



# Submission cover sheet

## **Inquiry into E-PET-077-25: Access to 11-12 ATAR language courses in 2026**

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# SUBMISSION TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL POLICY

## Inquiry into E-PET-077-25: Access to 11–12 ATAR Language Courses in 2026

ACT Legislative Assembly

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### Submitted by:

Annamalai Muthiah

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## 1. Introduction

Dear Members of the Standing Committee on Social Policy,

My name is Annamalai Muthiah. I am a proud Tamil Australian and a resident of the ACT. I can speak, read and write Tamil - a language that is not merely a tool for communication, but the very vessel of my cultural identity, my connection to my heritage, and my sense of belonging in this country. I write this submission with deep concern and a personal stake in the future of ATAR language education in the ACT, particularly the continuation of Tamil as an available subject for Years 11 and 12.

The confirmation that CIT will not accept new enrolments for its Year 11–12 ATAR language courses in 2026 and beyond represents a significant loss - not only for individual students, but for the cultural fabric of Canberra. I urge the Committee to recommend that the ACT Government act decisively to restore and expand these essential language pathways within the ACT Education Directorate.

## 2. The Significance of Tamil: A Living Classical Treasure

Tamil is widely regarded as the world's oldest living language, with a continuous literary tradition stretching back over 2,500 years to the Sangam period (300 BCE – 300 CE). In 2004, the Government of India recognised Tamil as the first Classical Language of India, an acknowledgement that was endorsed by UNESCO in 2008. It is spoken by over 80 million people worldwide and is an official language in India's state of Tamil Nadu, Sri Lanka, and Singapore.

Tamil is not a language of the past. It is a language that has flourished continuously - evolving and adapting without losing its classical soul. Its ancient Sangam literature, the philosophical depth of the Thirukkural, the expressive power of Bharatanatyam dance, and the rich traditions of Carnatic music all testify to a civilisation that has been deeply reflective, socially organised, and intellectually vibrant for millennia.

As UNESCO has affirmed, languages are not merely tools for communication - they are vessels of history, culture, worldview, and identity. When a government allows the formal study of such a language to lapse, it sends a message that this heritage

does not matter. I do not believe that is the message the ACT Government intends to send.

### **3. The Tamil Community in Australia and the ACT**

The Tamil community in Australia is significant and rapidly growing. According to the 2021 Census, approximately 95,400 people speak Tamil at home in Australia, a figure that has nearly doubled from around 50,000 in 2011. The total number of ethnic Tamils, including those who may not have listed Tamil as their home language, is estimated to be around 150,000. Tamil is now one of the most widely spoken languages in Australian homes.

Tamil Australians have roots in India, Sri Lanka, Singapore, and Malaysia. They have migrated to Australia across several waves - from colonial-era settlement through to skilled migration in recent decades, as well as refugees from the Sri Lankan civil conflict. More than 80% of Tamil-speaking Australians have completed high school education, well above the national average, reflecting the deep cultural value that Tamil families place on educational achievement.

In Canberra, the Tamil community, while smaller than in Sydney or Melbourne, is an active and growing presence, supported by organisations such as the Canberra Tamil Association. Tamil families in the ACT contribute significantly to the city's public service, IT, healthcare, education, and research sectors. Their children deserve the same opportunity to formally study their heritage language at the senior secondary level as students in other Australian jurisdictions.

### **4. Alignment with ACT Government Policy and Values**

#### **4.1 The Multiculturalism Act 2023**

The ACT's Multiculturalism Act 2023 enshrines a Charter for Multiculturalism that explicitly states that "language is central to the preservation and appreciation of cultural identity" and that residents "are free and are supported to use, preserve and promote" their language. Removing ATAR-level Tamil from Canberra's educational offerings directly undermines this commitment.

The Act's purpose is to "define the Canberra we want to live in now and into the future, as a community that will elevate, recognise, value and embrace our evolving and growing diversity of cultures and languages." Allowing language courses to lapse sends the opposite signal to culturally and linguistically diverse communities: that their languages are valued in rhetoric but not resourced in practice.

#### **4.2 The Language Education Action Plan (LEAP)**

The ACT Education Directorate's own Language Education Action Plan states that it aims for the ACT to be "the jurisdiction of choice for public school language education in Australia." It recognises that language education benefits cognitive function, critical thinking, and cultural awareness, and that Canberra is uniquely positioned with access to embassies, universities, and a diverse community language sector.

The withdrawal of CIT Solutions' language programs without a replacement directly contradicts this aspiration. As advocates have noted, without centrally delivered senior secondary language courses, the ACT would become an outlier among Australian educational jurisdictions - the only territory without such provision.

### 4.3 The Future of Education Strategy

The ACT's Future of Education Strategy commits to "excellent, fair and equitable education" and to ensuring "all students feel safe, valued and supported to thrive." Students who have studied a language for years through primary and high school, only to find it unavailable at the ATAR level because their local college does not offer it, are being denied equitable access to education. This is not a peripheral issue - it goes to the heart of fairness in our school system.

