



Good fences make good neighbors



Educators, business and community groups have come together with one message for government: boost Asia literacy in schools, or face the dire consequences. **Darragh O Keeffe** reports.

With the upcoming budget on May 10, the federal government arguably has a pivotal opportunity to both remedy a policy mistake of the past and bolster Australia's economic prospects for the future.

It could reduce racism and ignorance, produce a generation of global citizens and help create an engaged and outward looking nation.

These lofty goals could all be achieved, simply by continuing, or ideally expanding, a \$62.4 million education program.

students studying Chinese are of Chinese heritage. For Korean, it's virtually 100 per cent of the student cohort.

Many Australian students currently learn little or nothing about Asia in their schooling.

Only a small minority of students undertake studies with an Asian focus in Year 12 history, geography or arts. Typically, 65 per cent of modern history students in one state chose to study Germany, 19 per cent chose Russia and just 2 per cent chose China.

This dire situation, in both the decline of Asian languages in schools and the lack of cross curricular focus on Asia, has prompted calls for a new National Action Plan for Asia literacy.

And first on the agenda is securing funding for the current National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP) in the upcoming budget. Its \$62.4 million budget runs out next year.

Spearheaded by the Asia Education Foundation (AEF), a joint initiative of Asialink and Education Services Australia, the call has been endorsed by a diverse range of business, education and community organisations.

"The call for an action plan is saying that if we don't invest now, we are in danger of threatening our students' futures," says Kathe Kirby, executive director of the AEF.

"We've been going backwards since the last significant program of investment, which ran from 1995 to 2002. That doubled the number of young people studying an Asian language. But since 2002 it's been in distinct decline, and the research starkly illustrates that.

"We're at a tipping point. All these organisations and groups are saying, we're signing up to this because we realise the importance for our kids' future."

Among the goals set out in the call for a National Action Plan for Asia Literacy are a national curriculum with clear Asia literacy guidelines, Asia prepared school leaders equipped to lead Asia literacy through their schools, adequately prepared teachers to deliver the curriculum, and resources and creative solutions to long standing challenges.

"When [former Prime Minister Kevin] Rudd invested in NALSSP, we didn't have the data we have now, which shows the neglect of investment in this area. For example, we now know there has been 10,000 students, K-12, dropping out of Indonesian every year for the last five years. No one knew that before," says Kirby.

In fact, the study of Asian languages in Australian schools has been in consistent decline since they



As a percentage, more people studied Asian societies in the 1960s when Robert Menzies was in power and the White Australia policy in place than they do today

Consider this.

Trade engagement with China has grown an astonishing 16 times in the last decade. Australia's biggest trading partner is now the ASEAN bloc of countries. Western nations are behind China and Japan in terms of trade with Australia.

Half of Australians businesses plan to expand into Asia in the next year, and of those already operating there, 56 per cent say these dealings are 'highly important' to their bottom line.

Australia's relationship with Indonesia, meanwhile, is crucial to issues like border protection, fishing policy and trade routes.

Politically, culturally, economically – the experts agree Australia must engage in Asia.

Now consider this.

Less than 6 per cent of Year 12 students study an Asian language. Of those, 94 per cent of the

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peaked in the 1970s and 1980s, says Professor Tim Lindsey, director of the Asian Law Centre at the University of Melbourne.

"As a percentage, more people studied Asian societies in the 1960s when Robert Menzies was in power and the White Australia policy in place than they do today.

"Young Australians across the country are abandoning Asian languages en masse. We've completely failed. Korean is almost non-existent in schools and universities, having been virtually wiped out over the last decade. Indonesian is going down the tube fast behind it. Once we had 30 universities teaching Indonesian, now it's 15. And most of those only have one tenured full time staff member."

We haven't seen the numbers of students learning Asian languages to the level we'd like for some time, agrees Patrick Coleman, policy director, Business Council of Australia, one of the business signatories to the new call for action.

"It's been on businesses' radar for a while and has been seen as an important issue. Certainly for the businesses we represent, it's becoming increasingly important as more employees, as part of their roles, are needing to work within international teams and effectively build relationships with organisations in other countries, especially in Asia."

Indeed, confirming the economic importance of

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Eyes off Asia, and tongues not wagging, research shows

For the past few years, the Asia Education Foundation (AEF) has been compiling research on the status of Asian languages in schools, and the extent of cross curricular focus on Asia. The resulting body of data details a worrying situation.

