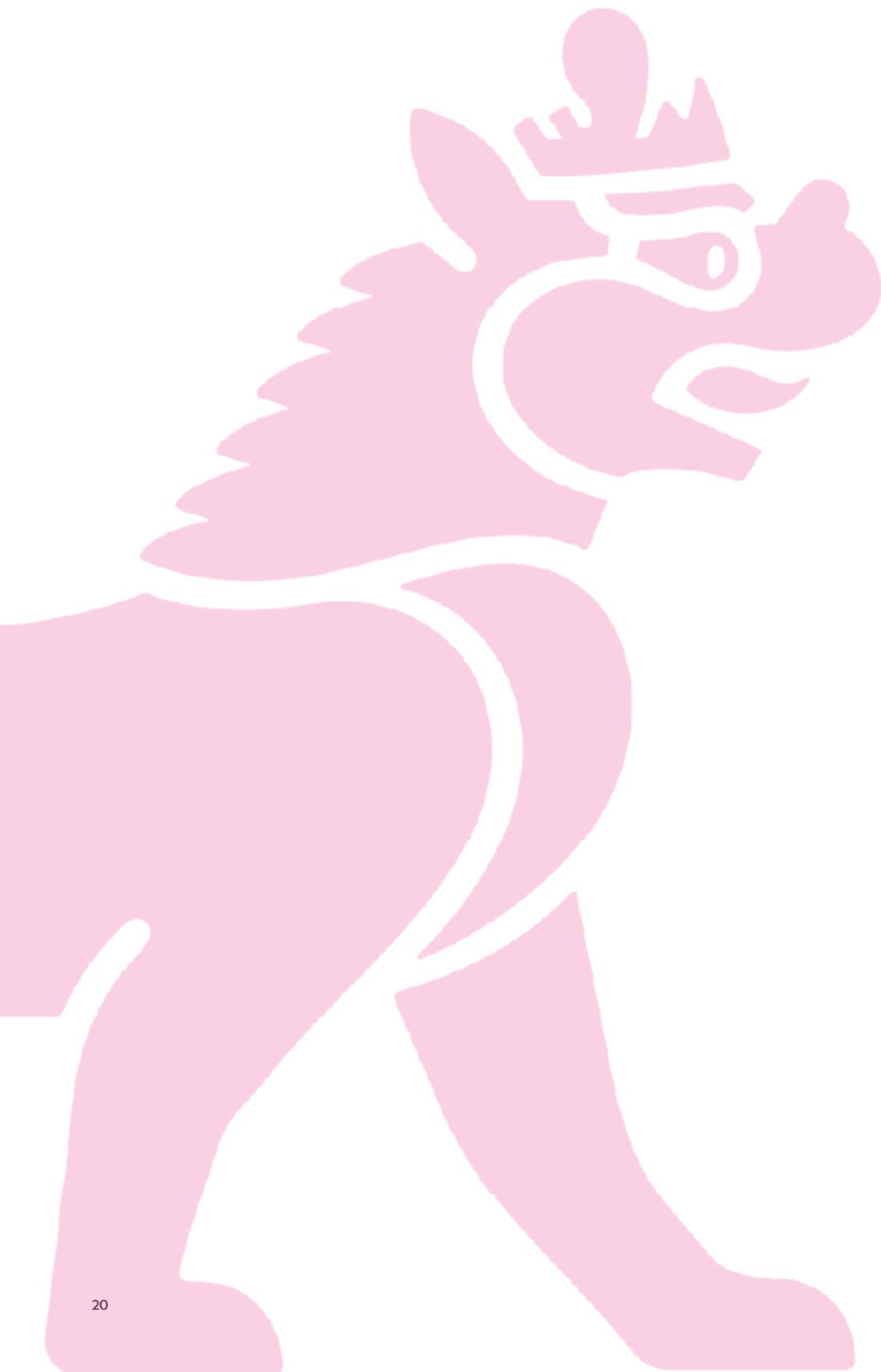
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# APPENDIX

## A. Asian languages used in this report

Language used at home (LANP) is classified using the Australian Standard Classification of Languages (ASCL), 2016. The categories are listed in groups below:

Language Group	Languages (4-digit included)	
<b>Eastern Asian Languages</b>	7100	Chinese, nfd
	7101	Cantonese
	7102	Hakka
	7104	Mandarin
	7106	Wu
	7107	Min nan
	7199	Chinese, nec
	7201	Japanese
	7301	Korean
		And all other Eastern Asian Languages
<b>Southeast Asian Languages</b>	6000	Southeast Asian Languages, nfd
	6100	Burmese and Related Languages, nfd
	6101	Burmese
	6102	Chin Haka
	6103	Karen
	6104	Rohingya
	6105	Zomi
	6199	Burmese and Related Languages, nfd
	6200	Hmong-Mien, nfd
	6201	Hmong
	6299	Hmong-Mien, nec
	6300	Mon-Khmer, nfd
	6301	Khmer
	6302	Vietnamese
	6303	Mon
	6399	Mon-Khmer, nec
	6400	Tai, nfd
	6401	Lao

A. continued

Language Group	Languages (4-digit included)	
<b>Southeast Asian Languages (continued)</b>	6402	Thai
	6499	Tai, nec
	6500	Southeast Asian Austronesian Languages, nfd
	6501	Bisaya
	6502	Cebuano
	6503	Ilokano
	6504	Indonesian
	6505	Malay
	6507	Tetum
	6508	Timorese
	6511	Tagalog
	6512	Filipino
	6513	Acehnese
	6514	Balinese
	6515	Bikol
	6516	Iban
	6517	Ilonggo (Hiligaynon)
	6518	Javanese
	6521	Pampangan
	6599	Southeast Asian Austronesian Languages, nec
6999	Other Southeast Asian Languages	

A. continued

Language Group	Languages (4-digit included)	
<b>Southern Asian Languages</b>	5000	Southern Asian Languages, nfd
	5100	Dravidian, nfd
	5101	Kannada
	5102	Malayalam
	5103	Tamil
	5104	Telugu
	5105	Tulu
	5199	Dravidian, nec
	5200	Indo-Aryan, nfd
	5201	Bengali
	5202	Gujarati
	5203	Hindi
	5204	Konkani
	5205	Marathi
	5206	Nepali
	5207	Punjabi
	5208	Sindhi
	5211	Sinhalese
	5212	Urdu
	5213	Assamese
5214	Dhivehi	
5215	Kashmiri	
5216	Oriya	
5217	Fijian Hindustani	
5299	Indo-Aryan, nec	
5999	Other Southern Asian Languages	

## ASIA SOCIETY AUSTRALIA

Asia Society Australia is a business and policy think-tank and membership organisation dedicated to Asia. We are a national, independent, non-partisan, and non-political institution with a national centre in Melbourne, an office in Sydney, and programs accessible in Australia and globally through digital and face-to-face platforms. Asia Society Australia is a centre of Asia Society – a preeminent global non-profit organisation dedicated to Asia, founded in 1956 by John D. Rockefeller 3rd, with centres in New York, Hong Kong, Houston, Los Angeles, Manila, Melbourne, Mumbai, Paris, San Francisco, Seoul, Sydney, Tokyo, Washington, DC and Zurich.

## GENERATION ASIA

Asia Society Australia's Generation Asia strategic pillar is a commitment to spotlighting younger voices across public, business and government debate and engagement on Asia, recognising youth as a key driver of Australia's future success in the region. Through this work Asia Society Australia seeks to reimagine Asia literacy and empower the next generation of Australian leaders and young professionals to stay interested and engaged with the region, amidst restricted mobility, geopolitical tensions and economic upheavals.

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