Prioritising Indian Languages: Strategies to Expand Hindi Education in Australia

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The Australia India Institute’s A VERY SHORT POLICY BRIEF series examines key questions facing contemporary India and the Australia-India relationship. It combines in-depth academic analysis with clarity and policy relevance.
Despite widespread recognition of the value of Hindi education in Australia, the number of mainstream schools and universities that teach Hindi remains extremely limited. It has been challenging to get Hindi education off the ground, given a lack of accredited Hindi language teachers and a paucity of quality teaching materials that are attuned to the Australian curriculum. Policy interventions that rely on simple ‘quick fixes’ are unlikely to bring about the change required. Policymakers must recognise that language education occurs in a complex ecosystem, which only thrives when there are dynamic connections between primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of education, and when diaspora communities are given space to provide a supportive role. We recommend, therefore, that governments at local, state, and federal levels work together to establish such ecosystems for Hindi education in a small number of strategically chosen locations – particularly in Melbourne, Sydney, and Canberra.
The Need for Change

In 1997, there were six universities that taught Hindi in Australia. Today, there are only two, and those two are suffering from major resource constraints.

Japanese, French and German remain the three most commonly taught languages in Australian schools, even though – with the possible exception of Japanese – these are not languages that are essential to Australia’s social and economic future.

Policy makers in Australia have long recognised the importance of Asian language education to our long-term economic relationship with Asia. The *Australia in the Asian Century White Paper* (2012) made a strong case that students in all Australian schools should have the opportunity to study one of four priority Asian languages: Japanese, Mandarin, Indonesian, and Hindi. While significant progress has been made on our other priority Asian languages, Australia continues to neglect Hindi education.

If Australia is to take its relationship with India to the next level, this needs to change. Some points to consider:

- Hindi is the fourth most spoken language in the world (after Mandarin, Spanish, and English) and the most common language in India, with more than 420 million native speakers and 100 million fluent second language speakers in India, as of the 2001 census.

- Despite the common assumption that India is an English-speaking country, only 11 per cent of Indians speak English, while more than 51% speak Hindi.

- Hindi is of growing global significance. Along with its sister-language Urdu – which in everyday spoken situations is almost identical to Hindi – it serves as a lingua franca in South Asia. Its influence is growing in countries in the Indian Ocean, such as Mauritius, and it has very large numbers of speakers in countries such as Fiji and Suriname.

- Hindi is among the fastest growing languages in Australia. Punjabi, a related language, is Australia’s fastest growing language as of the 2016 census (and most Punjabi speakers are also fluent in Hindi). There will be increasing demand for Indian language education in Australia as the Indian diaspora seek to retain meaningful cultural connections to their country of origin. Strong Hindi education programs will assist in promoting social inclusion for this diaspora community. Demand for Hindi interpreters and translators in Australia is also set to increase, particularly to assist elderly family members of the Indian diaspora when they visit Australia.

- The current Government of India conducts more of its affairs in Hindi than any previous government and fewer of its senior ministers are advanced English speakers. Prime Minister Modi makes a point to speak in Hindi even when hosting world leaders in India. This is likely to be an enduring shift. In future, diplomats to India will no longer be able to take English for granted – at least basic knowledge of Hindi will be required.

• The prominence of Hindi is set to increase: As of 2015 the Government of India is making efforts to strengthen Hindi education in India’s non-Hindi-speaking states and the Ministry of External Affairs is making efforts to promote Hindi as an international language. Civil society organisations such as the World Hindi Secretariat – based in Mauritius – are likewise seeking to promote Hindi globally.

• Hindi belongs to the Indo-European group of languages, which makes it relatively easy for English-speakers to master, compared to most other Asian languages.

A Brief History of Hindi Education in Australia

At the tertiary level, Hindi was first offered in Australia by the University of Queensland’s adult education Institute of Modern Languages in 1965. That course, still available, may be taken as a part of a university degree program. From 1972 other Australian adult education centres and TAFEs have sporadically offered courses in Hindi.

The next formal Hindi course was offered at the Australian National University (ANU), first conducted by R.S. McGregor (1971) and then by R.K. Barz and Y.K. Yadav (from 1972 to 2012). It is currently conducted by Peter Friedlander. From 1999 to 2006 the ANU Hindi course was provided by video conferencing to the University of Sydney. At the ANU, at least two-years’ study of an Asian language is required for the Bachelor of Asia-Pacific Studies and Hindi is one of the languages that fulfil that requirement.

