

Asia Education Foundation

**Submission to the
Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References
Committee
on
Inquiry into Australia's relations with China**

“Commercial links, alone, will never render war unthinkable. What will, however, are mutual understanding and respect and the banishing of prejudice... if that future is to be one of peace and prosperity our kids will need the capacity to engage in a dialogue with others of different cultures and creeds. And that applies both within Australia and abroad.”

General Peter Cosgrove, Head of the Australian Defence Forces, Working Together on Languages Education, 30 May 2002

Introduction

This submission has been prepared by the Asia Education Foundation (AEF) and relates to the teaching of Chinese studies in Australian primary and secondary schools.

The AEF was established by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) in 1993 to promote and support the study of Asia across all curriculum areas in primary and secondary schools. The AEF is a foundation of the Asialink Centre at the University of Melbourne and Curriculum Corporation.

The AEF works in partnership with government and non-government education sectors to achieve its goal through four major strategies: curriculum materials development, teacher professional development and schools development.

Whilst the work of the AEF is focussed broadly on Asia, China has been a major focus nationally.

(Note that the views outlined in this submission do not represent the views of the Commonwealth.)

Teaching about China in Australian Schools

Studies of China in history, geography, social studies, literature and the arts...

There has been no formal study as to the extent and nature of Chinese programs being taught in Australian schools. However, the AEF has, for the past 12 years, supported schools around Australia to include the study of China in a range of learning areas including English, Studies of society and its environment, the Arts, Maths, Technology and Science. There has been an increase of interest in and curriculum developed on China by teachers and schools. Appendix 1 outlines some of the education programs which have been developed by the AEF on China.

It is important to note that there is no nationally agreed curriculum for Australian schools. State and territory education jurisdictions determine curriculum locally, which in most cases is expressed in terms of generic student learning outcomes – not content. Decisions regarding curriculum content are predominately made by the school and/or individual teacher (except in the case of NSW where curriculum content is often mandated). Therefore any strategy to increase the teaching of China must be largely focussed on influencing teachers and principals.

Teacher knowledge is one of the greatest barriers for the implementation of programs on China.

Most teachers have not completed undergraduate programs on Asia. Therefore professional learning and training strategies are needed. Programs that offer in-country study, exchange and sharing of professional expertise, are required to shift the curriculum from being predominately euro-centric to one that includes studies of Asia.

From 1995 - 2002, around \$30 million per annum was allocated to the National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools (NALSAS) Strategy, which predominately supported the teaching of four priority Asian languages: Modern

Standard Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian and Korean with around 20% allocated to studies of Asia across the curriculum.

However, NALSAS funding ceased in December 2002 and a decade's successful momentum of change has declined - with state and territory governments unwilling to replace the federal funds. A 2002 study showed that at least 50% of Australian schools either do not teach about Asia at all or, if they do so, it is only superficially.

Nationally respected educator, and former CEO of Curriculum Corporation, Bruce Wilson, analyzed the situation in an address to the Asialink ANU: National Forum on Asia Australia Engagement in 2004:

'School education is glacial in its change processes and the change we are engaged in here (with the studies of Asia) is of the most sophisticated kind. It will take perhaps another 20 years if we're honest. Its complex, since it involves new knowledge, a changed cultural orientation, and a shift in perspectives about the world. It impinges on politics and values. It's a venture into territory where prejudice and racism lurk....because its long term complex national change, engagement and commitment must continue to be bi partisan.'

Whilst the Commonwealth has implemented two key strategies (NALSAS and the AEF) all indications are that there is still much to be done. The levels achieved are not adequate to meet the needs of our national interest and would not be considered acceptable in other key national priority areas. Australia must move forward with a coordinated policy direction if we are to achieve desirable levels of Asian studies capability in Australian students.

Teacher training must also be targetted. With the average age of teachers being 50 years, educating the next generation of our teachers becomes a priority. A 2001 examination of the content taught in university teacher education programs indicated that very little was taught about Asia (less than 5% of course content). Skilling our future teachers must become a high priority for the future.

Chinese language

Languages study is the only learning area in Australian schools that is widely seen as optional. Any state, and often any school, can choose any language, or whether to study languages at all.

