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AUSTRALIA'S LEADING UNIVERSITIES

Languages in Crisis



A rescue plan for Australia





Introduction

Australia has a proud reputation in many areas of education, research and training. Languages Other Than English (LOTE), is no longer one of them and urgent action is required if Australia is to avoid the serious educational, national security and economic consequences of becoming monolingual. Decades of policy neglect and inaction mean Australian school students now spend less time learning a second language than students in all other OECD countries. The percentage of Year 12 students graduating with a second language has fallen dramatically from 40 per cent in the 1960s to 13 per cent today.¹

“For our nation to continue to prosper we must enhance our links with the world – we do that by improving our cultural understanding, our language skills.”

Julie Bishop, Federal Minister for Education Science and Training, October 2006

In the past decade the number of languages offered in our universities has dropped from 66 to 29 and most states and territories are experiencing difficulty recruiting adequately skilled language teachers.² This is occurring at a time when monolingual native English speakers are losing their linguistic advantages and are increasingly competing with multilingual graduates from around the world.

Australian policy and decision makers are aware of the benefits of learning another language from a young age. A myriad of reports on foreign language education has endorsed the many social, cultural, economic, cognitive and personal benefits that can flow from learning a second language.³ Federal Education Minister, Julie Bishop, said recently “if Australian students have the opportunity to learn a language other than English there will be many benefits – not only for the individual, but for our nation as a whole.”⁴

The languages crisis Australia is experiencing cannot be solved by one sector of the education system alone. A co-ordinated national approach involving schools, community groups, universities and state and territory governments is required. This paper sets out the need for a national policy on Languages Other Than English in education. It recommends, among other measures:

- Co-operation between federal, state and territory governments to lead the development of a consistent national approach to language education at all levels of the education system.
- The staged introduction of compulsory second language education from primary to Year 10.
- The expansion of incentives to encourage the completion of language studies to Year 12 and at university.
- The provision of additional funding to support the current efforts of universities to retain languages and to improve the training and the quality of language teachers.
- A campaign to promote the benefits for Australian society and its individual citizens of multilingualism.



Languages other than English in Australian schools

“Australia’s school students spend the least time on second languages of students in all OECD countries. Language studies have collapsed from 40 per cent of Year 12 students studying a second language in the 60s to fewer than 15 per cent today.”

Professor Tim Lindsey, University of Melbourne, March 2007

“To effectively participate in a globalised world there should be the compulsory learning of a foreign language from 7 years of age or earlier.”

Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, April 2007

Languages Other Than English has been designated a key learning area since 1989 but, despite a range of measures designed to support languages education, Australian school students receive far less foreign language instruction than their counterparts elsewhere. The Federal Department of Education Science and Training acknowledges that “in other countries, second language learning begins in earnest much earlier in the curriculum, is given more hours per week of instructional time and continues throughout the school life of the student.”⁵ The result is that only 13 per cent of Year 12 students (in some states as few as 6 per cent) graduate from high school having studied a language other than English.⁶ Thirty years ago, when foreign language study was dropped as a pre-requisite for university entry, that figure was 40 per cent.⁷

The benefits of starting to learn another language at a young age are well documented. A combination of psychological and physiological factors makes young children good second language learners. Pronunciation in particular benefits from starting young. It also establishes that school is not a monolingual habitat.

Early introduction to the structure of words, sentences and sound patterns in more than one language has been shown to lead to better progress in first language literacy and other cognitive benefits such as divergent thinking processes and more efficient use of brain functions. Many countries in Europe and Asia, including countries which perform better than Australia on international literacy and numeracy tests, introduce the first foreign language at the infants school level, adding further languages as children progress. In Finland, where school students consistently perform better than Australians in comparative literacy and numeracy assessments, all children take three languages throughout schooling, 44 per cent a fourth language and 31 per cent a fifth.⁸

One former school principal in Australia says “the Europeans have it right: begin in kindergarten with serious study of a second language and study that same language daily throughout schooling, adding another later. Language study should be a requirement for school graduation and university entrance. The genuine intellectual challenge develops habits of mind that serve all other disciplines and brings personal rewards in abundance.”⁹

Every adult is conscious of the enjoyment that comes with achieving at work or in a chosen sport. When we achieve positive results we are motivated to work even harder because of the inherent rewards involved in success. The same motivation applies with

“What idiot decreed that foreign-language instruction not begin until high school?”

