

Measuring Australian Preservice Teachers' Asia Capability and Perceived Readiness to Teach the Asia Cross-Curricular Priority.

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Abstract: Preservice teachers are soon-to-be graduates expected to deliver the Cross-Curricular Priority 'Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia'. Teachers of all learning areas are expected to teach about Asia, irrespective of their knowledge or capabilities in Asian contexts. The curriculum review has revised expectations for 'Asia literacy' in graduates. The changes de-emphasise cultural knowledge, and instead, promote relationship-building and intercultural understanding. This research identified 31 preservice teachers' perceptions of their Asia literacy and preparedness to teach the related curriculum initiative. Grainger and Christie's (2016) linguistic model was used to define and measure Asia literacy. Thematic analysis identified (1) how participants conceptualised 'meeting' expectations for Asia literacy, and (2) how the tertiary provider might better respond to their learning needs. Like previous research (see Australian Government, 2023; Halse & Cairns, 2018), we found that most respondents felt unqualified to teach about Asia. Participants expressed the desire for more content knowledge, authentic opportunities (such as in-country experience or language capability), and pedagogical skills. We argue that the national improvement of Asia literacy in preservice teachers is tied to its assessment. There is a need to consistently define, delimit and assess Asia literacy within a framework of cultural literacy. These theoretical considerations underlie future, systemic efforts to track and evaluate a long-term government initiative.

Introduction

One of the priorities of 21st century education is to prepare students to live and work in a world of intercultural contact. Globalisation is intensifying the need to negotiate increasingly complex and frequent exchanges of culture. While 'global citizenship' or 'intercultural' goals have been a feature of the educational policies of developed nations for over fifty years (Council of Europe, 2022), the need to assess intercultural outcomes is only recently becoming an international priority. An example of this shift is evident in the amendments to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). A global competencies assessment was introduced in 2018; a foreign language assessment framework linked to global competencies will be included from 2025. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2021) justifies these inclusions, citing the need to assess readiness to 'engage with global problems that have deep implications for current and future generations' (p.7). Global problems demand the 'capacity to examine local, global and

intercultural issues,' and to 'engage in open, appropriate and effective interactions with people from different cultures' (OECD, 2021, para. 1). Underlying these objectives is the requirement for 21st century learners to develop an intercultural capability.

Within the push for an intercultural capability in students lies a more specific priority for young Australians: 'Asia literacy' or 'Asia capability'. For over twenty years, there has been federal interest in the economic, political, and strategic benefits of engagement with Asia in the 'Asian century' (Cairns & Weinmann, 2021; Salter & Maxwell, 2016). Successive governments have long acknowledged the need for Asia literacy yet poorly defined it or limited its scope. The 'lauded and elusive term of Asia literacy' (University of Melbourne, 2014, para. 2) is used extensively in national policy. The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (2008) established a 'need to become Asia literate' and 'build strong relationships with Asia' (The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008, p. 5). This priority was strengthened in the White Paper (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012), then reiterated in the Mparntwe (Alice Springs) Declaration (2019). Outside the education sector, the Australian Government has established Asialink Business - the National Centre for Asia Capability. This entity formalises a 'critical initial investment to complement the implementation of the Government's Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040' (Minister for Foreign Affairs, 2023, para. 5). Moreover, the Albanese Government has invested \$55.7 million into Asia literacy research and training for Australian businesses; an investment to deepen social and economic ties with Southeast Asia and 'seize the potential of diverse Asian and Indo-Pacific markets' (Asialink, 2022, para. 2). In the national curriculum, the Cross Curricular Priority (CCP) of Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia (AEAA) operationalises a desire to foster Asia literate citizens through schooling (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2022). This initiative has been a mandated inclusion in the curriculum for over ten years and '...represents the most comprehensive attempt to implement government policy in regards to Asia literacy' (Grainger & Christie, 2016, p. 233). The authors henceforth refer to the Cross Curricular Priority related to Asia as the 'Asia CCP' for consistency.

The Asia Education Foundation (AEF) (2022) defines Asia literacy as 'the foundational and deep knowledge, skills and understandings about the histories, geographies, societies, cultures, literature and languages of the diverse countries that make up our region' (para. 2). This definition is broad. That is, there is a lack of clarity around what these skills or capabilities might entail for learners and their teachers. Bice et al. (2014) lament that vague definitions 'mean it is not possible to measure or track the current levels or any future improvements in Asia capability skills development' (para. 2). In fact, the Australian Government's (2023) *Strong Beginnings* paper identifies the need to improve graduate quality by 'establishing nationally consistent indicators and public reporting [in teacher education]' (p.8). The need to define - and, by extension, measure - Asia literacy against consistent standards becomes increasingly relevant for teacher education (Halse & Cairns, 2018; Rice et al., 2023). This research paper extends the literature around 'what counts' in defining, delimiting, and assessing Asia capability in the target cohort of Australian preservice teachers.