It catalogues the difficulties faced by schools and teachers: lack of sustained teacher training and professional development, poor resources, insufficient time for lessons, shortage of adequately trained teachers, and inadequate training in pre-service teacher education.

However, it also shows that sustained and targeted programs like NALSSP, and its predecessor, NALSAS, do make a positive impact. Nonetheless, it clearly articulates the considerable challenge that lies ahead.

The 2010 report, *The current state of Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese and Korean language education in Australian schools*, shows that the number of students studying one of the four languages, from K-12, is 18.6 per cent of the total student population, down from 24 per cent in 2000. The most significant decline in student numbers is in Japanese and Indonesian.

In 2000, the proportion of students learning a NALSSP language at Year 12 was 4.8 per cent. This had risen to 5.8 per cent in 2008. However, the report goes on to note the increasing number of first language (L1) students studying Chinese, Korean and, to a lesser extent, Japanese, at Year 12 level.

"Estimated to be as high as 70 per cent of the cohort in Chinese, and known to generally be 100 per cent of the cohort studying Korean, L1 students underpin much of the growth in Year 12 enrolments," it says.

The report notes that student enrolment data for Indonesian, much like the data for other three languages, illustrates a "steep decline in student participation from the primary to senior secondary years".

It therefore says better pathways for language study between primary and secondary schooling, and from junior-middle to the senior years of secondary school, are essential if the pattern of participation at Year 12 is to change.

Of the challenge ahead to boost Asian language

learning, the report's message is clear.

It notes the aspirational target of NALSSP is that, by 2020, 12 per cent of students will exit Year 12 with a fluency in one of the four languages. Citing ABS data, the researchers show that to meet the NALSSP target, 24,000 students would need to be studying one of the languages in 2020 – up from the 11,654 who studied one in 2008. This equates to a 100 per cent increase in student numbers.

The report, which consists of individual papers on each of the four target subjects, details the unique issues specific to each.

For example, with Chinese, the paper says that given the high number of L1 students making up enrolments, retention of classroom L2 learners needs to be the first priority in any campaign to increase the numbers in Year 12 Chinese.

"By senior secondary school, the teaching and learning of Chinese in Australia is overwhelmingly a matter of Chinese teaching Chinese to Chinese." It says that 94 per cent of L2 learners drop out before Year 12.

With Chinese there is also the issue of difficulty.

"Over the period of their secondary schooling, Australian language students receive, at best, some 500 hours of instruction. The Foreign Service Institute in Washington DC estimated that it takes an L1 English speaker approximately 2200 hours to become proficient in Chinese (compared with 600 hours for French)," the paper notes.

Elsewhere, the reports commissioned by the AEF also demonstrate the challenge of incorporating Asia literacy as a cross curricular competency.

A 2009 report, prepared by ACER, showed many Australian students currently learn little or nothing about Asia in the senior years of schooling.

Only a small minority of students undertake studies with an Asian focus in Year 12 history, geography or arts. Typically, 65 per cent of modern history students in one state chose to study Germany, 19 per cent chose Russia and just 2 per cent chose China.

English is characteristic, the paper says.

Some English courses include no texts with content or focus on Asia. In others, there is a limited selection. Where there are texts with content or focus on Asia, they are often older established texts or relate to war and conflict.

"Marker reports indicate that Asian texts are less frequently selected than other texts. This may arise from the fact that many teachers will be less familiar with Asian texts and contexts than with those of Australia or Europe, and are inclined to select from the latter," it says.

"In NSW, where English is the largest HSC subject undertaken, students choose one of three areas of study. In area one in 2007 there were no prescribed texts with content or focus on Asia; in area two the only Asian choice was *Empire of the Sun*, and in area three, two Asian poets were listed," it says.

Similarly, the Victorian VCE English course contained four texts that might have included Asian content, but the examiners' report does not mention any of them, the paper notes.

The reports are available at:
www.asiaeducation.edu.au

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engagement with Asia, Asialink and the Australian Industry Group recently released their inaugural *Engaging Asia* survey.

The survey of businesses, including AIG members representing 750,000 employees in a range of industries, found half plan to start or expand their businesses in Asia within 12 months. Further, 56 per cent of businesses with current dealings in Asia indicated that at least one of their Asian operations is 'highly important' or 'extremely important'.

Unsurprisingly, businesses that have senior staff with some Asian experience or skill rated the importance of local knowledge to their business in Asia significantly higher than those without such staff.

