

ASIAN STUDIES IN AUSTRALIA: THE COMMONWEALTH PERSPECTIVE

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There is no need to describe in detail the reasons for Australians to learn about Asia. Europeans have long taken for granted learning the languages and cultures of their neighbours. Australia's proximity to, and contemporary relations with, the nations of Asia underline the need for Australians to similarly embrace the languages and cultures of *our* neighbours.

The Commonwealth sees Asian studies (here defined to include the learning of Asian languages and/or the study of the cultures, history, politics, geography, etc., of Asia) as being important for a variety of reasons, but particularly because of the growing consciousness of Australia's place in the region and the importance for Australia's trade and economic well-being of establishing better and deeper links with countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

Additionally, of course, there are domestic reasons for studying more about Asia. We have a multicultural population which increasingly consists of people from within our region. It is therefore also important for reasons of domestic harmony - promoting unity within diversity - that Australians come to know more about Asia and Asian cultures.

While here are other sound reasons for studying languages other than English and particularly for learning about Asia - including various intellectual reasons, personal growth reasons, and the like - from the Commonwealth's point of view it is those reasons of trade, economic performance and enhancement of the multicultural nation that are seen as most important.

The Commonwealth first became involved in a major way in Asian studies in 1986 with the establishment of the Asian Studies Council. The Council operated for some five years and undertook a great deal of important developmental work in promoting Asian studies within Australia.

In 1987, the Commonwealth also issued a National Policy on Languages. Although not confined to Asian languages, that policy document provided important guidelines for the development of language, including Asian language, learning in Australia. It was the first time that a coherent set of policies and directions for language education had been articulated at a national level.

In 1991, and leading on from other Commonwealth initiatives in the fields of Asian studies and language education, the Commonwealth released the

Australian Language and Literacy Policy. Although the scope of that Policy is much broader than Asian languages and Asian studies, it embraces those elements and provides a new policy framework for developments in Asian studies at the Commonwealth and national level.

In the context of these broad Commonwealth initiatives and similarly directed efforts at the state level, over recent years the development of Asian studies in Australia has occurred, especially at the school level, in a collaborative and cooperative way unprecedented among the various education systems.

For example, in 1988 the historic "Hobart declaration" was released. In this document the ministers for education from the states and territories and the Commonwealth agreed on the importance of language learning generally in schools around Australia, and stated unanimously that language learning ought to be regarded as an essential part of learning in schools for school students.

Following that came the development of what became known as the Australian Language Levels, which provide a framework for the development of language curriculum materials in Australia. (Again, I am talking about languages generally rather than Asian languages specifically.)

More recently still, national Asian language curriculum materials have been produced cooperatively at the national level. These materials have been funded by the Commonwealth but developed by individual states and territories in collaboration with one another. Those materials first became available at the beginning of this year and they are now being implemented in many schools around the country.

It is significant too, that towards the end of 1992, at the initiation of the Queensland Government, the Council of Australian Governments (the forum for state, territory and Commonwealth heads of government), determined that the development of a comprehensive understanding of Asian languages and cultures is a matter of national importance requiring urgent national attention. As a result of that resolution, a special working group has been convened at the behest of Premiers and the Prime Minister to develop a framework for Asian studies and Asian language learning in Australia, especially at the school and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) education sector levels. In view of this high level of government interest and sponsorship, further important initiatives in the area of Asian studies can be expected after the special working group submits its report - probably towards the end of 1993.

The quite dramatic growth in Asian studies, and particularly in Asian language learning, that has occurred over the last few years has been described elsewhere. However, I will reiterate some of the key features.

There are still three main languages studied in Australian primary, secondary and tertiary education institution: Japanese, modern standard Chinese or Mandarin, and Indonesian-Malay. As an illustration of the growth that has occurred in Asian language learning, in the four years from 1987 to 1991, Year 12 enrolments in Asian languages virtually doubled from around 4,600 in 1987 to more than 8,500

in 1991. Although more recent data are not available, that trend is expected to continue. As far as higher education is concerned, enrolments in Asian languages at higher education institutions doubled in the period 1988 to 1990.

Let us take, by way of further dramatic illustration, the study of Japanese in Australia. It is estimated that there are some 120,000 Australian students studying Japanese at all levels of the education system; that is some 50 percent more than the total in the UK, Canada, and the US combined, and is a larger number of students than in any other country in the world other than South Korea and China, which are the immediate, and of course in the case of China, very populous, neighbours of Japan. Thus, Australia is most definitely at the forefront in Japanese language education.

We are therefore witnessing a veritable explosion in learning about Asia in Australian education institutions.