This research study measures Asia literacy using Grainger and Christie's (2016) 'Asia Literacy Capability Continuum' – a model nested within a linguistic framework. The literature review identifies one other framework for educators, the Halse et al. (2013) model, which was designed for practising teachers and principals, not for preservice teachers yet to graduate. Whilst the Halse framework defines Asia literacy through pedagogy and knowledge, it ignores in-country experiences in Asian cultures and the associated benefits of proficiency in an Asian language (Grainger & Christie, 2016). If using a target language is

the fundamental expression of intercultural communication (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013), we argue the highest level of Asia literacy should embody this assumption. An Asian language capability is not only evidence of ‘deep knowledge’ (AEF, 2022) but it also powerfully influences one’s ability to ‘actively engage with Asia’ and ‘build relationships’ (ACARA, 2022). We acknowledge this conceptualisation of Asia literacy is at odds with the composition of many Australian preservice teacher cohorts, who are predominantly Anglo-Christian and monolingual (Rice et al., 2023). Rather than dismissing those respondents without a language capacity, the continuum’s lowest band is termed ‘Asia aware’. It represents preservice teachers with basic awareness of an Asian culture, customs and society but no language proficiency. We anticipated that most of our respondents would self-assess as ‘Asia aware’ in the regional Queensland university.

Like other tertiary educators across Australia, the university’s responsibility is to equip graduates with the knowledge and skills for ‘high quality, effective teaching in 21st century schools’ (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2022, p. 3). Part of this work is to ensure graduates meet the 37 AITSL standards and are therefore deemed ‘classroom ready’. In addition, graduates have a personal responsibility to be aware of expectations regarding the delivery of the curriculum. Australia is relatively unique because of its ‘three-dimensional’ curriculum, composed of (1) the *learning areas* or subjects, (2) the seven *General Capabilities* and (3) the three *Cross Curricular Priorities*. All teachers ‘embed’ the additional dimensions in their learning areas, placing responsibilities on teachers that extend beyond the skills and knowledge of their subject domains. The General Capabilities encompass 21st century skills such as Literacy, Numeracy, Critical and Creative Thinking, Digital Technologies, and Intercultural Understanding. The three Cross Curricular Priorities are items of significance for Australia’s prosperity and global identity; they relate to Asia literacy, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures, and Sustainability. This means all graduates are mandated to teach about Asia, regardless of their capabilities in Asian cultural contexts. The Asia CCP has been recently updated in version nine (released in 2022). It de-emphasises knowledge, and instead, speaks extensively of ‘active engagement with Asia’ and relational goals such as ‘developing intercultural understanding’ (ACARA, 2022). The suggestion in version nine is that cultural knowledge is not enough to be Asia literate. Such a conceptual change responds to Scarino’s (2019) criticism that previous content-dense versions placed culture external to the learner and encouraged a tokenistic treatment of Asia (p.60). The new expectations now include:

‘...the knowledge, skills, capabilities, and attitudes to effectively navigate and contribute to our regional neighbourhood (ACARA, 2022, para. 1).

‘...intercultural understanding, empathy and confidence to contribute to, and understand, Asia–Australia engagement’ (ACARA, 2022, para. 2)

‘... insight into the societies, beliefs, histories, cultures, languages and environments of the nations within the region’ (ACARA, 2022, para. 3)

If these policy goals are to be engendered in young Australians, such outcomes need to be developed and assessed in preservice teachers prior to graduation. There are now closer conceptual ties between the Asia CCP and the General Capability (GC) of Intercultural Understanding. The revision of Asia literacy to emphasise intercultural skills (such as empathy, openness, and perspective-taking) suggests this conceptual shift. The Asia CCP now emphasises ‘...concepts related to agency, global citizenship, interconnection, interdependence, diversity and inclusion’ (ACARA, 2022, p.2). The key change is a movement away from a content-dense approach to Asia and towards global competencies, positioning Asia literacy as an extension of an intercultural capability.

With these ACARA changes in mind, we investigated the Asia capability of preservice teachers in a regional Australian university in Southeast Queensland. This study is

timely and necessary; this cohort will be among the first graduates to teach about Asia in the version nine curriculum (due for full implementation by 2026). We also analysed qualitative responses to explore their interpretations of Asia literacy and perceived needs in relation to teaching the Asia CCP. The research questions were:

1. What is the Asia capability of preservice teachers according to a self-audit continuum?
2. What do preservice teachers perceive they need from the tertiary provider to teach about Asia upon graduation?

Literature Review

There are limited examples in the literature measuring Asia capability in Australian educators. To our knowledge, the Halse framework (2013) and the Grainger and Christie (2016) continuum are the only two dedicated measures of Asia literacy in Australia designed for practising teachers and the preservice cohort. Whilst there is a shortage of Asia capability models and assessments for educators, the intercultural literature offers guidance for the design of assessments and inclusion of parameters in the measurement of cultural literacies (Byram, 2012; Deardorff, 2015).

