

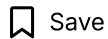


Opinion

Students have little opportunity to study foreign languages in Canberra. That's a problem

By Elly Kent

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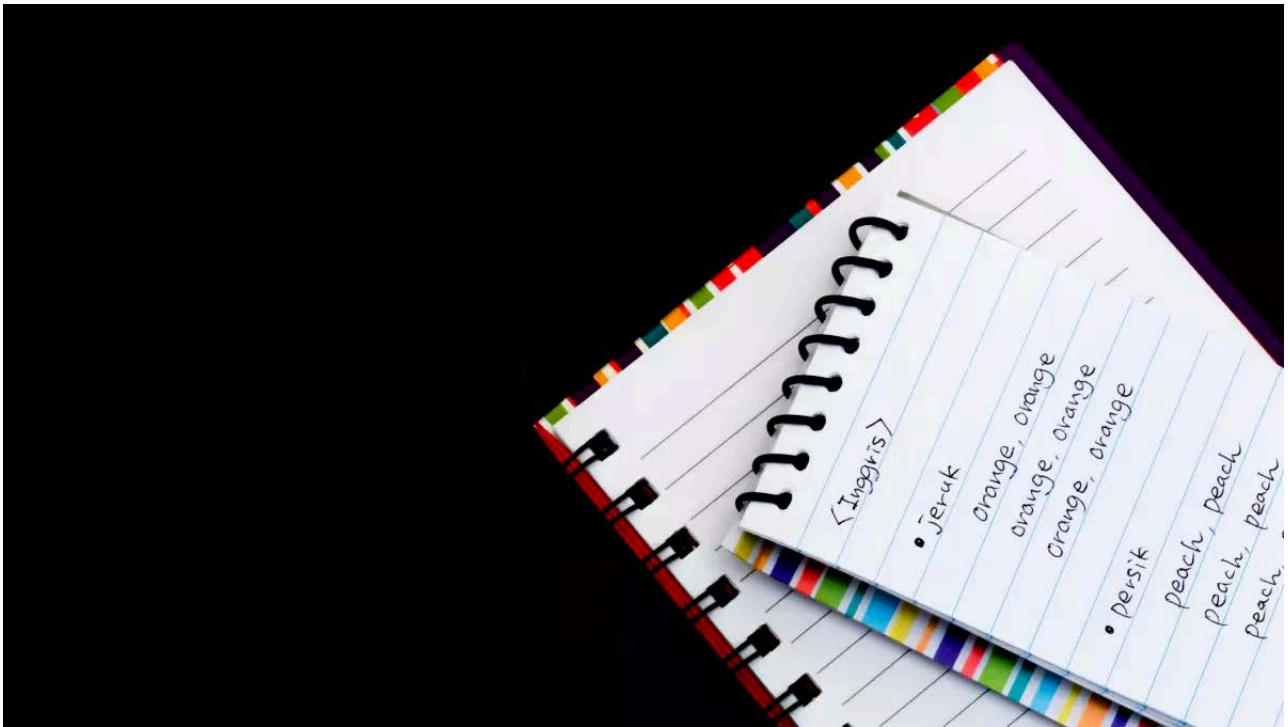


As schools wind down for 2025 and year 12 students begin their transition to "adult life", as my daughters call it, I'm also reaching the end of my journey as a parent in the ACT public school system. It's been 16 years since I dropped my first-born off for his first day of school. And it's been 16 years of fighting for my children's right to study an Asian language, or really, any language other than English (LOTE), at school.

In the nation's capital, home to countless embassies, cultural missions and internationally facing government departments and private sector businesses, our public school students have almost no pathways to learning a LOTE from primary school, or even secondary school, through to college.

In my own childhood, growing up in regional Victoria in the '80s and '90s, Indonesian was offered at four of the five schools I attended over 13 years. In 1990, 90,000 kids were studying Indonesian in schools across Australia. By 2000 that number was well over 300,000. My classmates from Indonesian language courses at ANU - the program I teach today - now occupy positions across the public and private

sector, leading our bilateral relations with Indonesia and, in our universities, training the next generation.