The primary reason why the ANU Hindi course has continued to be offered every year for 47 years, while most of the other university Hindi courses in Australia have been unable to survive, is that at the ANU Hindi has been all those years accepted as a degree requirement. No other Australian university has recognised Hindi as a language required for a degree. The singular success of the ANU in maintaining its Hindi course for such a long period is a strong indication that any university expecting success for its Hindi program must make that language a requirement for an undergraduate degree, for example, as part of an Asian Studies major.

In 1975 and 1976 and then again from 1982 to 1990 Hindi was offered at the University of Melbourne, taught for most of those years by Sudha Joshi. Hindi was also provided by the University of Sydney between 1982 and 2009 and at La Trobe University from 1991 to the present. The other universities in Australia that have included Hindi courses in their degree programs are Monash University (1993-1995) and RMIT University (1997-1999).

As of early 2018, only the ANU and La Trobe University – where Hindi is taught by Ian Woolford – continue to offer Hindi courses for a university degree. This is a startling decline from the year 1997, when six universities were providing Hindi instruction at undergraduate level in Australia. The primary reason for this deeply regrettable decline is that at none of the universities in which a Hindi course did not survive was Hindi accepted as a requirement for a degree. As a result, university administrations were easily able to discontinue their Hindi courses, unprotected by status as a required integral component in a degree program, for short-term financial considerations. In some cases, as at Monash and RMIT universities, unprotected Hindi courses were terminated after such a brief period of time that they never had a reasonable chance to prove their worth.

In 1995, Marika Vicziany, Director of the National Centre for South Asian Studies, set out the difficulties facing Australian university Hindi programs. Summarised, her view was that Hindi at Australian universities lacked the academic and demographic balance necessary for long-term success. There was academic imbalance in that the ANU had a complete undergraduate and graduate program in Hindi without an extensive range of non-language South Asian courses while the other universities offering Hindi had a reasonable selection of South Asian courses but no firmly-established Hindi program. Demographic balance was lacking in that Sydney and Melbourne, with their massive concentration of population, had insecure and weak Hindi language programs while only in Canberra – with its small population – was there a secure Hindi course of study. This remains a key problem today.

Vicziany’s solution for this problem of balance was for the Australian government’s Department of Education to encourage the university teaching of Hindi-Urdu, especially in Sydney and Melbourne, by providing funding for a period of five years. Vicziany’s suggestion, which was not implemented, remains even more relevant today when there is no university course in Hindi in Sydney and the Hindi courses in Melbourne and Canberra are threatened and have a declining component of non-language support courses.

Because of the efforts of Hindi-speaking parents to ensure that their children can study Hindi in school, the prospects for Australian primary and secondary education in Hindi are promising. Beginning in the 1980s, led by advocates like Dinesh Srivastava and Sudha Joshi in Melbourne and Mala Mehta in Sydney, Hindi speakers obtained government recognition for Hindi courses at the primary and secondary levels.

Other developments in primary and secondary instruction in Hindi in Australia include: the local production of Hindi textbooks for primary and secondary students, the provision of Hindi in the curriculum of some primary schools in Victoria and New South Wales and the inclusion of Hindi in the Australian Curriculum developed by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority established by an Act of the Australian Parliament in 2008.


The Current State of Hindi Education

In recent years, there has been a gradual increase in students studying Hindi at primary and secondary levels. This is reflected in the numbers of students taking their high school exams in Hindi. In 2017, 44 students from Victoria, 17 from Western Australia and 1 from Tasmania were to appear for their state certificate of education examinations in Hindi and in New South Wales 24 students were enrolled for the Higher School Certificate course in Hindi. In Canberra two public senior secondary colleges, Narrabundah College and Gungahlin College, were offering two-year Hindi courses.

Yet, the number of mainstream schools in Australia teaching Hindi as one of their main foreign languages remains dismally low. Only two primary schools in Victoria and seven in New South Wales offer Hindi, and no high schools teach Hindi as a main foreign language anywhere in the country. The lack of high schools offering Hindi is a crucial weak link in the chain, resulting in a reduction in the number of students who may wish
to go on from high school to university-level Hindi – and subsequently become Hindi teachers. Yet, principals of both primary and secondary schools are often reluctant to consider Hindi when choosing languages for their schools, as it is seen to be riskier than languages that are already widely taught in Australia, and which consequently have greater supports available.