There are two broad theoretical frameworks in the modelling and assessment of any cultural literacy: the communicative view and the dispositional view (Risager, 2007). Whilst the dispositional view is associated with the cultivation of affection and cognitive factors (e.g., empathy and tolerance), the communicative view positions proficiency in an additional language as ‘directly related’ to any measure of intercultural capability (Fantini, 2020, p. 53). A necessary consideration, then, in measuring Asia literacy is for researchers to disclose the assumptions underpinning a view of the highest level of competence (Griffith et al., 2016). This is significant because many tools are developed without evaluation of the theoretical model of cultural literacy within which the assessment is nested. The consequence is often ‘conceptual murkiness’ whereby ‘definitions of the [construct] vary considerably’ (Griffith et al., 2016, p. 1). This literature review synthesises recent models of Asia literacy and intercultural capability to position our research and critically evaluate the assumptions within the chosen assessment tool.

One of the most famous frameworks of cultural literacy in the literature is a dispositional model: Bennett’s (1986; 2011) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). If an aim of the amended Asia CCP is to cultivate ‘...intercultural understanding, empathy and confidence to contribute to, and understand, Asia–Australia engagement’ (ACARA, 2022, para. 2), an analysis of the DMIS is justified.

The DMIS emerged from grounded theory and systematic observation of how individuals *affectively* engage with cultural differences (Gordon, 2015). The DMIS (Table 1) posits that dispositional and cognitive factors regulate how individuals experience, interpret and interact with cultural differences. A 50-item inventory (the Intercultural Developmental Inventory or ‘IDI’) emerged from the DMIS. The IDI generates an ‘intercultural sensitivity’ score, positioning individuals along Bennett’s six-scale continuum (see Table 1) from *ethnocentrism* (stages of denial, defence, minimisation) to *ethnorelativism* (acceptance, adaptation, integration). Each of the six stages reflect a set of beliefs and assumptions around cultural differences (Hammer, 2011). The final stage of the continuum, usually achieved after an extensive time living or working in a foreign linguaculture, is *integration* - the ability to shift perspectives, communication, and behaviour to adapt and integrate in a target culture. Individuals who reach *integration* see themselves as cultural mediators with the highest level

of intercultural sensitivity. These individuals ‘help others understand different cultures and promote unity between two or more cultures’ (Cushner, McClelland & Safford, 2012, p. 165).

Ethnocentrism			Ethnorelativism		
Denial	Defence	Minimisation	Acceptance	Adaptation	Integration
The existence of cultural difference tends to be ignored; a refusal to engage with difference	Specific cultural differences are recognised in us/them framing or discourses	Cultural difference is trivialised and often seen as relatively unimportant	Cultural difference is appreciated and respected; ability to relativise one’s cultural view	Skills of relating are enhanced to effectively negotiate intercultural situations	Ability to understand and operate effectively in at least two cultures – typically takes 3+ years

Table 1: The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennett, 1986).

Although the DMIS was designed to measure a broader construct than ‘Asia capability’, it would assume that Asia literacy in preservice teachers is perhaps best measured through motivational and dispositional factors. Progression through the first four stages is mostly contingent on the development of values and attitudes towards engaging with cultural differences. These affective traits underlie and precede the development of more advanced intercultural skills (Deardorff, 2011). These assumptions inform an understanding of how Asia literacy might be fostered in preservice teachers. For instance, the lowest levels of ‘Asia literacy’ would suggest the absence of curiosity, respect and appreciation for cultural and linguistic diversity. This idea is pertinent because the preservice teaching cohort is overwhelmingly monocultural (University of Melbourne, 2023). Yet all preservice teachers – upon graduation - are mandated to teach young Australians the skills and dispositions of intercultural communication (ACARA, 2022). Taken further, this means that graduates who are arguably *ethnocentric* are expected to teach cultural literacies. It is unlikely that such graduates could be expected to teach students to ‘navigate intercultural contexts’ (ACARA, 2022, para. 3) if their underlying attitudes and values towards engaging with cultural and linguistic diversity are rigid or ‘ethnocentric’. Grainger and Willis (2021) reiterate this idea, expressing that many Australian teaching graduates ‘may not have the skills, nor the inclination, to change existing beliefs and elect to work with what is familiar’ (p.332). The DMIS reminds teacher educators that affection precedes competence; preservice teachers develop Asia literacy from foundations of sensitivity.

There are indications that the level of motivation to learn and teach about Asia is relatively high in both practising and preservice teachers (O’Neill, Crichton & Scarino, 2019; Salter & Maxwell, 2016). In an Australian study of English teachers’ delivery of the Asia CCP, Gauci and Curwood (2017) found that most respondents (n= 82) perceived value and importance in incorporating Asia-related content into their learning area. However, participants commonly felt ‘...ill-equipped or under-resourced to address [the Asia CCP] in a way that promotes deep learning and understanding for students’ (p. 163). Some avoided the CCP entirely for fear of a ‘tokenistic or shallow’ (p. 169) approach to Asia, conveying a desire to deliver content with sensitivity and respect. Participants did not perceive their motivation or beliefs as barriers to teach about Asia, but rather reported that institutional constraints, the crowded curriculum, and a sense of feeling culturally ‘unqualified’ were more pressing obstacles.