📷 The study of Indonesian was once widely accessible to Australian students. Picture Shutterstock

When my eldest began school around 2010, I quickly realised he would not have the same opportunities. We joined the local community Indonesian language school, and set up an after-school language club at our school. I quit my job, started a PhD and dragged the family to Indonesia for fieldwork so I could enrol the kids in local schools for a couple of years.

My kids' next Australian primary school offered Indonesian, but even though there were many Indonesian kids at the school, for most of their time there all students studied the same material every year.

Foreign languages were not offered at our zoned public high school, so we sought the education directorate's permission to enrol in an out-of-zone school that offered French and Mandarin. Last year, when Indonesian suddenly became available at a nearby, non-feeder college, I wrote again to the directorate for out-of-zone enrolment approvals.

Enrolments in Indonesian at UC Lake Ginninderra College have been very low, and finding and retaining teachers has been a challenge for the school, but I am grateful my two youngest were able to study Indonesian in year 11 and year 12. However, even if this senior program runs next year, it is disconnected from potential feeder Indonesian language programs, which are all out-of-zone. The largest cohorts are on the opposite side of Canberra. Little wonder enrolments are low.

Sadly, the barriers and broken pathways we've experienced in the ACT represent a broader crisis in Indonesian language teaching, Asian language teaching, and LOTE teaching more broadly, across Australia. Enrolments and programs have declined to catastrophically low levels, further constrained by disconnections between schooling levels. Low student uptake is routinely blamed, but the causes are more complex than that; students who do want to progress find it almost impossible.

This has flow-on effects for their university choices, and if young people should want to study an Asian language, they'll find no more than one or two tertiary programs in most states, and almost none in regional areas.

Of these small cohorts, fewer still train to become language teachers, far less than the numbers retiring or leaving the profession. The problem is especially dire in the public system, making studying an Asian language an elite activity, mainly accessible to students in private education.

Across Australian universities, including the ANU where we offer 16 different Asian languages, we are watching the effects of this play out in real time. Our undergraduate student numbers are worryingly low, with little onflow from the "pipeline" in schools.

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PhD enrolments are even more concerning. Each year, conferences are ever more dominated by excellent students from overseas, developing expertise that they will take home with them. At the ANU Indonesia Institute's 2025 postgraduate workshop, only two out of 30 applicants were domestic students.

If the situation continues, Australia faces the prospect of having virtually no local expertise on the countries who are our nearest neighbours - the countries with which we share natural resources, maritime boundaries, long histories of alliance and exchange, as well as significant trade and security agreements. The vast numbers of Asian-Australian heritage speakers of will have no route to develop their familial language into professional standard fluency.



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The crisis is real and it is here now – the current federal parliamentary inquiry into building Asia capability in Australia through the education system and beyond is evidence of that. Over 180 written submissions were made to that inquiry, which will continue on to hearings. Many submissions have stressed a critical teacher shortage and the impact of compounding policy and cultural barriers – like those evident in the ACT – to students accessing, and maintaining access, to Asian language teaching in our school systems. These will take time to address, not to mention concerted, bi-partisan political will. But we need action on languages, and especially Asian languages, right now in the ACT.

A current petition to the ACT Legislative Assembly highlights this. The petition statement reveals that "the ACT Education Directorate is currently advising students CIT will not be enrolling new students in 2026 and beyond". CIT Solutions offered language courses for year 11 and 12 in 2024-2025 after the 2023 closure of the Canberra Academy of Languages. Without it, many students now have no opportunity to continue the language study they began in high school through their college years. Even more have no opportunity to pick up a language in college at all.

A recent "listening exercise" into the possibility of instating Hindi and Punjabi teaching into ACT public schools garnered strong community engagement and overwhelming support, further demonstrating there is community demand for Asian languages in Canberra's schools. But will it be met?

Canberra is a multicultural, multilingual, cosmopolitan city, rapidly growing into its status as the national capital and international face of Australia. Our education system is being left behind, and leaving our young people behind too. Soon it will be too late to recover. It's time for the Legislative Assembly and the minister for education to step up

and ensure that the whole of the Canberra community has equitable, consistent access to Asian language teaching, and consistent pathways throughout the school system. Anything less is selling our city - and our country - short.