The few schools that have embraced Hindi are instructive cases of what it is possible to achieve. Rangebank Primary School in the South-East of Melbourne took on Hindi in 2012 and was the first school in Victoria to do so. The school’s principal, Colin Avery, recognised that while other schools in the region were already teaching Mandarin, Indonesian, and Japanese, offering Hindi could provide a point of differentiation for the school. He also recognised that the large South Asian population in Melbourne’s South-West would benefit immensely from a local school teaching a language with which they are familiar. The school did not have any great difficulties in finding a qualified teacher, Pooja Verma, and within a short time, parents and community members of South Asian origin also became involved in the delivery of Hindi education at the school. The school takes an immersive approach to teaching Hindi, with signs around the school written in both English and Hindi and prominent Indian festivals and events being celebrated at the school.

When no schools are available to cater for demand for Hindi education, students in some states have the option of enrolling at specialised language schools at a low cost. These schools, which are funded by state governments in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and the Northern Territory, give students the option to study a wide range of languages that are not available at their schools. For Hindi education, the Victorian School of Languages (VSL) has by far the most comprehensive offerings in Australia. They have been teaching Hindi since 1987 and now also teach a range of other South Asian languages, including Urdu, Punjabi, Tamil, Kannada and Malayalam. Students can study in face-to-face classes located at 9 centres across Victoria – mostly in metropolitan Melbourne, but also in Mildura and Shepparton. Hindi is now also one of the 9 languages that VSL offers via distance education, where students maintain regular contact with their teachers via phone calls and Skype sessions. VSL’s students are all supported by a range of materials that VSL produces themselves, including textbooks and audio CDs. VSL is also developing online resources for Hindi education, which should be available for use in the near future.

Community Language Schools have also been crucially important in delivering Hindi education in the absence of formal programs in mainstream schools. These schools offer classes outside of school hours, with teachers being drawn from the Indian diaspora community. Students are overwhelmingly the children of Indian migrants – who often travel large distances to ensure they can participate in these classes – but there is also increased demand from students who are not of Indian origin.

Materials have been developed to teach Hindi by distance education at the Year 12 level in Victoria, and a range of books and supplementary materials have been produced to complement teaching offerings at primary and high school levels. As of yet, however, these materials cannot be considered comprehensive, having been developed largely by voluntary efforts of members of the Indian diaspora. Funds need to be made available for the development of a comprehensive suite of teaching materials for Hindi.
In addition to a lack of materials, Hindi programs have also been stunted by a lack of cooperation on curriculum development between states.

As noted above, at the tertiary level, only ANU and La Trobe University continue to offer Hindi as part of an undergraduate degree. These two universities live with the ever-present threat of funding cuts and enrolments tend to be relatively low compared to other Asian languages. A scarcity of funds means that directors of Hindi programs have been unable to develop the innovative recruitment strategies necessary to give university-level Hindi enrolments a much-needed boost.

One important development in tertiary Hindi is that as of 2018, ANU is offering Hindi as an online course through Open Universities Australia, enabling students from around Australia the opportunity to study tertiary level Hindi. The ANU plans to add one new course each year for the next four years, by the end of which it will be possible to attain a full major in Hindi through online study.

Towards Functioning Hindi Ecosystems in Australia

Any attempt to improve Australia’s efficacy in Hindi education needs to recognise that language education programs only persist when they are able to function as part of a complex, integrated ecosystem. For example, for primary and secondary school programs to flourish, there needs to be an adequate flow of teachers who receive training through nearby tertiary-level Hindi language programs and who receive the appropriate teacher accreditations. Yet, to create an interest in tertiary studies of Hindi, strong secondary school programs need to be in place. Likewise, the development of learning materials, such as worksheets, videos, and books, help strengthen Hindi education – yet demand to create such materials tends to only emerge after teaching programs are well-established. A further critical support for this ecosystem is the Indian diaspora community, who can not only provide various forms of learning assistance, but who act as a pressure group to establish new Hindi programs and to sustain existing ones. Beyond the Indian diaspora, it is imperative that parents and the wider public recognise the value of young people learning Hindi.

If we are to achieve a critical mass that will allow Hindi education to take off in Australia, all the nodes within this ecosystem need to be developed such that they are mutually reinforcing. We must identify weak points in the current Hindi language ecosystem in Australia and work on addressing them. Recognition of the ecosystemic nature of this field also implies that policy interventions that occur at only one level will tend to have only short-term benefits. Interventions need to be systemic.

Teacher education is the clearest weak point in the current system. When primary or secondary school principals make decisions about the languages to prioritise at their schools, a major consideration is the availability of quality teachers. Unfortunately, the current system of teacher education and accreditation in Australia does not provide clear career pathways to encourage teachers to sign up to become language teachers – and particularly not in languages that are not yet well-established4.