In a similar study, Salter (2014) reported that teachers perceive the Asia CCP as a ‘tricky sort of subject matter’ (p. 212). Teachers criticised the framing of the Asia CCP as promoting homogenous ideas of Asia, grounded in East/West polarisations, thus diminishing the cultural richness and diversity within Asia. Salter (2014) praised teachers’ ‘recognitions of singular notions of Asia as inadequate’ (p.212). The study concluded that motivation to

teach the Asia CCP was high, yet participants felt awkwardly positioned or constrained by representations within the curriculum. Notably, the Salter (2014) and Gauci and Curwood (2017) studies focused on teachers' interpretations of curriculum, and the tension of translating policy into practice, rather than measuring Asia literacy. In both studies, there was no model or assessment scale to separate teachers on an Asia capability scale.

The Asialink model and assessment scale is the product of a federally supported research project to measure the Asia literacy needs of corporate workers. Established in 2018, the framework allows the provision of tailored and measurable Asia literacy development for Australian businesses. The 'proven' framework describes Asia capability as six individual traits and five organisational traits (Asialink Business, 2022). The individual components emphasise the development of 'the critical capabilities, insights and connections to engage with and negotiate the complexities of the region' (para. 2). These individual Asia capabilities are:

1. Sophisticated knowledge of Asian markets and environments.
2. Extensive time and experience in Asia.
3. Ability to develop and maintain long-term relationships in Asia.
4. Ability to adapt behaviour and communication to Asian cultural contexts.
5. Knowledge of government processes in Asia.
6. Target language proficiency.

Apart from the business-specific knowledge of the framework, there is an emphasis on relational skills and culturally sensitive communication and behaviour. The model recognises that intercultural relationships require commitment, emotional investment and cooperative adjustment of behaviour and communication from both parties. This idea reflects Dearsdorff's (2011) definition of intercultural capability. That is, the objective of any intercultural interaction is 'effective and appropriate communication and behaviour' (p.66). The Asialink framework identifies language skills as a necessity, citing that a useful level of proficiency in the local language(s) allows for 'better communication and demonstrates commitment and cultural sensitivity' (Asialink, 2018, p. 15).

The Halse et al. (2013) survey study of practising Australian teachers and principals (n = 1732) is the most significant attempt to define and measure Asia literacy in educators. Participants self-assessed their level of 'Asia readiness' according to a four-scale continuum based on the AITSL progression scales; self-audit intervals were beginner, proficient, highly accomplished and lead. The study revealed that 'most teachers do not perceive themselves as either Asia literate or interculturally competent' (AITSL, 2013, p. 6). Six qualities of an 'Asian literate' educator were identified; one of which was the ability to embed intercultural learning in classroom practice. Halse's (2013) six characteristics of an 'Asia literate' educator (e.g., those at the highest level of preparedness to teach the Asia CCP) were:

1. Expert knowledge of the content, assessment, and pedagogy for teaching Asia-related curriculum.
2. Familiarity of a range of Asia-related teaching resources.
3. Actively works to build students' intercultural understanding.
4. Ability to frequently and seamlessly integrate Asia into other learning areas.
5. Uses digital technologies to connect Australian students with those in Asia.
6. Leads Asia-related professional learning inside and outside the school.

Whilst not positioned as an essential characteristic of the 'Asia literate educator', Halse et al. (2013) acknowledged that an ability in an Asian language was an enabler of Asia literacy. The respondents with 'specialist language expertise' saw themselves as 'intercultural models' (p.42) for their students, using their advanced language and cultural knowledge to 'actively build students' intercultural understanding to create a more successful and tolerant

Australia’ (Halse et al., 2013, p. 116). For these teachers, Asia literacy extended beyond the requisite for cultural knowledge. Rather, the Asia CCP was positioned as part of a broader message for global citizenship, cultural empathy and the promotion of egalitarian ideals.

Grainger and Christie (2016) confirmed similar findings to the Halse study in a pilot survey measuring preservice teachers’ Asia literacy (n = 54). One survey question asked participants to self-evaluate their level of Asia literacy according to a four-scale linguistic model of competence: the ‘Asia Literacy Capability Continuum’ (see Table 2). The scale (Table 2) was informed by the International Second Language Proficiency Rating (Ingram & Wylie, 1997). It deliberately embodies the ‘the fundamental necessity of knowing a language in order to be truly interculturally competent’ (Grainger & Christie, 2016, p. 236). The Grainger study found that 72% of preservice teachers ‘had no particular knowledge or skills related to Asian languages and cultures that had been learnt formally’ (p.242), and 50% were unsure of the curriculum expectations related to teaching Asia. No participants self-assessed in the top two scales of proficiency in an Asian language (intermediate and advanced proficiency). The findings confirmed trends in the Halse study regarding poor preparedness to teach about Asia. However, the Grainger study questioned the Halse framework as incomplete. ‘Asia literacy’ in the Halse study is defined by procedural and pedagogical knowledge alone; it ignores in-country experiences and the significance of using an Asian language. The inclusion of language is a shift away from dispositional (attitude-based) models and assessments of cultural literacy, which have dominated the literature since 1986 (Hammer, 2011).

Level	Description
Asia Aware	Awareness of an Asia culture, customs, society; no Asian language proficiency.
Asia Capable	Basic understanding of an Asian culture, customs, society, and beginner Asian language proficiency achieved through study of an Asian language at secondary school (equivalent to four tertiary courses).
Asia Literate	Working knowledge of an Asian culture, customs, society, and intermediate Asian language proficiency achieved through formal study of an Asian language in eight tertiary courses.
Asia Expert	Advanced knowledge and understanding of an Asian culture, customs and society and advanced Asian language proficiency because of extensive in-country experience.

