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## Asian Studies in Australia

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Australia lies in the Asia-Pacific region, but is mostly Western – and particularly British – by culture. When I went to secondary school in the 1950s, I learned French, German, Latin and ancient Greek, but was not offered Chinese or Japanese.

Over the decades since then, Australia has become an incomparably more multi-cultural society. This has been especially the case since the Australian Labor Party (ALP) government led by Gough Whitlam (1972–1975), because that was the first government in Australia to take the concept of multiculturalism seriously. There have been several major attempts to introduce Asian languages and cultures into the schools and universities. Although basic popular attitudes towards Asian studies have improved radically over that time, the realities have been quite disappointing. In some periods progress has been notable, but times of back-sliding have been all too common.

The most recent landmark was when Prime Minister Julia Gillard issued the white paper *Australia in the Asian Century* on 28 October 2012. A major sentence in the executive summary read: ‘we also need to broaden and deepen our understanding of Asian cultures and languages, to become more Asia literate.’<sup>1</sup> The context was highly instrumentalist, the main thrust of the report being the wish to use opportunities presented by a rising Asian middle class to expand Australia’s trade and prosperity.

The concept of ‘Asia literacy’ dates back at least to 1994, when Kevin Rudd, then head of the Premier’s Department in Queensland, made a serious attempt to promote Asian languages and studies in the primary and secondary schools. In his original report, he had raised the concept of Asian literacy, listing among primary aims “the development of an Australian export culture that is ‘Asia literate’”.<sup>2</sup> Like Gillard’s concept, Rudd’s Asia literacy was thus highly instrumentalist, but it was more clearly geared towards promoting the study of Asian languages and cultures in the schools.

In response to Rudd’s initiative, the state and federal governments set up the National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools (NALSAS) strategy. The government of ALP Prime Minister Paul Keating, which was in power at the time the NALSAS strategy was proposed, strongly supported the project, but under his successor, the more conservative Prime Minister John Howard (1996 to 2007), it tended to languish and in 2002 targeted funding was withdrawn. When Kevin Rudd brought

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the ALP back to power in 2007 he revived the NALSAS strategy. However, in the 2011 budget, after Julia Gillard had taken over the prime ministership from Kevin Rudd in June 2010, the NALSAS funding was withdrawn. The appearance was that the government simply did not care much about understanding its Asian neighbours in cultural terms.

In 2011, Asialink, which is a body attached to the University of Melbourne, set up a Taskforce, which carried out a survey on how 'Asia capable' Australia's workforce was. It developed a national strategy to make the workforce more Asia capable, listing 11 capabilities, six of them individual, the other five organizational. The list was mainly instrumentalist, but included cultural sensitivity and experience in Asian countries. The last of the individual capabilities was a 'useful level of proficiency in the local language(s), for better communication and to demonstrate commitment and cultural sensitivity'.<sup>3</sup>

Not only did the Taskforce see the role of language and culture as important, but it also found training in these areas made a difference in terms of the success of Australian enterprises working in Asia. It said, for instance, that 'The higher the proportion of senior leaders who have cultural training, speak an Asian language or have lived and worked in Asia for more than 3 months, the more likely it is that business performance will exceed expectations.'<sup>4</sup>

The survey the Taskforce carried out suggested that in Australia levels of Asian capability were quite deficient. Its conclusion was that 'Less than half of the 380 businesses surveyed report having any board members or senior executives with Asian experience or language ability'.<sup>5</sup> According to a government-funded 2010 survey, the number of students studying a priority Asian language, Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian or Korean, at year 12 levels in 2008 was about 10,000, or 5.8% of the student year-12 total. That is a slight rise on the 4.8% who did one of these four Asian languages at year 12 level in 2000,<sup>6</sup> but considerably <10% the NALSAS strategy had in 1994 proposed for 2006 and about half the target the Rudd government set in 2008 for 2020.

The white paper of October 2012 represents another milestone on the road of Australia's attempts to learn Asian languages and cultures. It differs from earlier reports in requiring that people in the business, politics and media communities should give much more attention to Asia and include far more people with deep experience in Asia and knowledge of Asian culture. Unlike earlier government reports, the four languages of focus included Hindi, but omitted Korean, representing a new push to teach children more about India. It urged all schools to teach at least one of these four priority languages, namely Chinese, Hindi, Indonesian and Japanese, by 2025.

However, in contrast to earlier attempts to increase the teaching of Asian languages and cultures in Australian schools, this one offered no specific strategy on how its goals should be accomplished beyond advocating computer technologies based on the national broadband network to assist in teaching. Another problem was that the white paper offered no funding tied to the teaching of Asian languages, although it did specify that the allocation of some still un-promised and unbudgeted education funds might be tied to a willingness to include Asian languages in the curriculum. Typical media commentary was that the white paper was long on vision but short on specifics.

Asian studies have done somewhat better at tertiary level than secondary. The great majority of universities offer courses in Asian languages and studies, and most have

gone out of their way to promote the study and understanding of particular Asian countries, especially China. There is now more engagement with Chinese counterparts in Australian universities than with those of any other country, even the United States. There are many academics from China working in Australia. This represents great progress, considering that exchanges between Chinese and Australian universities did not even begin until the early 1980s. There are serious downsides, however. For instance, the study of Indonesian language has declined overall, and several universities that once promoted it actively have abandoned it altogether.

Of course the emphasis that emerges here on language and cultural knowledge is positive. However, the approach advocated is still instrumentalist, with no serious attention to the intrinsic value of Asian cultures. Australia has still not really come to terms with the importance of its Asian neighbours in anything but economic terms. It has still not really understood the full implications of the sea change that is taking place in the globe as a whole in the balance between the Western and Asian world. The efforts made so far are puny by comparison with what is necessary if Australia is going to engage properly with the rest of the world in the 'Asian century'.

## Notes

1 "Executive Summary", in Australian Government, *Australia in the Asian Century, White Paper*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, October 2012, p. 2.

2 K.M. Rudd, et al., *Asian Languages and Australia's Economic Future, A Report Prepared for the Council of Australian Governments on a Proposed National Asian Languages/Studies Strategy for Australian Schools*, Queensland Government Printer, Brisbane, 1994, p. 2.

3 Asialink Taskforce for an Asia Capable Workforce, *Developing an Asia Capable Workforce, A National Strategy*, September 2012, p. 14, web version, accessed 5 October 2012, at [http://www.asialink.unimelb.edu.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0008/619793/Developing\\_an\\_Asia\\_Capable\\_Workforce.pdf](http://www.asialink.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/619793/Developing_an_Asia_Capable_Workforce.pdf).

4 Australian Industry Group and Asialink survey, 2011, cited Asialink Taskforce, *Developing an Asia Capable Workforce*, p. 10.

5 Cited Asialink Taskforce, *Developing an Asia Capable Workforce*, p. 13.

6 Asia Education Foundation, *The Current State of Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese and Korean Language Education in Australian Schools, Four Languages, Four Stories*, Education Services Australia, Carlton, Victoria, 2010, p. 4. Among the four languages in 2008, the number studying Chinese at year 12 was a bit over 5000, Japanese 4000, Indonesian 1300 and Korean 177. See Asia Education Foundation, *The Current State*, p. 3.

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