Many of the Hindi teachers who are employed through the various language schools spread across Australia come with proficiency in English and qualifications in Hindi through the Indian education system – but lack teaching qualifications. These teachers gain ‘Permission to Teach’ accreditation, which is adequate for language schools, but in most cases, does not allow them to teach in mainstream schools. The few teachers who are teaching Hindi in mainstream schools generally have teaching qualifications and Hindi language proficiency, but lack specific qualifications in language education. Further work needs to be done to recruit excellent, English-proficient Hindi teachers from India and for smoother pathways for qualifications recognition and teacher registration in Australia.

Challenge 2. Linking Secondary and Tertiary Education

Of the relatively small number of students who are studying Hindi in secondary schools, few are currently likely to continue their studies of Hindi at the tertiary level. This speaks, in part, to the lack of linkages between the secondary and tertiary systems of language education. More work is needed for university staff – not only in language programs, but also in South Asian studies – to speak to secondary school students and advise them on the social, cultural and career benefits that may come through expertise in Hindi.

Challenge 3. Values of the Indian Diaspora

Governments must recognise that diaspora communities are often crucial drivers in the development of functioning language education ecosystems. The Indian diaspora has the potential to both support community learning initiatives (see Challenge 6, below) and apply the necessary pressures to schools to select Hindi as their chosen language and to sustain Hindi language programmes, once they are established.

Yet, anecdotal evidence suggests that while the Indian diaspora largely values South Asian language education as a means of retaining social and cultural connections to India, they do not yet value language education as a wise career move. As such, while large numbers of young members of the second and third generation of the Indian diaspora study Hindi in informal settings – such as through family or religious institutions – relatively few pursue it in formal studies, seeing little value for career progression. Governments need to work more closely with diaspora organisations to promote awareness that not only can the study of Hindi give their children competitive advantages in high school exams – and subsequently in entry to university programs – they can also provide entry points for careers through engagement with India.

Challenge 4. Quality, Accessible Learning Materials

A challenge faced by many students studying South Asian languages is a lack of accessible learning materials. When studying languages that are well-established in Australian schools, access to workbooks and interactive online apps is rarely a problem, but for Hindi, such materials are relatively underdeveloped.

New online platforms can provide access to learning materials to students studying Hindi, even in regional and remote areas – and Government can support the development of such platforms at a relatively low cost. A key example of the potential in this field is the work done by the Victorian School of Languages in developing an online course for Year 7 and 8 students in Mandarin. Supported by a 2009 grant of less than one hundred thousand dollars from the Federal Government’s National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program, the online course features interactive material, video and audio files and regular quizzes and tracking systems to allow teachers to track students’ progress. The course was designed in such a way as to be compatible with languages curricula across Australia and is now being drawn on as a key resource throughout the country. With its experience with the Mandarin course, developing a similar online course for Hindi using the same software should not be a great challenge for the Victorian School of Languages and could make an enormous impact, particularly for students who lack access to face-to-face classes.

Challenge 5. Support from the Government of India

The current Government of India is highly enthusiastic about the promotion of Hindi and its recognition as an international language. To date, however, they have not provided strong financial support for the development of Hindi programs in Australia. One important way in which the Government of India could aid the development of Hindi education in Australia is through sending teacher assistants to Australia to assist teachers in delivering classes and developing teaching materials for primary and secondary schools. Teacher assistants of this kind are deployed by several other countries. Hanban, the Chinese Government organisation for international education, sent 38 teacher assistants to Victoria alone in 2018. The Government of India, by contrast, does not send any. Before there can be meaningful progress in this field, however, the Government of India needs a clear expression from Australia of its long-term interest in Hindi.
Challenge 6. Involving the Community.

An especially promising approach to Hindi education involves bringing together the agenda for language education with social inclusion objectives. There is growing scholarly recognition that in Australia, there is great value in involving diasporic communities in teaching their first languages – particularly the elderly. Australia's large and growing Indian diaspora population forms a fantastic – but as yet untapped – resource for augmenting formal Hindi education programmes.

Research conducted in Melbourne has shown that pairing high school students with mentors from diaspora communities can assist in the acquisition of languages, improving confidence and allowing new vocabulary to be acquired\(^5\). Not only this, such programmes can help students develop richer understandings of other generations and other cultures and deepen their appreciation of the experiences of migrants in Australia\(^6\). From the elder generation's point of view, being involved in teaching their first language can lead to greater social inclusion, a sense of satisfaction in making a positive contribution to inter-cultural understanding and a better appreciation of the perspective of youth in Australia\(^7\). This is especially important, as elderly migrants – particularly those whose English language skills are not advanced – often face numerous problems with isolation and a lack of social inclusion. The Indian diaspora in Australia could make a great contribution through such community initiatives, as they are often highly passionate about the value of their languages as a window into their history, culture, spirituality, and identity.