Table 2: The Asia Literacy Capability Continuum (Grainger & Christie, 2016)

The Grainger and Christie (2016) model challenges dispositional models of cultural literacy such as the DMIS. The DMIS assumes a simple, linear idea of intercultural capability (Gordon, 2015) and a disproportionate focus on affection (Hoff, 2020). The underlying criticism is that dispositional models diminish the role of communicative skills (skills of interpreting and relating) and behaviours (skills of discovery and interaction) in intercultural contexts (Byram, 2012). By focusing intently on affection, the model understates the role of target language proficiency and critical cultural awareness in the development of an intercultural capability. The logical concern is that the highest level of achievement in the DMIS (the stage of *integration* in a target culture) is certainly facilitated by proficiency in a

target language. Yet second language proficiency as a variable remains ‘left out of most models and unmentioned by most intercultural scholars’ (Fantini, 2020, p. 53).

There is a prevailing sense of agreement of target language proficiency as fundamental to measuring an intercultural capability (Fantini, 2020; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). The addition of a foreign language capacity to PISA’s measurement of ‘global competencies’ qualifies this claim. A foreign language assessment framework will be included in the 2025 iteration of PISA. The OECD (2021) identifies the link between speaking an additional language and preparedness to ‘engage in open, appropriate, and effective interactions with people from different cultures’ (p.7). Similarly, Fantini (2020) argues that ‘intercultural competence is directly related with an ability in the host language, aside from the humility and other affective dimensions experienced when attempting to communicate on someone else’s terms’ (p. 52).

There are some assumptions within a linguistic idea of Asia capability that warrant discussion when applied to preservice teachers. The measurement tool provides a conceptual framework that not only delimits Asia literacy, but also provides a platform for much-needed discussion about ‘what counts’ in making consistent judgements of an ‘Asia literate’ graduate. The Grainger and Christie (2016) model responds respectfully to the extensive diversity of Asian languages and cultures whilst acknowledging the emerging position of language proficiency in judgements of cultural literacies. Whilst the measurement tool is nested in a linguistic framework, it does not measure preparedness to *teach* about Asia. The model does not assess pedagogical skills or dispositional attributes. These factors are integral to measuring graduates’ preparedness to promote Asia-Australia engagement, and readiness to teach students from a range of Asian cultures.

A potential misinterpretation of the model also requires clarification: an Asian language capacity *does not* necessarily mean a capability in another Asian context. The model is intentionally limited to a target language. However, there are indications that the skills and dispositions developed through using an additional language are often transferable. A growing body of research suggests an additional language capacity positively influences one’s communication and behaviour in intercultural contexts beyond the target language (Kim, 2020; OECD, 2021). An ability to use an additional language is often reflective of a commitment to cultural sensitivity (Asialink, 2018), a ‘tolerance of ambiguity’ in perceiving meaning (Griffith et al., 2016), and an appreciation of vulnerability when positioned ‘to work on another’s cultural terms’ (Fantini, 2020, p. 53).

Intercultural scholars often describe the cultivation of ‘cultural empathy’ through using an additional language. Scarino (2019) articulates how such ‘cultural empathy’ is nurtured through the process of ‘decentring’. This term describes how one’s cultural ‘frame of reference’ shifts when interacting in an additional language. This ‘shifting’ confronts learners to recognise that their own knowledge, assumptions, and worldviews are incomplete (Vromans et al., 2023). That is, the ‘frame of reference’ through which one views the world is culturally constructed and shaped by one’s native language(s). For monolinguals this lens can often remain unexplored; cultural ideas encoded in language remain uninterrogated (Kramsch, 2014). Speakers of Standard Australian English, for example, only have one word for the second-person singular pronoun (*you*). Many Asian languages have at least two - often encoding ideas of reverence or distance between two speakers. ‘Decentring’ therefore describes the learning which occurs through the interplay of at least two languages (e.g., one’s native and additional languages) when creating and interpreting meaning. This process invites learners to recognise how meanings might be perceived in an intercultural situation. Concomitantly, learners are positioned to deepen an understanding of the complex experience of intercultural communication for another. Naidu (2020) explores this idea. Critically engaging with an additional language invites teachers to be ‘reflexive about their own

experiences and identity, and to engage intellectually with the concept of ‘culture’ (p. 662). Those with an additional language capacity are frequently encouraged to problematise the relationship between meaning-making and meaning-receiving. For Australian preservice teachers, many of whom are monolingual and non-diverse (Australian Government, 2023), this idea is significant yet undermentioned. The suggestion is that young Australians are unlikely ‘to examine how people experience intercultural contexts differently’ (ACARA, 2022, para. 7) or ‘sharpen skills in perspective taking’ (para. 8) if their teachers’ experience of intercultural communication is anchored in a fixed, monolingual ‘frame of reference’. The increasing relevance of languages in the modelling and measurement of cultural literacies supports the use of the Asia Literacy Capability Continuum.