More than half of the businesses operating in Asia had little board and/or senior executive experience of Asia and/or Asia skills.

Among the survey's core recommendations was an endorsement of the National Asia Literacy Action Plan.

"In a broad sense, Asia literacy, including Asian languages, provides a critical skill set for young people, simply because economically and strategically, Asia is key," says Lindsey.

"There has been an economic power shift, from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Of course, there is the rise of China cliché, but it's more than that. Indonesia, for example, had the best performing economy during the period of the GFC – including China and the US.

"Look at the markets and their strategic importance. Who is Australia's biggest trading partner? It's the ASEAN bloc, followed by China and Japan. The Western trading partners are way down the list," he says.

Strategically, too, Australians should consider the northern border.

"It all depends on Indonesia. It determines fishing control, people smuggling, border protection. Think of the deep water trade from the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean – which is critical to our future trade. The point is that economically and strategically, Asia is key.

"How equipped Australians are to speak Asian languages will determine how Australia takes its place in the Asian Century. Languages are a critical part of education; yet Australia is rated the worst in the OCED for second language learning.

"The market is not delivering the Asia skills needed for the Asian Century. The next generation of Australians will pay for this policy failure. I don't think Australians understand how important Asia is, both economically and strategically," Lindsey says.

"A key imperative is having people coming through schooling with a better understanding of Asia, at least one country in Asia. It will help them go into the workforce with cultural understandings, which is one of the key issues they'll face," says Coleman.

"The business imperative is that businesses and organisations need to be able to build strategic relationships in a number of ways, and within Asia particularly, this is central to our economic success.

"We need to think more broadly than just the study of languages. Asia literacy needs to be



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embedded in other areas of the curriculum; such as business studies, for example. We want young people to leave school with an understanding of business and government systems within Asia," he says.

However, Asia literacy is much more than just the business imperative, many are keen to emphasise.

"It's also about social and cultural literacy," says Kirby. "It's the idea that every child in Australian schools gains knowledge and understanding of the countries in our region; their people, traditions and customs."

Similarly, the Australian Multicultural Foundation, another signatory to the call for action, sees Asia literacy as an integral part of the curriculum.

"We support the advocacy for Asia literacy and understanding in the curriculum. Particularly now, with current issues and debate focusing attention on certain faiths; namely Islam, and other global events that affect the Commonwealth. It's important that people have an informed understanding of their neighbours, especially Muslim countries," says executive director, Bulent (Hass) Dellal.

"It's like anything you try and do where you seek to shift mindsets; if you can't do it through education, then I don't know how else you do it. Education is the key, but it needs resources and support. Teachers need good resources and factual information. This enables them to break down barriers, take away stereotypes and reduce the aspects of racism that develop through ignorance and fear. It simply makes sense to help young people develop to become global citizens."

Dr Lucas Walsh, senior executive, research and evaluation at the Foundation for Young Australians, also cites the importance of social and cultural literacy.

"It's really important we increase young people's understanding of Asian countries; their traditions

and cultures. It benefits not just how they view and engage with the region, but also how they view each other. All those benefits flow back to them in a variety of rich ways," he says.

Kirby, meanwhile, is optimistic these lofty goals can be achieved.

A long time advocate for Asia literacy in schools, she says, in many ways, the gods are aligning.

"We've never been in a more positive political space than now. All the education ministers agreed on the need for young people to be Asia literate in the Melbourne Declaration. They agreed on the importance of Asia literacy being a cross curriculum perspective in the national curriculum. However, the key point is that while these are excellent political aspirations, they won't be achieved unless we invest in the usual things; equipping teachers and school leaders, focus on teacher training, pre-service teacher education, curriculum materials," she says.

With the new national curriculum, there is also an extra opportunity to bolster Asian literacy in schools. Indeed Kirby says the AEF has been working with ACARA, providing detailed responses to shape papers, as well as a range of practical teacher and academic work in the area.

"For example, we developed a reading list of Asian literature suitable for the different levels within the English curriculum. We look forward to continued opportunities to develop and provide materials that will support teachers in the classroom," she says.

But, of course, the main game in town is the call for action. It is currently being distributed to education decision makers, policy makers, trade and education ministers and department secretaries.

The AEF intends to work through other channels, too. Its advisory board, for example, consists of representatives of various educational organisations. Similarly, its parent body, Asialink, has many peak business bodies associated with it.