Challenge 7. Making it Fun.

Lastly, if language programs are to endure, students need to see them as fun and interesting. Although governments may be rightly interested in promoting Hindi education due to the rise of India as an economic superpower, people rarely study languages based on prospective economic opportunities. Members of the Indian diaspora – and those who marry or befriend them – study Hindi to maintain meaningful social and cultural connections to India. Those without Indian heritage mostly study Hindi as a result of a passionate interest in India's society, culture, history, and many religious traditions. Recognising that these socio-cultural factors are key to making Hindi fun – and thereby sustaining interest in the language – should be at the forefront of policymakers’ minds if we wish to see strong and sustainable Hindi education programs in Australia.

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6. Ibid.
Recommendations

1. State governments need a long-term vision and strategy for building thriving systems for Asian language education – and within that, they must recognise Hindi as the highest priority, given that it is so far behind. Governments should focus strategically on select local clusters, particularly in areas where there are high numbers of students of Indian heritage and near universities that are also able to teach Hindi at the tertiary level. Within these clusters, high schools and their feeder primary schools should be given adequate support to sustain Hindi programs over a number of years. Sustained support in strategically chosen localities is necessary to develop the kind of ecosystems for Hindi education discussed above. Given the higher concentration of Indian-origin populations and their proximity to existing Hindi programs, select suburbs in Melbourne, Canberra, and Sydney should be the initial focus.

2. State governments must lead a campaign to promote Hindi within these clusters, partnering with key media outlets such as SBS Radio and Indian diaspora groups to encourage parents to lobby for their children’s schools to teach Hindi and for students of all ages to enrol in Hindi courses. The benefits need to be made apparent, and this will require a concerted advertising campaign which is beyond the scope of individual schools or university departments to drive.

3. To encourage primary and secondary schools to offer Hindi as their language of choice, state governments should host forums, in collaboration with the Australia India Institute, to inform school principals about the benefits of learning Hindi, of gaining a deeper understanding of India, and the various supports and learning materials that would be available to schools offering Hindi.

4. There need to be far clearer education and career pathways for potential Hindi teachers. Governments should consider providing financial incentives for teachers to teach Hindi in government primary and secondary schools. Teachers with Hindi language proficiency but without experience in teaching languages should be given the opportunity to teach, on the provision that they undertake the required language teaching accreditation within a specified period.

5. Efforts must be made to build a supportive and inclusive language ecosystem through involvement of the diaspora community – especially the elderly – in Hindi education. Local governments can play a strong role in this respect, by providing space and facilitating the formation of voluntary Hindi education courses that involve elderly members of the diaspora community. It would be especially valuable for local governments in areas with strong Hindi programs in schools and large Indian diaspora populations to fund such initiatives.

6. Engagement grants should be made available for universities to develop partnerships with secondary schools to advise students on the benefits of engagement with India and Indian languages. This would foster stronger high school-to-university links and encourage more enrolments in Hindi courses at the university level. One approach to doing this would be to pay an academic staff member working in South Asian Studies at 0.1 rate to spend a day a fortnight for a set period to visit language schools and high schools to speak about the benefit of studying Hindi and India more broadly. This should be done after secondary school Hindi programs are well-established.
7. At the university level there needs to be stronger symbiosis between courses on Indian language and Indian society. Universities with strong South Asian Studies programs need to offer Hindi and vice versa. In cases where this is not viable, universities offering, or wishing to offer, South Asian Studies courses should be encouraged to also allow students to study Hindi delivered from ANU through Open Universities Australia or La Trobe as cross-institutional enrolments. Governments should provide financial supports to universities who make such moves – at least during the initial years of implementation.

8. The South Asian diaspora in Australia need to be made more aware of the existing offerings at schools and universities and the value of Hindi education. They should also be made aware that if they lobby their local schools to teach Hindi, this can be effective, as was the case at Rangebank Primary School. There is also a need for basic research on diaspora attitudes towards language education and how diaspora support for Hindi could be a driver of Hindi language education programs in Australia.

9. The Federal Government should fund the Victorian School of Languages to develop a national online learning platform for Hindi for Years 7 and 8 students, as was done with Mandarin.

10. State and Federal Governments should lobby the Government of India to send Hindi teaching assistants to work at Australian language schools and in primary and secondary schools with nascent Hindi programs. The Government of India could provide a base salary for these teaching assistants, while the relevant state or federal government in Australia could 'top up' this salary in recognition of the cost of living requirements in Australia. The Government of India may also be able to provide other teaching resources.
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