Method

A voluntary paper-and-pencil survey was administered to preservice teachers enrolled in a Bachelor of Education course at a regional Southeast Queensland university. Ethics approval was obtained prior to the study. 31 preservice teachers responded (26 females, 2 males, 3 did not specify). Analysis of responses to the self-audit Asia Literacy Capability Continuum (see Table 1) was used to answer research question one. To investigate research question two, we thematically analysed participants’ written responses to the question: *How can preservice teachers develop Asia literacy knowledge, skills and values that can provide evidence of meeting the Asia Cross-Curricular Priority? Any other comment you would like to make?*

Qualitative data was thematically analysed to infer participants’ readiness to meet the requirement to teach Asia. How respondents intended to achieve ‘Asia literacy’ revealed not only varied interpretations of the term itself, but also how they evaluated the tertiary provider’s role in developing Asia literate graduates. Analysis of participants’ understandings of Asia literacy is justified because graduates are ultimately interpreters seeking to realise the planned curriculum (Scarino, 2019, p. 60). The American curriculum commentator Shepard (2015) acknowledges this reality, observing that ‘reforms are undone by superficial understandings or by hollow enactments of idealized schemes’ (p. 47). We therefore investigated participants’ understandings of Asia literacy to infer how participants imagined ‘meeting’ the mandated CCP.

Results

The Asia Literacy Capability Continuum self-audit separated participants in terms of proficiency in any Asian language and time spent living in Asian cultures (see Table 2). In increasing order, the four levels were Asia-aware, Asia-capable, Asia-literate, and Asia-expert.

Three surveys of 31 were discarded for incorrect or illegible marking of the continuum. 24 of the remaining 28 self-assessed as Asia-aware (86%) or ‘no knowledge of any Asian language’. 4 participants (14%) acknowledged a basic level of proficiency in an Asian language, equivalent to the study of four tertiary language courses. No participants self-assessed as Asia-literate or Asia-expert.

The free-text responses were thematically coded (n=31). This involved discussion between the researchers to identify candidate themes reflective of the entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The veracity of the themes is supported by of the experience of the authors;

two of three authors have more than twenty years of experience in the fields of intercultural communication and language learning.

We identified four themes in open-ended responses to the question: *How can preservice teachers develop Asia literacy knowledge, skills and values that can provide evidence of meeting the Asia Cross-Curricular Priority?* Theme 1 was the perceived need for *more Asia knowledge* in teacher education courses. Theme 2 was the desire to *learn pedagogical skills* associated with the delivery of the Asia CCP. Theme 3 was the desire for *more alignment* of tertiary structures to reflect ACARA expectations of Asia literate graduates. Theme 4 represented *authentic opportunities* to engage with Asia at home and away, such as in-country experience and language learning. Themes are coded below (Table 3).

Themes	Responses
<p>Knowledge (More content knowledge of Asia)</p>	<p>ID01: more subjects to do with GC. ID02: more subjects about it at uni ID03: more subjects at uni ID07: A specific course at uni to cover Asia literacy. ID08: a course related to Asia literacy. ID14: more subjects which touch base with knowledge and skills. ID18: I have had very little knowledge on Asian culture, history and religion and would love to learn more. ID27: By implementing a uni course that focuses on this specific skill set</p>
<p>Pedagogy (Learning the skills to teach the Asia CCP in classrooms)</p>	<p>ID01: being shown evidence of how to implement in practice. ID03: transfer to practice ID05: a course dedicated to it...how to incorporate it into key learning areas. ID12: I am very uncomfortable to teach this in the classroom as I have never seen it at uni. ID20: How do I include the content of this CCP in music and art subjects? ID24: Reflect on professional experiences: What are the GC and CCP they incorporated into lessons?</p>
<p>Alignment (Alignment of coursework to reflect ACARA's expectations of 'Asia literate' graduates)</p>	<p>ID06: have a CCP course that focuses on developing the knowledge and skills that reflect the standard. ID09: Incorporate Asia Literacy education into one of the ATSI courses and split the course. ID10: Why don't we have a course on Asia literacy and knowledge? ID13: Why is Asia thrown aside? ID20: I didn't hear about it in much depth until the end of my 3rd year (of primary ed degree). ID23: More depth rather than 1 tutorial and more understanding of pedagogies and it actually in the classroom. More awareness for uni assignments. ID26: We have specific courses on ATSI but nothing on Asia Literacy? And we are supposed to be confident teaching it? ID29: PST should be subjected to this CCP before their 4th year, as this makes the CCP feel somewhat less of a priority. ID30: Should be mentioned/embedded into our course from year 1 rather than Year 4.</p>
<p>Opportunity (More authentic opportunities to actively engage with Asian languages, cultures and communities at home and away)</p>	<p>ID15: travelling, allocating time. ID26: add a language elective too. ID16: be involved in study programs, engaging with students of diverse backgrounds on placements. ID16: engaging with Asian communities, helping to mark Asian-CPP work, communicating with Asian students and teachers. ID22: travel to Asian countries and experience the culture first-hand. ID24: access to learning an Asian language, visit a language classroom to get insight</p>

Table 3: Preservice Teachers' Perceived Needs in Relation to Asia Literacy

Discussion

The results indicate that preservice teachers' Asia capability and preparedness to teach about Asia is low. Similar results were reported in the Grainger and Christie study (2016) indicating that the issues identified then are yet to be addressed in the regional university. Despite iterations to the Asia CCP over the last ten years (AEF, 2022) the results suggest our Bachelor of Education students feel ill-equipped and under-supported to teach the updated Asia CCP. This comes despite motivation to learn about Asia and, in some participants, a level of frustration about graduating with low readiness to teach a mandated curriculum dimension. Two comments capture this sentiment:

'I am very uncomfortable to teach this in the classroom as I have never seen it at uni.'