The Commonwealth's role in the general area of Asian language learning and Asian studies is largely to encourage, facilitate and support the efforts of other agents and agencies. Since in Australia the constitutional responsibility for school level education resides with the states, the Commonwealth is not in a position simply to direct developments in the area, but needs to act in concert with state governments. Similarly, higher education institutions in Australia have always enjoyed a very high level of autonomy. Again it is the Commonwealth's role to "nudge along" higher education institutions but certainly not to usurp in any way their control over their course offerings.

The Commonwealth currently spends something in the order of \$20 million per annum on promoting and developing Asian studies. Most of that comes from the Department of Employment, Education and Training but there are also other agencies involved in this area. AUSTRADE, for example, provides fellowships for business people wishing to undertake Asian language learning in the region; the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has a number of "bilateral agencies" (for example, the Australia-Japan Foundation) which also provide funds for the development of Asia-related education.

The Australian Language and Literacy Policy highlighted the fact that less than four percent of Year 12 students in 1990 were studying Asian (including West Asian) languages. In fact the number of students at Year 12 level studying Asian languages is still relatively slight, despite the growth to which I have referred. The target for all language learning - European, Asian and other language learning at the Year 12 level set by the Language and Literacy Policy - is 25 percent of Year 12 students by the year 2000.

In the Australian Language and Literacy Policy, the Commonwealth identified a number of priority languages for development nationally. Essentially, those languages reflect existing state and territory policies and practices. Within the set of 14 priority languages identified, there are six Asian languages: in addition to Chinese, Indonesian and Japanese, there are Korean, Thai and Vietnamese. A seventh, Arabic, is also a major language of Asia; as, it might be argued, is an

eighth, Russian. I should note that this selection of Asian languages does not signify the exclusion of other Asian (nor other languages) from promotion in Australia. However, it is rather a particular set that the Commonwealth has focused on as being nationally important and therefore warranting special attention for development in Australia.

Several new initiatives have been introduced within the last year or so under the Australian Language and Literacy Policy. For example, the Government has set up an *Asia Education Foundation*, charged with the responsibility of infusing Asian studies across the curriculum within schools. It does not focus on Asian language learning *per se* but on studies of Asian societies and cultures. The Government has also set up the *Asia in Australia Council* which is comprised of representatives from business and industry who convene to formulate advice to the Government on business and industry's education-related needs- especially as they affect firms' activities in Asia. The *Australian Language and Literacy Council* has been established to advise the Minister for Education on language and literacy priorities and to monitor the implementation of the policy.

Continuing since 1990, a *Commonwealth-funded National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia* has also been operating. Although not charged specifically with a responsibility for Asian language development, it is doing much in that area. For example, it is currently developing proficiency or assessment scales for Japanese language learning in Australia.

Jointly through the state, territory and Commonwealth ministers for education, employment and training, the Commonwealth is promoting and contributing to a further enhanced coordination and cooperation at the national level. Of particular note, in 1993 the ministers are likely to consider the adoption of national collaborative strategies for language education in the schools and TAFE sectors - potentially very important developments.

The Australian Language and Literacy Policy also provides funding under a number of different program heads for Asian studies promotion and also more generally for languages other than English promotion in the country. Under the *Priority Languages Incentive Element* of the School Language Program, state and territory governments and independent school systems are being encouraged to teach languages to increased numbers of students at the Year 12 level. Through that program, schools and school systems are granted A\$300 for every student who studies a language at the Year 12 level. Funds may be applied to further develop language courses at any level, and for any language, within the school system and its schools.

The *Innovative Languages Other Than English in Schools* program has been introduced. Under this program various curriculum and other initiatives are being supported.

Following on from what used to be known as the *Ethnic Schools Program*, the *Community Languages Element* of the School Language Program provides very substantial funding (of the order of \$9.5 million per annum) for the provision of community languages in both ethnic schools and mainstream schools.

The Commonwealth is also involved at the moment in a fairly large scale public awareness campaign to try and foster among members of the public, school communities (parents, students and teachers) and business people an appreciation of the importance of learning languages, and especially Asian languages, as well as other and Asia-related education.

Of particular note, the Commonwealth is also presently endeavouring to facilitate higher education academic and also higher education student student exchange within the region through a regionally coordinated undertaking known as the *University Mobility Program in Asia Pacific* program.

In addition to these significant initiatives, there is also a range of other programs and projects with an Asian studies focus at the higher education level and the TAFE level, as well as scholarships for overseas studies, which are being funded by the Commonwealth.

Although much is happening , as outlined above, it is also obvious that much still needs to be done. In this context, libraries in Australia have a significant role to play as repositories of information that will enable a deeper study of Asia in Australia.

There are substantial and high quality Asian studies resources already available in Australian libraries. Perhaps the main task of the Commonwealth, as it is attempting to do in other areas, is to encourage and support higher levels of coordination among libraries in Australia so that those resources are more and more accessible.