Harry Chugani, paediatric neurobiologist Newsweek, February 1996

learning languages. The earlier a child begins to learn a language, the more efficient he or she will become in using it and the more success he or she will enjoy. A child who performs well in languages at primary school is more likely to choose to study languages at high school and at university. The first step, therefore, is to ensure at least one foreign language is compulsory from at least the primary level.

The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry recently issued a Blueprint for Education in Australia which recognises the importance of introducing languages in the early years of formal education to equip students to “effectively participate in a globalised world”. The paper calls on all Australian governments to work towards ensuring children are involved in compulsory language lessons at school from the age of seven or earlier.¹⁰

Unfortunately, Australia has been heading in the opposite direction in recent years. The National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools Strategy, which doubled the number of Asian language learners in schools in eight years during the 1990s, has been abolished and most schools, both public and private, do not require students to take a second language throughout the compulsory years of education.¹¹ This is despite the fact that 86 per cent of parents and 60 per cent of students recently surveyed by the Australian Council of State School Organisations said language study should start in early primary and 65 per cent said studying a language helps with English.¹²

In 2007 Australian education ministers agreed to work towards a nationally consistent school curriculum in the areas of maths, science and English. The 2007 Federal Budget allocated funds to develop core curricula standards in these subjects as well as Australian History. The scale of the problems faced by languages warrants a similar national approach and an agreement on the need for compulsory foreign language learning in schools. Given Australia’s national language is English, it does not need to teach any particular language as its first foreign language. What is important is that a nationally consistent approach is adopted which ensures that students have continuity in learning a particular language from primary to secondary school and on to university, thus building upon their knowledge at all stages of their education.



Languages other than English in universities

In 1997 there were 66 languages offered at Australian universities.

Ten years later, just 29 survive.

“Crisis is not too strong a word to describe the quality and supply of language teachers in Australia.”

**National Board of
Employment, Education and
Training, 1996**

The learning of languages requires intensive face to face contact with language teachers either one on one or in small groups. Such modes of learning are expensive. A critical mass of students choosing a particular language is therefore an important factor in a university's ability to offer that language.

The lack of emphasis on languages in our schools means that universities need to offer a greater variety of language courses as many students have had no or limited exposure at school. This puts significant pressure on already stretched language departments.

University language departments are looking for creative solutions to keep languages viable. The introduction of the compulsory study of a language other than English at some universities for degrees such as International Relations, International Business and Liberal Studies is helping keep language enrolments healthy at those institutions.

Another initiative to encourage language enrolments at university level is the Victorian university entrance (VTAC) system, which provides a 10 per cent bonus on a student's entry score if she or he has successfully completed the study of a language other than English at Year 12 level.

In addition, over half of all Australian universities are involved in collaborative arrangements – sharing resources and facilities in an effort to maintain a broad spectrum of languages, particularly those with very small enrolments.¹³ However, existing arrangements are hampered by financial and administrative problems, many of which are imposed by the Department of Education, Science and Training. As such, they are unlikely to provide long-term solutions without significant policy changes.

Despite all these efforts, the number of languages taught in our universities continues to fall. Of the 29 languages still on offer at tertiary level, nine are offered at only one Australian university and only seven are well represented across the sector.

However, even if all universities could afford to offer a wide range of languages, the university sector alone cannot solve the problem. The sophisticated level of language required to actively participate in complex negotiations develops over time, is more likely if started at a young age and usually requires significant periods of time spent on exchange or working in the country where the language is spoken. Students who start out as beginners at university are unlikely to achieve such competence in three years of classroom-based study alone. In addition, the financial difficulties faced by many language departments as a result of small enrolments have led to a reduction in the number of contact hours. This, in turn, affects the competence levels reached by students, which flows on to affect the quality of the next generation of language teachers.



English is no longer enough

“Monoglot English graduates face a bleak economic future as qualified multilingual youngsters from other countries are proving to have a competitive advantage over their British counterparts in global companies and organisations. Alongside that, many countries are introducing English into the primary curriculum.”