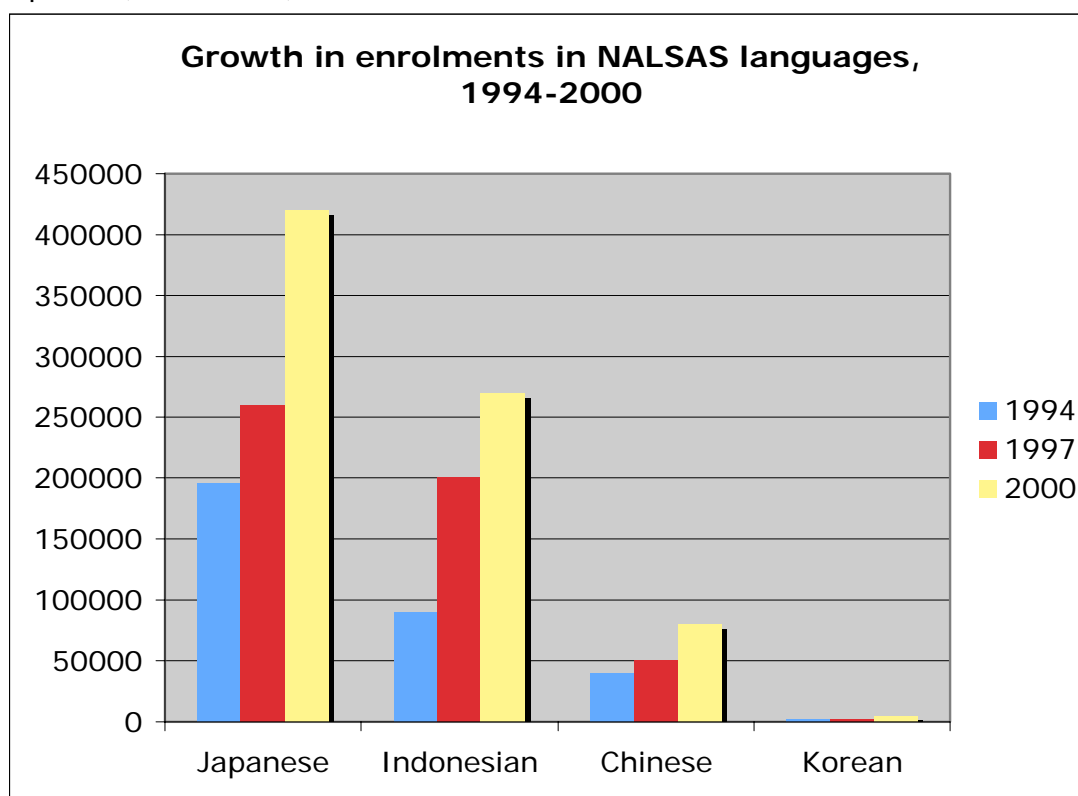
Australian languages experts point to European Union leaders who three years ago agreed to a goal of teaching each child at least two foreign languages from an early age, to give Europeans a competitive edge in the job market.

In 2002 13.5 per cent of Year 12 students in Australia were enrolled in the study of a language other than English. In the same year, more than 76 per cent of students were studying mathematics. In the 1960s, almost 40 per cent of Year 12s studied a second language.

Even so, from 1991 to 2002, Asian language students in Year 12 represented the only growth area. Their numbers increased from 3.87 to 6.26 per cent of total students largely due to federal Government support from the National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian schools (NALSAS) strategy.

NALSAS was highly successful and led to a doubling over eight years in the numbers of Asian language learners. In the other years of schooling 23 per cent of all

Australian students were studying – at some level – one of four Asian languages: Japanese, Indonesian, Chinese and Korean.



Source: Evaluation of the National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools Strategy, January, 2002.

An example of language studies is provided by Victoria¹: the highest enrolments are in Indonesian (29.7 per cent), followed by Italian, Japanese, German, French, Chinese (Mandarin) and Auslan (sign language). Numerically, the biggest increase from 2001 to 2002 was in Chinese (up by 739 students, but many of these are said to be background speakers) and the biggest drop was in Indonesian (down by 2773 students).

“Background” speakers continue to represent the majority of Chinese language students. In NSW, for example, 91 per cent of Chinese (Mandarin) students were from a Chinese-speaking background.

The dropping of Australian Government funding has had a detrimental impact, not only in terms of discontinued matched funding support at the State level, but also symbolically. The national strategy promoted by the Commonwealth until 2002 emphasised that Asian languages was an issue of national importance. It is no longer seen to be so. As a result, particularly at primary school level where, in any case, the hurdles are currently extreme, the momentum has been lost.

There is a direct causal link between on the one hand, the limited pool of language proficient Australians identified in the Flood Report on Australia’s Intelligence Agencies, or the shortage of Asian languages skills, and on the other, what happens at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels.

Why Study Asia? Why Study About China?

