

Asia studies key to the future

Kathe Kirby

Kevin Rudd scored a great public relations coup late last year. As opposition leader, he broke into fluent Mandarin with China's President Hu Jintao, influenced a \$45 billion natural gas deal in the process and vastly affected international perceptions of Australia as a constructive neighbour in Asia.

It was a powerful illustration of the 21st Century interactions Australia needs if it is to thrive.

The question is – are our school kids prepared for Asian engagement? The answer? Not really!

By 2040, when today's five-year-olds will be at the peak of their careers, China and India are expected to dominate the world economy.

India is Australia's fastest-growing source of international students. Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim nation, is on our doorstep. Japan's economic and cultural influence remains formidable.

By 2020 a quarter of the world's population will be younger than 25 and live in Asia. They will be our children's contemporaries – their business partners, workmates, bosses and customers. If we play our security and social cohesion cards right, they will also be their friends.

Yet half our schools teach little or nothing about Asia. Less than a quarter of students have a chance to learn an Asian language and only 5.8% learn one at Year 12. It drops to 3% at University level.

Possibly the greatest challenge for today's students is the global environmental crisis. China will be the world's largest carbon emitter within 10 years. If Australians are to resolve global issues such as climate change, today's children need the skills to work effectively with China.

Language learning is a critical way of bridging the vast chasm between cultures – yet Mandarin is at crisis levels in Australia. It ranks just sixth in terms of student numbers and the majority of learners have a Chinese background. We have failed to attract new speakers.

This is not surprising given that students with no Chinese background perceive they will be disadvantaged in their final Year 12 score by learning a scripted, tonal language while competing against those who have an advantage.

We need to provide new learners with greater incentives. The simplest carrot is preferential university entrance and HECS remission for Asian languages.

While language studies are likely to be available only to a small percentage of students for the foreseeable future, cultural understanding of Asia is possible for every child if it is embedded in the history, geography, literature and arts curriculum in all primary and secondary schools. No state now requires schools to teach about Asia.

The Secretary of the Victorian Education Department, Peter Dawkins, told a conference of business studies educators this month that new national goals for schooling, due out later this year, will reflect significant changes in the world, including the rise of China and India. Asia literacy for every young Australian must be included as a central goal.

A new national curriculum is being developed and educators are calling for studies of Asia to become a core part of history, geography and English courses. This is essential if we are to achieve Asia literacy.

However, most of our teachers had no opportunities to learn about Asia in their own education. The Asia Education Foundation has produced a host of resources for teachers to help them incorporate Asia into classes. This is a partial resolution – but in the long term you can't teach about Asia if you don't know anything about it.

So what does a school equipped for the 21st Century look like?

Imagine in the near future Sam (15) speaks in Mandarin online to her friend Jing via a live video link to her Shanghai sister school. They discuss their school's environmental action plans. Sam knows water is also precious in China after doing a unit on Chinese geography last term.....

In today's interconnected world, languages and cultural understanding are the new currency. Deputy Prime Minister put it succinctly when she addressed the nation's principals at a recent Asia Education Foundation forum: "The luxury of monolingualism is not coming back".

Mr. Rudd wants Australia to become "the most Asia-literate country in the world" and has contributed \$62 million towards Japanese, Indonesian, Mandarin and Korean languages and studies.

The current mood is a welcome change, coming after 10 years of funding cuts and decline in Asian studies.

Realistically, more will be required. Particularly to tackle the shortfall in Asian language teachers and assistants – one of the headaches plaguing principals who would like to offer an Asian language.

Large-scale Asian literacy won't happen without a loud and forceful demand from across the community – especially from parents and young Australians. And business knows we won't retain a competitive edge in Asia without it. Business can support schools by providing incentives such as priority career paths and international exchanges.

Peak education groups have formed Australia's Asia Literacy Alliance and are driving the push for Asia literacy – their Call to Action is at www.asialink.unimelb.edu.au

No-one would argue with the proposition that Australian schools must produce a generation of global citizens. This isn't conceivable without Asia knowledge, skills and networks. Otherwise the next global divide will be between those students who have an international outlook – and those who do not.

If your child's school is not engaged with Asia you need to ask: Why not? If your child cannot access an Asian language you need to ask more questions.

If your child isn't learning about 40% of the world's people, our closest neighbours and trading partners, you need to insist that something changes!

Kathe Kirby is Executive Director of Asia Education Foundation at University of Melbourne. This article appeared in The Age on 21 July 2008