

## **Communiqué**

### **National Languages Summit**

**National Press Club  
Canberra**

**Thursday 7 June 2007**

The National Languages Summit was convened by the Australian Academy of the Humanities and the Group of Eight Universities as a strategic contribution to a developing national discussion on the urgent need for policy leadership and action on Australia's language capability.

It brought together over 150 leaders from across the Australian community with an interest and expertise in language learning, including teachers, academics, public servants, the media, members of the defence forces, and representatives of industry and ethnic communities.

The Summit agrees that the development of Australia's language capability is firmly and urgently in our national interest. Australia needs a comprehensive, coordinated languages plan to develop this capability in a sensible fashion. This policy should be broad-based and should involve a range of languages including Australian Indigenous languages, as well as Asian, Middle-Eastern and European languages.

Languages should be taught for all the well-established reasons: cultural insight, intellectual development, curiosity and exposure to literature and history. These are as important and relevant today as ever. Language education can have a substantial transformative effect on students – particularly children – who develop a confidence in negotiating life in a diverse global community. It is a powerful tool for social cohesion through the positive effects of language learning on cultural understanding.

Linguistic and cultural proficiency is also central to any trans-cultural engagement. There is a range of pragmatic instrumental imperatives for change, centred around the necessity for ordinary Australians to communicate effectively with people from all over the world – both here and overseas. These skills are not the preserve of the specialist any longer, but are increasingly required of all of us. They are crucial to the further development of trade, national security, tourism and cultural diplomacy, and they underpin our role as a regional power at times of strife and disaster.

Our national deficit in language capability is Australia's great unrecognised skills shortage – and the one most directly relevant to our competitiveness, security, prosperity and social harmony in an increasingly global environment.

The present state of language education and proficiency in Australia is seriously inadequate for our current and emerging needs, and far behind comparable levels in our peers and competitors. The size of this gap and the work and time required to close it has led some to describe the situation as a crisis.

But while we must act decisively and quickly, it is important that our response is not devised and implemented in a crisis mode. We need a national, long-term commitment to a manifest of considered, appropriate measures.

The Summit recognises those measures that are already in place to promote language education, and value these initiatives. But we see a clear gap between rhetoric and reality; between intention and effect.

We believe the wider community wants bipartisan support at all levels of government for coordinated measures to develop Australia's language capability.

We recognise that this is a genuinely national issue, requiring action by everyone, not only governments. The most effective measures will be those that enlist partnerships between governments, teachers, industry, community groups, parents and students. However, we do recognise the special role of governments in providing leadership and strategic direction.

The Summit calls on federal, state and territory governments to develop an agreed national languages capability target for a significant majority of Australians to attain second-language proficiency by 2020.

All Australian students should study languages for most of their compulsory schooling. Languages teaching in schools should be conducted by subject specialists with appropriate training and meaningful career paths.

Second language study should be much more common at university level, and particular emphasis should be placed on language teacher training and research training. Immersion education should be more widely available at all levels, and articulation between educational sectors should be more streamlined.

Australia has a rich supply of linguistic diversity that can be tapped and built upon to achieve these aims. Strategies should promote links with communities of speakers as custodians and conduits of their native languages.

Research shows that proficiency in a second language is an aid to English language and literacy, and not a trade-off. It also supports better academic performance in other subjects, especially music, mathematics and logic.

Strategies must be tailored to suit the specific requirements of particular language instruction programmes, from mass education in mainstream languages to instruction in niche languages of specific strategic, cultural and economic interest.

Programmes to support Indigenous languages of Australia can be paired with English teaching, rather than act in competition with them. Achieving a base-line proficiency in the languages of our region should also be a goal of a strategic languages policy.

The Summit holds that it is time to get serious about Australia's language capability. It is time to significantly increase our commitment to expanding the language skills of our citizens. It is time to rebuild our national language-teaching capacity so that a long-term improvement in our language-*speaking* capability will be sustained. It is time to recognise that a relatively modest investment in dollars and personal effort will reap significant gains in the short-term, and form the foundation for successful global and regional interactions in the long-term.

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