



Asia Education Foundation

## Asian languages education crisis deepens: report shows

The state of Australia's Asian languages education is far worse than feared and continuing to decline, according to four major new reports, the first of their kind in more than 15 years.

The reports, released today by the Australian Government, reveal that the aspiration to double the number of Year 12 students fluent in an Asian language by 2020 faces huge challenges unless there is attitudinal change across the Australian community.

The reports show an alarming drop in the number of Australian students learning one of the four priority Asian languages - Indonesian, Japanese, Korean and Chinese (Mandarin).

Indonesian is at crisis point, with Year 12 enrolments halved since 2000 to just 1100 students nationally.

The proportion of "non-background" speakers in Chinese language, that is, students whose families have no Chinese heritage, is rapidly declining. And Japanese - once the shining light in Australian Asian language studies - has seen a marked 20 per cent decrease in participation since 2000.

***The Current State of Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese and Korean Language Education in Australian Schools: Four Languages, Four Stories***, an Asia Education Foundation (AEF) series of reports commissioned by the Australian Government to get a baseline on current participation rates, shows:

- On current trends, Indonesian could be virtually extinct in language studies at Year 12 level by 2020.
- In 2000, 24 per cent of students across K-12 were studying one of the four languages, while in 2008, this had fallen to 18 per cent.
- At Year 12, the issue is particularly alarming: less than six per cent of students currently study one of the four languages and it is estimated about 50 per cent of these are Asian "background" or heritage speakers.

The challenge will be "finding new and effective ways of persuading young people and their parents of the value of learning one or more of these languages," the report says. "The right incentives for participation will have to be found, instituted and marketed."

The aspirational target for the Australian Government's National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP) is that "by 2020, at least 12 per cent of students will exit Year 12 with a fluency in one of the target Asian languages (Mandarin, Indonesian, Japanese and Korean) sufficient for engaging in trade and commerce in Asia and/or university study."

Executive Director of Asialink and the Asia Education Foundation, Ms Kathe Kirby, said today the reports were the first detailed analysis of the state of Asian languages in Australian schools in more than 15 years, and revealed that Australia's Asian languages education was in urgent need of greatly increased resources.

"These reports have been developed at a time of significant impetus to improve languages learning in schools," Ms Kirby said. "The Government's NALSSP has provided crucial leadership and resources, and we now know the extent of the challenges ahead."

Chairman of the NALSSP Reference Group, businessman Mr Sid Myer, said a substantial injection of additional funding was imperative to support languages learning. "Young Australians' futures are linked to Asia. The next generation of Australians will be less effective if they cannot speak the languages and understand the cultures in which they will be working."

“Thinking and working in English will exclude them from so much of the business and activity of our region. It means that as a country we will be one-dimensional – and we know that successful countries, companies and individuals are multi-dimensional.”

“We cannot afford to be left behind,” he said.

According to the report summary, the target of 12 per cent is equivalent to 24,000 students exiting Year 12 fluent in one of the four languages. Currently, Asian languages have about a 90 per cent attrition rate overall - that is, students who drop the language before Year 12 - among non-background speakers.

“Based on trends, in order to get to 24,000 by 2020, we need to have more than a million students learning Asian languages across all year levels,” Mr Myer said. “And that is double what we have now.”

The Four Languages, Four Stories reports identify a number of key issues:

- Better pathways for language study between primary and secondary schooling, and within secondary schooling, are essential if the pattern of participation and retention is to improve
- Serious concerns exist across all four languages about the content and duration of primary school programs and the impact of these programs on student achievement, levels of satisfaction and motivation to continue to study the language.
- The professional learning needs of teachers of all four languages are significant, varied and ongoing, and according to data gathered for all four reports, require renewed attention
- Differing backgrounds of learners in Chinese and Korean classrooms must be officially recognised, with appropriate curriculum and assessment procedures developed for each category
- nature and quality of training at the pre-service level for teachers of languages require urgent reform to attract and keep quality student teachers, and to produce quality teachers
- The challenge of finding new and effective ways of persuading young people and their parents of the value of learning one or more of these languages.

Indonesia expert, Professor Tim Lindsey, Director of The University of Melbourne’s Asian Law Centre and a member of the NALSSP Reference Group, said enrolment trends for Indonesian language showed it was at risk of disappearing from Australian schools.

“When Indonesia’s President, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, addressed our parliament recently, he generously praised Australians for their ability to speak Indonesian. This report proves he was, sadly, very mistaken.”

“This is the language of our largest neighbour, the world’s largest Muslim community, an emerging democracy and a country vitally important to our security. It is the key to ASEAN, which as a bloc is now one of our major trading partners.

Yet every year, thousands of Australian students drop Indonesian. In 2009 we had 1100 students across the entire country studying Indonesian language at Year 12. This is down from the 1300 in 2008, and half what it was 10 years ago.” he said.

“We sometimes hear that all will be well because Asians will all learn English, but this is naïve and self-deluding nonsense. How can we hope to resolve vital issues for our future like people smuggling, terrorism, or climate change, and how can we capitalise on economic growth in Asia, if Australians do not even speak the languages of own region? We urgently need to invest in our future by rebuilding Asian language studies before it is too late.”

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