English Next, British Council, 2006

A complacent assumption that English is the only language we need has dominated debate on this issue for too long. Given the popularity of learning English around the world (estimates range between one and two billion people currently learning English as a foreign language) this assumption is understandable yet misleading and dangerous for a range of reasons.

Monolingual English native speakers are already losing the advantage in their own language because English language skills are becoming a basic skill around the world. With English now part of the school curriculum in many countries from Europe to Asia, Australians are increasingly competing for jobs with people who are just as competent in English as they are in their own native language and possibly one or two more. It has been observed that the London business world prefers graduates from European universities rather than British institutions because they speak English as well as at least one other language, and often two or three.

International business negotiations often take place in a non-English language setting giving English speakers with local linguistic and cultural knowledge a significant edge over their monolingual and monocultural counterparts. A recent report by the European Commission found that:

“English is important as the world business language, but other languages are used extensively as intermediary languages and businesses are aware of the need for a range of other languages in relationship-building.”¹⁴

Mandarin Chinese is the most widely spoken language in the world and English merely competes with Spanish, Hindi, Bengali, Arabic, Chinese Wu and Portuguese for second to eighth place depending on the particular statistics consulted.¹⁵ Spanish is already about the same size as English in terms of its native-speaker base and by the middle of this century Hindi (and its closely related counterpart Urdu) and Arabic are predicted to rival both English and Spanish as the second most widely spoken native language in the world.¹⁶

The dominance of English on the internet is also decreasing. The proportion of internet users with English as a native language has declined from 51.3 per cent in 2000 to 32 per cent in 2005 and the proportion of English material on the internet has also declined.¹⁷



Security and economic risks of monolingualism

Australian business leaders have been found to be competent in fewer languages than their counterparts in 27 other countries.

Global Literacies, Simon & Schuster, 2000

“We’re not particularly good at forming linkages with people that do not speak our mother tongue.”

**Professor Peter Høj, Former CEO
Australian Research Council,
November 2006**

“...the reality is that it is the developing world, and in particular Asia, because of its proximity to Australia and because of its growth, that will have a hugely more significant impact on Australia and Australia needs to understand it and adapt.”

**James Wolfensohn, former World
Bank President, April 2006**

Language skills are central to diplomacy, managing Australia’s national security and developing trade opportunities. Foreign language study is not just about grammar and vocabulary. At a sophisticated level it is also about understanding the nuances of foreign cultures and the ability to communicate confidently and diplomatically. In this context, the decline in language education poses serious national security and international relations risks for Australia. Given Australia’s need for trusted translators, interpreters and diplomats to take part in high-level government to government negotiations, the following statistics are alarming.

Only five universities now offer courses in Arabic at a time when understanding the culture and faith of the Arabic speaking world is more important for Australia than ever before. Fewer than 3 per cent of Australian university students study an Asian language.¹⁸ Yet the Asian region represents 70 per cent of Australia’s largest export markets, it makes up 60 per cent of the world’s population, is home to two of the world’s major powers and the world’s two most populous nations. In 2005 there were only around 500 students enrolled in Indonesian language courses at university yet Indonesia is home to the world’s largest Muslim population, is the world’s third largest democracy and only a four hour flight from Perth.¹⁹

Research from the European Commission makes clear the risks to the economy of Australia’s lack of language skills. A 2006 survey of Small to Medium Enterprises (SMEs) across 29 European states found a clear link between languages and export success. The report concluded that “a significant percentage of SMEs across the EU and the wider Europe are losing export business through lack of language skills and, to a lesser degree, lack of intercultural skills.”²⁰ In March 2007, Amazon, one of the world’s largest retailers with US\$8.4 billion in revenue, announced it would move its European customer service centre from the UK to Ireland to take advantage of better language skills (41 per cent of Irish citizens speak a second language at conversational level compared to 30 per cent of UK residents).²¹

Tourism and international education are two of Australia’s largest export industries. International education alone is worth an estimated \$10 billion to the economy. Both industries rely heavily on Australia’s ability to promote itself as a multicultural, tolerant society that welcomes people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The drift towards monolingualism seriously undermines this reputation and the industries which rely upon it for their success.