## 5. The Proven Benefits of Language Education

Research consistently demonstrates that studying languages delivers substantial benefits that extend far beyond the ability to communicate in another tongue:

- **Cognitive advantages:** Studies from institutions including Harvard and the American Psychological Association have shown that multilingual individuals exhibit enhanced brain functionality, better cognitive control, improved problem-solving skills, and greater mental flexibility. Bilingualism has even been associated with delaying the onset of dementia by several years.
- **Academic performance:** Students who study languages score higher on standardised tests, demonstrate stronger literacy skills, and develop denser grey matter in areas of the brain responsible for executive function. These gains transfer across all subjects.
- **University pathways:** The Australian National University, located here in Canberra, offers a five-point ATAR bonus to students who study a language - a direct acknowledgement of the value of linguistic study. Without ATAR language courses, ACT students are disadvantaged compared to their interstate peers.
- **Career opportunities:** In Canberra - home to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, embassies, diplomatic missions, and international organisations - bilingual and multilingual skills are a significant professional asset. As one parent advocating for these courses noted, language proficiency "especially in Canberra" increases employment opportunities in diplomacy, trade, defence, and international relations.
- **Intercultural understanding:** Language learning fosters empathy, cultural awareness, and the ability to navigate diverse perspectives - skills that are essential in a multicultural society and an interconnected world.

## 6. The Strategic Importance of Tamil in the Australia-India Relationship

The relationship between Australia and India has never been stronger. In 2020, the bilateral relationship was elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Nearly

one million Australians now trace their heritage to India, making the Indian-Australian community the country's second-largest and fastest-growing overseas-born group. Two-way trade between Australia and India has reached approximately \$49 billion, and the economic relationship continues to deepen through the Australia-India Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement (ECTA).

Tamil Nadu, the heartland of the Tamil language, is a major economic and technological hub in India. Australian companies including Ansell have established manufacturing facilities in Tamil Nadu. Australia maintains a Consulate-General in Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu, reflecting the strategic importance of this region. Nurturing Tamil language skills in Canberra - Australia's national capital - directly supports this deepening partnership and equips the next generation to participate in one of Australia's most important bilateral relationships.

## 7. The Human Cost: What Is Lost When Languages Disappear from the Curriculum

Behind the policy debate are real students and real families. Research shows that the transition from Year 10 to Year 11 is the single strongest driver of language attrition in Australian schools. When students who have invested years studying a language through primary and high school find that their local college does not offer it, and no central alternative exists, they are forced to abandon a subject they are passionate about.

The alternatives currently suggested by the Education Directorate - enrolling at an out-of-area college, attending two colleges simultaneously, or pursuing NSW distance education - are impractical and inequitable. As one Canberra parent rightly observed, suggesting distance education for language learning in the nation's capital is not a reasonable solution. Language is inherently social and communicative; it cannot be meaningfully learned in isolation.

For Tamil families specifically, the loss of ATAR Tamil carries an additional emotional weight. Language is the thread that connects generations. When a young Tamil Australian can speak, read and write Tamil at an academic level, they can access 2,500 years of literature, philosophy, and cultural heritage. They can communicate with grandparents, participate in cultural and religious life, and maintain a living connection to a civilisation that has endured across millennia. To lose this at the very moment when students are deepening their academic engagement is a profound loss - one that cannot easily be recovered.

## 8. Recommendations

I respectfully request that the Committee recommend the following actions to the ACT Government:

**1. Immediate restoration of ATAR language courses:** Establish centrally delivered Year 11–12 ATAR language courses within the ACT Education Directorate for 2026, beginning with Year 11 students, to ensure continuity for students currently in the pipeline. Tamil must be included among the languages offered.

**2. Long-term language education strategy:** Develop a sustainable, long-term model for centrally delivered senior secondary language programs that supplements local college offerings and ensures equitable access for all ACT students, regardless of where they live.

**3. Expansion of language offerings:** Consider expanding the range of languages available, reflecting the diversity of the Canberra community and the strategic language needs of the national capital.

**4. Community partnership:** Engage with the Tamil community and other linguistically diverse communities in designing and delivering language programs, drawing on the wealth of linguistic expertise that already exists within Canberra.

**5. Alignment with stated policy:** Ensure that the ACT's actions on language education are brought into alignment with the commitments made in the Multiculturalism Act 2023, the Language Education Action Plan, and the Future of Education Strategy.

## 9. Conclusion

Canberra is not just the national capital - it is a multicultural community with enormous linguistic wealth. Nearly one in four Canberrans speaks a language other than English at home. Tamil is among the oldest, richest, and most widely spoken of those languages. To allow ATAR Tamil and other languages to disappear from our education system is to squander a resource that other jurisdictions actively invest in.

As a Tamil Australian, I ask the Committee to consider what kind of city Canberra aspires to be. A city that values diversity in words but not in practice? Or a city that invests in its young people, honours its multicultural character, and gives every student - regardless of their postcode - the opportunity to pursue their language at the highest level?

I believe the answer is clear. I urge the Committee to recommend that the ACT Government act without delay to restore and expand ATAR language courses in 2026 and beyond.

*Nandri.* Thank you.

**Annamalai Muthiah**

10 April 2026

*I consent to this submission being published.*