

Submission to Inquiry into Building Asia Capability in Australia through the education system and beyond



Artist: Van Rudd

About ViếtSpeak

We are a community-led, non-profit advocacy organisation based in Melbourne's west. We formed in response to the loss of Australia's only Vietnamese-English bilingual program at Footscray Primary School in 2020. We seek to build bilingual programs and community engagement opportunities that support the preservation of Vietnamese language and culture in Melbourne's west.

We believe in education that values cultural heritage through multilingual inclusion. We value a dynamic continuity, across generations, in the languages and cultures of Australia's Indigenous, multicultural and diasporic communities. In working for the continued life of Vietnamese language and culture, we recognise that the vital importance of local language and culture extends to other disenfranchised groups within Melbourne's west. We therefore lend our advocacy in support of projects and alliances that acknowledge and foster the lived cultures and experiences of diverse communities.

Key points

- 1) Existing Asian language education policy fails Asian communities - thus failing the Asia capability of Asian diaspora living in Australia.**
- 2) Bilingual programs for Vietnamese and other Asian languages, beginning from early childhood and primary school, are the best practice model for building Asia capability through language learning.**
- 3) Providing funding to develop a pipeline of Vietnamese bilingual teachers is necessary to address limited workforce supply, which is a structural barrier to developing Asia capability in Australia.**

What is Asia Capability?

Asia capability is supporting and equipping the Vietnamese community - and other Asian diasporic communities across Australia - to maintain language and cultural heritage through initiatives, including primary school bilingual education programs. Supporting Asia capability through community multilingualism enables people from different diasporic communities and the wider Australian public to engage with each other in the communities they live. This helps build trust and inter-community bonds, reduces isolation between groups and results in stronger social cohesion and social connection. Building Asia capability within Australian communities, in turn, extends capacity for deep and productive engagements with the region and across global Asian contexts.

Currently, ViệtSpeak is actively engaging in this work at a grassroots level and without government support. We have helped establish two much-needed early years Vietnamese bilingual programs in Melbourne's west to support the local Vietnamese community who live there. We have also created opportunities for diasporic communities and the wider Victorian public to engage with each other through the lens of language and culture by organising events and festivals, such as our yearly Language in Community Festival¹, and creating content for families and community members on language (see our Growing Up Bilingual Podcast² and our online hub of bilingual learning resources³ as examples of our work).

¹ VietSpeak, 'Language in Community Festival', 2025, <https://languagesfestival.net/>.

² VietSpeak, 'Growing Up Bilingual in Australia - A ViệtSpeak Podcast', 2022, <https://vietbilingual.org/podcast/>.

³ VietSpeak, 'Learning Library - ViệtSpeak', 2024, <https://learning.vietspeak.net/>.



Photo: Thuy Vy

Key points

1) Existing Asian language education policy fails Asian communities - thus failing the Asia capability of Asian diaspora living in Australia.

The Vietnamese community is one of the largest non-Anglo communities in Australia, with Vietnamese being the second most commonly spoken language outside English in Victoria and the third nationally.⁴ This is particularly true of Melbourne's western suburbs; in Braybrook, Vietnamese is the most spoken language at home, ahead of English.⁵ We therefore argue that Asia, including Vietnam, should not be seen as external to Australia but a part of the very fabric of our society and our lives through the vibrant and rich Asian diaspora communities that live here. The recognition of these existing populations, as resources to be tapped into and supported, must be the starting point as well as the ongoing core of any proposed policy to support Asia capability in Australia.

Prominent language scholar Professor Joseph Lo Bianco affirms that while trade and diplomatic interests have a legitimate role in shaping Australian educational policy relating to Asian languages and culture, they must work in conjunction with people who have an intimate knowledge of language learning, are connected to mainstream schools and teachers, and

⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics, '2021 Australia, Census All Persons QuickStats', accessed 4 November 2025, <https://abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/AUS>.

