

Attachment B: A University-based analysis and proposal

Languages and Postgraduate Research in the Faculty of Arts, University of Sydney, 2004

* The University wishes to become a research-led institution increasingly financed by its research quantum. A principal impediment to this is the lack of language requirements and appropriate provision of language training for its students starting postgraduate research. This is not the case with our peers.

For example, at the University of California, Berkeley, in Art History, completion of Stage I to MA for subsequent entry to PhD requires:

1. Ten courses 2. Qualification variously satisfied in two European languages OR one European and one Asian language OR German, Greek and Latin 3. Qualifying paper

* There is currently no provision at Sydney for teaching intensively at postgraduate MA or Honours level to secure a language qualification, especially in hard-languages.

* Estimates vary between language schools, but research competence might be obtained in increasing order of difficulty where: Spanish= 1 [6 months f/t]; Russian, Indonesian= 2 [9-12months f/t], Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Thai= 3 [12-18months f/t]

Here f/t is 'full-time' and indicates 5 hours x 5 days x 30 weeks = 750 hours contact teaching in one year. Experience indicates an ideal mix for category 3 languages is one-year full-time teaching at home, before six months further teaching and residence in the target language culture.

* So far as I am aware, in category 3 languages, University of Sydney Undergraduate beginning language students currently receive 5 hours x 26 weeks x 3 years or 390 hours. That is a beginner receives about half the teaching contact time required for research competency over three times the annual length of a one-year intensive course.

* Personal experience in teaching Japanese language at Sydney at higher levels from 1992-1999 indicates that only those students who have studied at high school, and had a year exchange in Japan, and had done an Honours year, have had research competency in Japanese [usually not more than 2 per annum].

* The admission of native speaker or background students to some Asian language streams means that whilst the economic viability of the language area is maintained, few of the graduates are trained to competence, even research competence, from scratch. The intellectual goals of those students are likely to be, and in practice are, mostly low. This militates against a reasonable percentage of them [say 15%] using their language skills in postgraduate or other kinds of research.

*The effective future removal of one language stream, Indonesian, to another University, UNSW, and the elimination of another, Thai [despite it having a larger undergraduate

size than the only comparable course at ANU], means that a complete area of interest to several researchers in the University is without language support. There will undoubtedly be several kinds of knock-on effect, but it is very unlikely down the track that postgraduate research will be generated in fields which require those languages. This is despite the importance of the economies, societies, and cultures of those languages for Australian and University of Sydney links to Southeast Asia.

*At Honours level in Art History many of those students who have had sufficient language skills to write an Honours thesis using French or Italian sources had spent a High School exchange year in the country of the language they used.

* The lack of a language requirement to enter Honours or PhD levels means that the language skills of those who do have them are systemically undervalued: they have a surplus qualification. The necessity of acquiring them is not spread to at least the postgraduate research student body as a whole, and does not influence the general cultural environment in the University. We are systemically already a much more Anglophone institution than is desirable, despite the apparent ethnic and cultural diversity of our student body. In consequence, language skill acquisition has become an opportunity cost for the student and educational system alike, rather than constitute a requirement with major intellectual and broader cultural benefits.

* To provide for these lacks and probably recruit other researchers to University staff who recognizes these language skills, or possess them, may require:

1. financial provision probably via competitive scholarship for an extra postgraduate language acquisition year.
2. reorganization of Asian category 3 language training onto an intensive one year basis. Native or background speakers would only be able to enter these intensive courses at the appropriate level. This model might also be applied for shorter time spans to category 1 and category 2 languages.
3. introduction of a language requirement for entry to PhD research, if not Honours years.
4. pairing of all language teaching programmes with disciplinary areas likely to be the core of postgraduate research. For example, this could be by siting all non-European literature programmes in a Department/School of Literature which teaches in English, and the concentration of language teaching resources in a proper, fully funded and highly prestigious Languages Institute.
5. when dealing with university officials at various levels, there are issues of cultural sensitivity and its lack which contrast with the University's avowed policies of internationalization. These have, however anecdotally, frequently been raised on the part of foreign students and even, I reliably understand, foreign ambassadors. The University should adopt an open set of cultural objectives positioning its wider intellectual and cultural goals which may meet these difficulties in its own behaviour and foreign perception, and ensure standards which should be met throughout all University dealings with those from 'worlds other than our own'.

John Clark

Professor, Art History and Theory, 11.11.2004