

## Languages in Crisis

General Peter Cosgrove put the issue squarely: *“I cannot imagine a future in which people of all cultures and nations are not increasingly connected by ties of travel, commerce and migration. Language skills and cultural sensitivity will be the new currency of this world order (and) provide the keys to participation in the global economy.”*

But across Australia the study of languages continues to languish in a state of ongoing decline and crisis.

Years ago, a national target was set - to move from 12% to 20% of Year 12 students taking a language. But despite six very expensive national reviews, that Year 12 figure remains stuck at some 13%. In some states the figures are much, much lower than that.

Though our students perform well in many aspects of international assessment, languages proficiency is not one of them. In Finland, whose high student achievements we seek to emulate, all Year 12 students take three languages: Finnish, Swedish and English. Almost all Dutch students take English, and 40% study a third language. Most European countries are working rapidly towards a standard of three languages as core curriculum for all students. China, the new powerhouse of our region, is fast building its languages capacity. While we continue to stand still.

These international perspectives affect how we should prepare and equip our young people to take on an effective role in a changing world, in ways that bear directly upon their own opportunities in life – and the economic well-being of Australia.

Research indicates our state of foreign language capacity is holding us back from engaging as beneficially as possible in a diverse global economy.

In their recent Blueprint for the future of education, the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry called for compulsory languages education for students from age seven – or earlier. Peak bodies agree that the ability to communicate both locally and globally with people from all over the world is crucial to the further development of trade, our national security interests, our tourism industries, our efforts at cultural diplomacy. And our effectiveness as a regional power – in times of strife or disaster as well as opportunities to participate in regional growth and prosperity through such forums as APEC.

Yet Australia’s business and other leaders are competent in fewer languages than their counterparts in 27 other countries. This reflects a persistent monolingual mindset – at odds with the context of a country with a rich inheritance of languages, and nearly 200 other languages regularly spoken in homes and communities around the country. The most successful multicultural country in the world seems to be in willful denial and disregard of our extraordinarily rich language potential.

We have gone backwards. In 1996 the then government introduced, co-operatively with the states, a national Asian Languages and Studies program which encouraged thousands of students to gain familiarity with one of the four leading Asian languages (Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Indonesian) and learn about their cultural context. That program was abruptly terminated by the present government in 2002. Interestingly, in recent days the Labor Party has recognised that deficit and promised to restore the program as a priority if they take government.

Our national deficit in foreign language capability is Australia's great skills shortage – and the one most directly relevant to our competitiveness and security.

There is much to be done – but we can scarcely afford not to do it. And the multicultural and multilingual richness of Australian society provides a basis on which to build for the future.

To progress the debate on behalf of the families and school communities across Australia, the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) is currently conducting unique national research on the attitudes and expectations of those school communities in respect of languages education, to inform new and practical strategies. We have launched a national Website resource on languages education, at <http://www.languageseducation.com> together with a free electronic Newsletter - to which we invite everyone with an interest in languages education to subscribe.

It is monolingualism that is much too costly for us as a nation.

As recently quoted in a USA State Department Paper, Dr Robert Scott said: *“We have a critical need to know other cultures and to be competent in communicating with other people. These are not new needs. We have heard many calls to action to address these needs. So it is past time for a renewed focus on our role as members of the world community. Last call – it is time for action!”*

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