⁵ idcommunity, 'Braybrook Language Used at Home', City of Maribyrnong: Community Profile, 2021, <https://profile.id.com.au/maribyrnong/language?WebID=100>.

understand the functioning and realities of Australian public education.⁶ The Australian Government is supporting the study of Asian languages at a tertiary level, including investing \$43.2 million in the New Colombo Plan program for 2024-2025 for Australian undergraduates to study in the Indo-Pacific, and has explicitly identified Vietnamese as a priority language.⁷ However, ViệtSpeak argues that the provision of such funding will not necessarily generate an increase in demand and interest in Vietnamese language learning unless other steps are taken, such as the establishment of primary school bilingual programs. Bilingual exposure and immersion at an earlier age ensures greater sustained, life-long interest and engagement with Asia, thus building Asia capability.

2) Bilingual programs for Vietnamese and other Asian languages, beginning from early childhood and primary school, are the best practice model for building Asia capability through language learning.

In primary schools located in Melbourne's western suburbs, the only Vietnamese LOTE program will be replaced by Spanish at the start of the 2026 school year due to the teacher retiring. This leaves the 50,000+ Vietnamese people in Melbourne's west, including families and children, without access to a mainstream Vietnamese language program.

We note Labor's 2026 Election promise to provide \$25 million in funding to Community Language Schools, as well as a \$5 million commitment to support Asian language learning in the years from Year 11 to Year 12.⁸ However, we view such an investment of similar or larger scale in mainstream primary and secondary school bilingual programs would be much more effective in supporting students to learn and maintain languages, building longer-term Asia capability in those students. This will reach a wider array of communities and populations in normalising Asia capability.

3) Providing funding to develop a pipeline of Vietnamese bilingual teachers is necessary to address limited workforce supply, which is a structural barrier to developing Asia capability in Australia.

The closure of Victoria's only Vietnamese bilingual primary school program was attributed to, in part, a lack of qualified Vietnamese language teachers. Yet, the size of our community, including Vietnamese language secondary school students, points to the potential pool of Vietnamese language teachers. The retention rates of Vietnamese language students between Year 7 and Year 12 is high, evidenced by an analysis of enrolments for the same cohort - Vietnamese was the tenth most popular foreign language for Year 7 enrolments in 2015⁹, but jumped to the fourth most popular foreign language for Year 12 VCE enrolments in 2020 (behind Chinese,

⁶ Professor Joe Lo Bianco, 'Australia Needs to Make Languages Compulsory', *Melbourne Asia Review* 2021, no. 7 (2021), <https://melbourneasiareview.edu.au/australia-needs-to-make-languages-compulsory/>

⁷ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *New Colombo Plan Scholarship Program 2025 Guidelines* (Australian Government, 2024), <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/new-columbo-plan-scholarship-program-2025-guidelines.pdf>.

⁸ Australian Labor Party, 'Labor Is Celebrating Australian Diversity through Community Language Schools', 26 April 2025, <https://alp.org.au/news/labor-is-celebrating-australian-diversity-through-community-language-schools/>.

⁹ Department of Education and Training, *Languages Provision in Victorian Government Schools, 2015* (State of Victoria, 2017), <https://content.sdp.education.vic.gov.au/media/edustate-languages-provision-report-2015-pdf-851>.

French and Japanese).¹⁰ These rankings remain rather consistent across academic years and cohorts. However, these students have nowhere to continue their Vietnamese language and culture education at a tertiary level in Victoria, should they wish to become certified classroom teachers capable of delivering a bilingual curriculum.

If the Australian Government is serious about developing Asia capability, it needs to be serious about investing in an Asian language teacher workforce to deliver those competencies. Funding must be allocated to support a Vietnamese teacher pipeline through scholarships and other forms of financial aid. This should also include funding and support to develop courses focusing on bilingual education and subject matter in Vietnamese. Additionally, active recruitment of Vietnamese and other Asian diaspora early childhood, primary and secondary teachers is needed. Beyond financial support, mentorship programs are necessary, as well as opportunities for professional learning communities specific to Asian diaspora educators.

Conclusion

We look forward to working with you to develop Asia Capability through Vietnamese language and culture.

¹⁰ Department of Education and Training, *Languages Provision in Victorian Government Schools, 2020* (State of Victoria, 2021), <https://content.sdp.education.vic.gov.au/media/languages-provision-in-victorian-government-schools-2020-pdf-1966>.