

The absence of Asia

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We can provide the imperative but how do we impress on teachers and students the importance of studies of Asia for 21st century schooling?

While Asia is well represented in the formal curriculum, a recent study suggests that there is a distance to travel before it is represented in what is actually studied in the senior years. The most disturbing finding is that teachers and students do not opt for the study of Asia even when it is available as an option within courses. Notably, this trend is mirrored in the study of Asian languages, where the 23 per cent who study Asian languages K–10, drops to 6 per cent in year 12.

The evidence is that state and territory curriculum authorities have made efforts to include Asia in senior curricula, though the picture varies across subject domains. English is characteristic. English courses usually include a range of texts from which schools select which to study. Some courses include no texts with an Asian focus. In others, there is a limited selection. Where there are texts with an Asian focus, they are often older established texts written by non-Asian authors (e.g. Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*) or relate to war and conflict. Examiners' reports indicate that Asian texts are less often selected than other texts, such as *The Great Gatsby*. We need to be asking why this is the case.

Senior History courses will often include one or more units that focus on Asia, but schools and students select which units to study from a wide range. In one state, where students have a choice of nine national studies, only two per cent of students chose to write about China and only four per cent chose India, Japan, Indonesia and Australia combined. Germany accounted for 65 per cent and Russia/Soviet Union 19 per cent. In another state, 0.5 per cent chose to study Asia.

Geography courses do not usually mandate Asian content or focus, but do often provide scope for it. In one state, the Geography course provides many opportunities for a focus on Asia. Students are required to study a range of geographical contexts and the units include many ideas and examples drawn from Asia. Students taking this course would almost certainly encounter Asian content, but it is not mandatory. More normally, courses provide some opportunities for, but do not require, Asian study.

International Studies and Politics courses sometimes do include mandatory Asian content, but are taken by relatively few students. In one state, the course requires the study of specifically Asian content, students to write about one Asia-Pacific country, but the course is taken by fewer than four per cent of students.

Art courses mostly propose no specific Asian content or focus, relying on teacher or student choice as the basis for the inclusion of Asia. In most cases an Asian focus would be possible.

We can surmise that when teachers making course content selections are unfamiliar with Asia, or have not taught Asian texts and topics previously, the strong likelihood is that they will continue to ignore Asia-related material. This relative unfamiliarity with Asia is still the norm in Australian schools. Unless the study of Asia is mandated within courses, it will continue to languish.

Australia is now in the process of developing a national curriculum, which, all going according to plan, could eventually replace most curriculum documents in the states and territories. The key lesson for the national curriculum from the ACER study is that simply making Asian content available for selection in courses is ineffective in stimulating the study of Asia.

The research sends a salutary message to policy makers in Australian education. If we are serious about young Australians being equipped to take a real role in the Asian century, it is time to require the study of Asia rather than to offer it as an optional extra.

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Reference cited: Wilkinson, J & Milgate, G (2009). *Studies of Asia in Year 12*, Australian Council for Educational Research, Camberwell. For full report: www.asiaeducation.edu.au