'We are supposed to be confident teaching it?'

There were no respondents who self-assessed in the top two tiers of an Asian language proficiency (Asia literate and Asia expert stages). 86% of participants had no language ability but indicated awareness of Asian cultures, customs, and society. Low participant numbers in the study limit not only the generalisability of this finding to other Australian cohorts, but also the possibility to statistically verify the continuum. Future research with larger preservice cohorts can address this gap. However, a suspected reason for respondents' lack of Asian language capability is the homogeneity of the cohort. While national census data indicates 17.4% of Australia's population has Asian ancestry (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2022), the participants in the study are disproportionately white, female and monolingual. Separating participants based on language is exclusive, yet our model is justified because it clearly defines and delimits Asia literacy against a theoretical framework. Assertions made by Halse et al. (2013) support the case for language:

'Asian language teachers are Asia specialists and score higher on measures of Asia literacy than non-language teachers (p.11).'

Written responses revealed how preservice teachers imagined addressing their relatively low Asia capability, providing four 'solutions' (see Table 3). A common perception was a vague need for 'more content knowledge about Asia'. According to Scarino (2019) and Diaz (2013), this perception of 'Asia literacy' is the accumulation of facts – an 'additive' and 'tokenistic' interpretation. Scarino (2019) argues this view may indicate a lack of awareness of the deeper objectives of cultural initiatives, particularly in relation to the amended Asia CCP, whose underlying goal is to foster students' intercultural capabilities. In version nine of the curriculum, these capabilities refer to 'the behaviours and dispositions to know what happens and what to do when cultures intersect' (ACARA, 2022, para. 1). Responses in our study suggest the need for tertiary educators to provide more awareness of graduate responsibilities regarding mandated cultural curriculum, especially regarding the deeper 'intercultural' messages within the Asia CCP. Examples of our preservice teachers' lack of awareness to teach about Asia are:

'Preservice Teachers should be subjected to this CCP before their 4th year, as this makes the CCP feel somewhat less of a priority.'

'I didn't hear about it in much depth until the end of my 3rd year (of primary ed degree).'

Participants also perceived the lack of pedagogical skills as a barrier. Understandably, respondents wanted to see examples of meaningful implementation of the Asia-related learning in classrooms. If all teachers are expected to embed the Asia CCP (ACARA, 2022), graduates need to learn what this 'looks like' for their learning area (Davies, 2021). The need for pedagogical skills related to intercultural communication is implied in the AITSL graduate standards. The focus of the most relevant AITSL graduate standard to Asia literacy

(standard 1.3) is ‘knowledge of teaching strategies that are responsive to the learning strengths and needs of students from diverse linguistic, cultural, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds’ (p. 3). Although the standard does not explicitly state Asia, it foregrounds the need to adjust teaching and learning to cater for the diverse composition of classrooms. Recent census data indicates that most of the overseas-born Australian population are from Asian countries (ABS, 2022). Six of the top ten countries of overseas-born migrants are from India, China, Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, and Nepal (ABS, 2022). The suggestion is that graduates will be increasingly required to differentiate for learners who come from a range of Asian cultures – many of which will access the curriculum using English as a second language or dialect (Australian Government, 2023). The need for graduates to be prepared with the pedagogical skills for this work is significant – it extends beyond a responsibility to deliver the Asia CCP. We found the desire for pedagogical skills related to Asia literacy was particularly relevant for respondents of learning areas generally viewed as ‘distant’ from the Asia CCP, indicated by comments like:

‘How do I include the content of this CCP in music and art subjects?’

‘[I want to] be shown evidence of how to implement it in practice’.

‘[I want to] visit a language classroom to get insight’.

Respondents criticised the lack of alignment between tertiary structures and ACARA’s expectations of graduates. They perceived the university’s commitment to Asia literacy as ‘low priority,’ observing that Asia ‘should be mentioned and embedded into our course from Year 1 rather than Year 4’. Consequently, participants identified authentic engagement with Asia as a solution. We defined ‘authentic engagement’ as opportunities that promoted both experiential learning of Asia and relationship building in Asian countries and at home. These comments revealed a desire for ‘deep learning’ (AEF, 2022) rather than content knowledge alone; such participants wanted to actively engage with Asian cultures, communities and languages yet felt limited by institutional constraints. While calls for in-country experience and language exchange programs are common in the literature (Nelson & Luetz, 2021), participants also desired relational engagement with Asia in Australia. These recommendations include:

‘Being involved in study programs, engaging with students of diverse backgrounds on placements’.