¹ The only state to publicly release data on LOTE

The study of Asian language and cultures in schools is in Australia's national interest. Knowledge and understandings of languages and cultures of our nearest neighbours, our major trading partners and the growing number of Asian Australians, are essential to Australia's security, prosperity, regional relationships and the maintenance and growth of an enriched, tolerant multicultural Australia. Australia's Asia knowledge has the capacity to be a rich **national asset** and **resource**.

The central importance of Australian students learning about the peoples, cultures and languages of their regional neighbors, particularly China, continues to grow:

Australia's future

- Australia is geographically situated in the Asia region – increasingly, for our prosperity, welfare, environment and security, we need to work with our neighbours to forge alliances and agreements to minimize conflict and poverty, restore ecosystems and evolve an agenda of ethics and fairness to which all can be a part

International understanding

- September 11th, the bombings in Bali and Jakarta and the Indian Ocean tsunami sharply demonstrated the rapidly growing interconnectedness of our world. It heightens a need for Australia's future citizens to develop knowledge and understanding of different cultures – the Asian region cannot be ignored, particularly China, the fastest growing nation in the world.

Inherent intellectual value

- Studies of Asia are inherently valuable and form 60% of the world's knowledge and civilization – China, the most populous nation, offers a rich source for the study of the arts, literature, philosophy, history, science and language - an education that does not address study of these cultures is intellectually limited.

Trade and business

- Australia's trade with Asia is consistently around 60% of our trade with China our third largest trading partner. A significant number of Australian young people require vocational skills to work in and with the countries of the Asian region. Business leaders emphasize the pivotal role of cross cultural knowledge and understanding in business development and success

A tolerant and empathetic community

- Close to 10 % of the Australian population come from an Asian background – an harmonious and unified multicultural society requires that its citizens have shared values based on mutual respect, knowledge and understanding of each other

Future Needs

Educating the next generation of Australians must be an integral part of any strategy to build Australia's relationship with China. The following broad strategies are offered as the foundations for the development of Australians who are skilled to work, learn, understand and interact with fellow citizens of this region, in particular China:

- **Fostering of people-to-people links** through bilateral exchanges and study tours are important opportunities for Australians and Chinese to interact and develop greater knowledge and understanding of each other's culture.
- **Teacher professional development and training** is required to increase knowledge and understanding of China. Teachers and teacher educators who are skilled and confident to teach about China will generate interest and enthusiasm in students. This is crucial to the development of positive attitudes towards China and Chinese citizens.
- **Contemporary curriculum material on China** for use in Australian schools - such materials should focus on expanding concepts of Asia and China, exploring the contributions of China to the world, challenging stereotypes and consider the likely implications of closer Australia-China links.
- **Teacher education programs** should offer opportunities for students to undertake programs with a focus on China. This will ensure that the next generation of teachers and indeed students will be better placed to understand Australia's relationship with China and the region.

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Appendix 1

Education Projects Focused on China

The following is a summary of some of the projects undertaken by the AEF on China. These projects are reliant on a range of sources for funds including: the Australian Government (DEST), education jurisdictions, schools and teachers.

Curriculum Materials:

Snapshots of Asia – China

One of a series of 9 big books for primary the primary years.

Access China Website

An award winning website for teachers and students features classroom activities and resources on China.

Voices and Visions – Texts from China for the Senior English Classroom CDROM

Voices and Visions China is part of a series of 4 CD ROMs featuring contemporary and traditional texts from China, India, Indonesia and Japan. The China CD features literature, popular publishing, visual and performing Arts and film and television.

The Primary Asian Languages Support resource will link cultural studies to languages learning and be available to Australian schools in 2006.

People-to-People Links:

Linking Latitudes Conference and Fieldtrips – Shanghai, China 2001

This program was conducted in partnership with the China Education Association of International Exchange attended by 280 Australian and 100 Chinese educators.

China Study Tour Program

For the past 10 years the AEF has conducted study tour programs to China for Australian educators. To date the AEF has sent a total of 220 Australian educators to China on three-week study tours.

Endeavour Languages Fellowships

20 will be offered to Australian languages teachers of Chinese for the third time in January 2006 with 3 week study programs in China.

Professional Development

In addition to the above, the AEF has been involved in the delivery of professional development programs for Australian primary and secondary teachers. These programs include a specific focus on China and in many cases support the teaching of Chinese language.

The Asian Languages Professional Learning Program (ALPLP) will complete a two year strategy in mid 2005 aimed at improving the quality of languages teaching.

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