"We're not going to do a major media campaign; we're talking a softer, advocacy approach," says Asialink CEO Jenny McGregor.

The initial goal is to ensure, at the very minimum, that NALSSP continues.

For Lindsey, the government must commit to substantial, long term funding.

"The on/off approach to funding Asia literacy in schools is hugely problematic. There was substantial funding over eight years under NALSAS. Then, there was lesser funding over three years under NALSSP. It gets resuscitated slightly; then cut off again. Schools can't handle policy like this. Language teachers are saying they'll just give up; it gets too hard. They'll say NALSSP is great, but they can't deal with this on/off approach to funding. The inconsistency to funding is damaging. The government needs to make a strong, clear and long term commitment to funding."

Walsh says he is confident of the call for action's success. "Not just because of the number and diversity of organisations that have signed up to it, but also because of the broader political climate, where people are encouraged to become Asia literate. It's an awareness of the importance of engaging more deeply with our neighbours. I think that shift in awareness bodes well for this particular initiative.

"I've been keeping an eye on this for the past 13 years, and I've never been more optimistic than now. This is a quite pivotal moment; it's not an option, it's a necessity," he says.

Kirby is also upbeat.

"There is so much opportunity. This isn't medicine we have to take; it's exciting, interesting and creative. It will help us grow as a country. It's about strengthening our economy, and producing thoughtful, global citizens," she says.

"Having champions is important," adds Dellal. "Asialink and the Asia Education Foundation are obvious champions. And the number of organisations, businesses and peak bodies that have endorsed the action plan is very encouraging. We must all take ownership and take the lead; we must all be champions."

FIND OUT MORE

The Asia Education Foundation (AEF) has an extensive body of resources for teachers and school leaders, designed to creatively and effectively promote Asia literacy in schools.

For students, there is an impressive series of video clips, featuring prominent Australians talking about their perceptions of Asia and the importance for Australian engagement in the region.

Much of the research referred to in this article is also available on the website.

Go to <http://www.asiaeducation.edu.au>

The reasons why

Given the business, social and cultural imperatives for Asia literacy in schooling, why has the situation been allowed to deteriorate?

Is it a lack of interest among students? Is it lack of training and knowledge among teachers?

Or, could there be broader, community forces at play? Yes, says Tim Lindsey.

He says that Indonesia and Australia currently have the warmest bilateral relationship the countries have ever had. But while the Canberra-Jakarta relationship is "warm and engaged", the feelings of Australian people towards Indonesia are somewhat different.

In an article for *Dialogue*, the journal of the Academy of the Social Sciences, Lindsey cites the results of a 2007 Lowy Institute survey, where 52 per cent of respondents described their views of Indonesia as negative. In the 2009 survey, Australians were asked whether they trusted Indonesia to act responsibly in the world. 54 per cent responded 'not at all'.

"Despite the 10 years of democratizations in Indonesia and five years of 'fair dinkum' partnership between Canberra and Jakarta, this year's Lowy survey showed that both fear and ignorance about Indonesia remained consistent in Australian perceptions," Lindsey wrote.

For this reason, he believes that because Asia literacy isn't a "sexy or attractive topic", politicians are hesitant to advance the cause.

"No one is going to argue against it. The economic and strategic imperative is clear. But no politician is going to stomp up and promote the issue," he tells ER.

Australians have a largely apprehensive, if misinformed, approach to Asia. China is seen as a threat, there's the danger from the north. With the Middle East there are the troubled attitudes to Islam, he adds, although most of these fears are unjustified or greatly exaggerated.

"It creates a vicious circle. Lack of Asia literacy leads to misunderstanding of Asia, which discourages Asian studies and increases Asia illiteracy."

Of the decline in the study of Asian languages, Patrick Coleman similarly cites Australian attitudes as a cause.

"Student disinterest potentially is part of the problem, but I think it's broader than that. As a community we don't recognise the significance of learning languages, and having a good knowledge of neighbouring countries that are so important to us, economically and culturally," he says.

Elsewhere, Lucas Walsh says teacher training is a key factor.

"When you look at the research, it talks about popular texts and it cites *The Great Gatsby*. Surely there must be some historical inheritance at play; teachers haven't had the advanced training to explore the other great texts coming out of the region. The enormous wealth of information those texts tell us about ourselves and our neighbours, and about the human condition," he says.

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