‘Engaging with Asian communities, helping to mark Asian-CPP work, communicating with Asian students and teachers’.

‘Access to learning an Asian language’.

Our findings support the Halse et al. (2013) recommendation that tertiary providers need to audit their course structures to ensure that professional learning is relevant, authentic, and available to preservice teachers. Halse et al. (2013) maintain that ‘relevant professional learning, in initial teacher education, postgraduate and professional learning programs, is a key indicator for Asia literacy’ (p.13).

The responses of this study are indicative of a complex, systemic issue. Addressing Australian universities’ failure to foster Asia literacy in preservice teachers extends beyond the site of this research. Few preservice teachers study Asian languages (or any languages) in university or secondary school (Dervin, Moloney & Simpson, 2020) and tertiary providers face mounting pressure to meet accreditation and re-accreditation agendas in already crowded teacher education programs, where behaviour management training is increasingly a priority (Australian Government, 2023). Despite these constraints, all teaching graduates remain mandated to teach Asia literacy in the delivery of the national curriculum (Asia Education Foundation, 2022). Complicating this mandate, Australia’s teacher workforce does not reflect the cultural or linguistic diversity of the wider population (Australian Government, 2023; Rice et al., 2023). Teachers from diverse backgrounds ‘often have a better understanding of

cultural issues and are more adept at building bridges to minority groups' (University of Melbourne, 2023, para. 11). The extent to which the lack of diversity of the teaching workforce impacts confidence to teach cultural initiatives is unclear. This is an avenue for future research.

Conclusion

This article investigated the Asia literacy needs of a group of preservice teachers in a regional Queensland university. We discovered that participants - although motivated to learn more about Asia - perceive themselves unprepared to teach about Asia. Written responses identified barriers at the tertiary level to shaping Asia literate graduates. There were indications that some participants conceptualised Asia literacy as 'more knowledge' which may suggest a tokenistic view of culture. Other participants identified the need for pedagogical skills to implement Asia across their learning areas, adding to calls for more clarity around how to teach 'a tricky sort of subject matter' (Salter, 2014, p. 204). Moreover, participants questioned the university's commitment to Asia literacy as a major barrier. They conveyed the desire to actively engage with Asian cultures, languages, and communities through more experiential and relational learning. We concluded that the structures and opportunities at this university inadequately supported the development of Asia literate graduates. This is concerning because the Asia capability of the cohort, according to language and experiences in Asian cultures, was already very low.

We used a self-assessment continuum with a linguistic focus to measure the Asia capability of participants. We found that most preservice teachers had no language ability in an Asian language (no participants self-assessed as possessing an intermediate or advanced level of any Asian language). If proficiency in a target language is increasingly recognised in measurements of an intercultural capability (Fantini, 2020; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013), then its inclusion is supported in a model of Asia capability. We emphasise the assessment tool does not claim to comprehensively measure readiness to teach the Asia CCP because it does not include pedagogical skills or attitudes. However, the measurement tool in this study is a platform for further research and critical discussion of two areas: (1) how to consistently define and delimit Asia literacy to reflect the skills, knowledge and values required by Australian preservice teachers, and (2) how its measurement can then inform tailored interventions. For over a decade, the lack of measurement against a robust conceptualisation of Asia literacy has stifled efforts to track the impact of Asia-related curriculum at both the school and tertiary level (University of Melbourne, 2023). Our study presents and defends one particular view and assessment framework of Asia capability.

In the short to mid-term, the issue that can be addressed at the tertiary level is the consistent measurement of Asia capability in the preservice cohort across Australia. The Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education (LANTITE) is a parallel example. The initiative recognises that teachers of all learning areas influence the literacy and numeracy development of young Australians, and hence must be assessed on their preparedness - or receive remedial training - prior to graduation. A similar assessment, to our knowledge, does not exist for Asia literacy that is used across multiple Australian institutions. One of the Australian Government's (2023) recommendations in the *Strong Beginnings* report is to increase graduate performance by 'establishing nationally consistent indicators and public reporting [in teacher education]' (p.8). A statistically validated Asia literacy measurement tool for preservice teachers is a necessary response to the recommendation. Our study demonstrates that the assessment of Asia literacy means to think deeply about defining it, limiting its scope, and making consistent judgements against a theoretical framework.

These are critical considerations that Australian tertiary providers and AITSL have failed to acknowledge in the tracking and evaluation of a long-term government initiative that affects both the school and tertiary levels.

The design of an Asia capability framework and survey assessment is currently measuring outcomes in the business sector (Asialink, 2022) yet no such tool exists for the future teachers entrusted to teach about Asia. The development of Asia literacy in young Australians is the desirable long-term impact of the Asia CCP (Halse & Cairns, 2018) which the government has implicated in the social, political, and economic security of Australia in the 'Asian century' (Minister for Foreign Affairs, 2023). Outcomes in students are an unlikely long-term target without taking a first step: prioritising the defining, delimiting and assessment of Asia literacy in preservice teachers. Systemic improvement of Asia literacy - and the targeting of quality interventions - will rely on consistent assessment across Australian tertiary providers.

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