

Travel Round the World in a day! An ACT celebration of languages

Over 800 people got a taste of our multilingual local community on Sunday 28 September at the University of Canberra (UC). The day comprised a range of activities and displays which celebrated the many languages being spoken and learned in the Canberra region and marked the UN International Year of Languages.

Officially opened by Mr John Hargreaves, ACT Minister for Multicultural Affairs, the event incorporated the Ethnic Schools Open Day, an annual event which showcases the work of the more than 40 community-run schools teaching over 30 languages in the ACT. Children from these schools were the main stars of the musical and dance performances throughout the day, though adults had their turn with a spectacular Indonesian dance by UC students and the singing of an Italian choir.

Participants were able to visit more than 45 display stalls organised and staffed by local ethnic schools, other community groups teaching or promoting languages, and Canberra's diplomatic community. There were also free workshops, courtesy of several UC lecturers and students, embassy personnel, community members, and teachers, which allowed participants to learn about particular languages and writing systems, get practical ideas about how to help develop language skills, and discuss the value of languages for life and work. We were especially pleased to have a workshop which introduced us to speaking Gamilaraay, an indigenous language of NSW.

Participants could record their journey around the world in specially designed Global Passports featuring 33 languages. Passport holders had to seek out native speakers of the languages at the various displays and workshops and show that they could say a few words in each language to have the relevant page stamped.

There were also three panel discussions. One was led by parents and their children from bilingual or trilingual families who shared their experiences and views on raising children in more than one language. The second panel comprised representatives from the major political parties standing at the October ACT election who discussed their party's policies on language education and what they hoped to achieve in this area if elected for the next term of government. The third panel was made up of four 'language champions' who told us how languages had added to their lives.

Feedback on the day was extremely positive and everyone seemed to have a really good time. It certainly brought together a diverse range of organisations, groups and individuals in the ACT who are involved in, or interested in, the teaching and learning of languages and cultures. It is hard to judge how successful it was in sparking more interest in languages in the general community however. We received little mainstream media coverage, and publicity is certainly an area that needs more attention if such an event were to be repeated in the future. Also the number of activities at any one time, often up to 5 happening simultaneously, meant that some workshops were not as well attended as they could have been if people had been able to attend all the workshops they were interested in.

Nevertheless many valuable new contacts and links were made which can be built on in the future. The commitments the politicians made during the language policy panel will also be followed up by members of the Canberra Region Languages Forum. In addition, the day was a great celebration of multicultural Canberra and the International Year of Languages. Special thanks to all those who gave so freely of their time and enthusiasm

to make the day happen, and to the Canberra Multicultural Community Forum Inc (CMCF), the ACT Ethnic Schools Association, and the University of Canberra for their financial and in-kind support.

Mandy Scott