There are also many areas of potential growth in the Australian economy which cannot be realised without foreign language skills. For example, it has been suggested that the growth potential for Australia’s wine industry would be significant if Australia had more fluent German speakers. Germany is the largest importer of wine in the world, yet Australia does not capitalise on this. Australia’s top four wine export markets are English speaking countries.²²

▶ Australia's untapped resource – community languages

Arabic is available at only five universities, Vietnamese at two universities and Cantonese is no longer offered at any Australian university.

'Re-examining Australia's Tertiary Language Programs', The University of Queensland, 2006

If Australia discovered untapped oil and gas reserves, it would be considered foolish to ignore them. Yet Australia does ignore its language resources. About 16 per cent of Australians speak a language other than English and a total of about 200 different languages.²³ Building and expanding upon these existing linguistic skills makes economic and pedagogical sense. A student with some native speaking skills is likely to achieve deeper linguistic and cultural skills than a student who has no prior knowledge or experience with a language. It also acknowledges the intrinsic value and interest of Australia's many cultural heritages.

These language skills, most of which are brought with immigrants when they arrive in Australia, are currently being wasted. Many important community languages are disappearing from our schools and universities which means young Australians do not have the opportunity to keep or improve their language skills through formal study.

For example, the languages most commonly spoken in the Australian community apart from English are Italian, Greek, Cantonese, Arabic, Vietnamese and Mandarin. The most widely used community languages amongst pre-schoolers and those of compulsory school age (0–14 years) are Arabic, Vietnamese and Cantonese followed by Greek, Mandarin and Italian.²⁴ At university level 18 per cent of domestic students use a language other than English at home with Cantonese, Mandarin, Vietnamese, Arabic, Greek and Hindi being the most widely spoken. Yet in 2005 Arabic was available at only five universities, Vietnamese and Hindi at two universities and Cantonese is no longer offered at any Australian university.²⁵

The extent of the reduction is further highlighted by the fact that many other languages with sizeable communities in Australia are not available for study at an Australian university or at only one university. They include languages like Filipino/Tagalog, Serbian, Croatian, Slovenian, Macedonian, Dutch, Danish, Lithuanian and Latvian.²⁶

THE WAY FORWARD



It is time for a new attitude towards languages and the learning of languages in Australia. Australian governments are failing current and future generations of students as well as the future of the Australian economy if they do not work with schools and universities to address the languages crisis in our education system.

There is no one quick-fix solution. The current problems have developed over decades and will consequently take considerable time and effort to solve. The *National Statement for Languages Education in Australian Schools* and the *National Plan for Languages Education in Australian Schools 2005–2008* represent a good start but they do not cover languages in higher education and they do not include recommendations for compulsory study of languages.

We need to work together towards a comprehensive policy, a National Policy on Languages, which truly embraces the benefits for Australian society of multilingualism and the learning of languages. If we don't, then Australia will jeopardise its political security, its cultural harmony and its economic and educational competitiveness.

A joint policy commitment from Commonwealth, state and territory governments should involve the following elements:

- Co-operative action to lead the development of a consistent national approach to language education at all levels of the education system.
- The staged introduction of mandatory study of a second language starting in primary school and continuing through to Year 10. While no one language needs to be chosen as Australia's preferred second language, each state and territory must ensure that its compulsory languages are available and fully supported at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels so that students have continuity in learning a particular language. It is highly recommended that the states and territories consider the full spectrum of languages to identify those to be selected for mandatory introduction.
- A commitment from all states and territories to the Collaborative Curriculum and Assessment Framework for Languages (CCAFL) which maximises the number of languages available to students for Year 12 assessment.
- The expansion to all other states and territories of the bonus for language study based on the successful VTAC practice, which provides a 10 per cent bonus on a student's university entry score if he or she has successfully completed the study of a language other than English at Year 12 level.
- A wide-ranging and meaningful promotional campaign about the benefits of maintaining and learning other languages. This campaign should build upon the current efforts undertaken. It should clearly reject the notion that English native speakers do not need to be multilingual because they have natural advantages over speakers of other languages.
- The provision of additional funding to strengthen language education, especially through collaborative language efforts in universities. This should be accompanied by the removal of the current structural impediments so that universities can offer the widest possible spectrum of languages.
- The provision of targeted funding to boost the morale, the skills and the numbers of trained language teachers at all levels.

Notes

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