

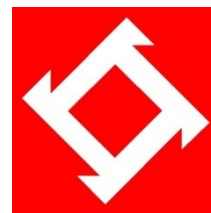
ASIAN STUDIES ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA

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Statement: A crisis in Asian languages

Australia is facing a fast-approaching crisis in the teaching of Asian languages at our universities.

After learning several weeks ago that La Trobe University was considering closing its Indonesian and Hindi programs, over the last fortnight we have learned that Murdoch University is planning to close its Indonesian program, and Swinburne University wishes to close Chinese and Japanese. Informal reports are flying through the sector about looming closures at other universities.

These closures are concerning for different reasons:

In the case of La Trobe and Murdoch University's Indonesian programs, closure would be another milestone in an accelerating collapse of the teaching of Indonesian, the language of Australia's closest Asian neighbour at Australian universities. It is feasible that within a year or two Indonesian will be available to students at less than ten Australian universities, down from two dozen a generation ago. Entire states will lack tertiary-level Indonesian language programs thereby denying graduates an opportunity to better understand a country of 270 million people, with growing international importance and critical strategic value to Australia.

- The closure of Chinese and Japanese programs at Swinburne occurs in the context where these programs have maintained healthy enrolment numbers. It seems that the leadership of the university believe that language training is not relevant to the university's mission to emphasise research and education in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields. It is absurdly short-sighted to think that Japanese and Chinese – the languages of two of the world's leading scientific and technological innovators – are irrelevant to developing expertise in technology.
- The closure of Hindi at La Trobe would mean losing one of only two such programs offered in Australian universities. Hindi, spoken by about 550 million people, is the most widely spoken language of India - a country with which Australia is striving to build closer ties. It is a woeful state of affairs to consider that a country as wealthy as Australia can afford to offer advanced training in such a strategically important language at only one of its many universities.

While these closures are being planned in the context of the acute financial pressures on Australian universities as a consequence of the COVID-19 induced crisis of the sector, they are the product of long-term neglect. We are concerned that they represent a marked acceleration of a trend that may have far-reaching consequences for understanding our region of the world.

For decades, successive Australian governments – and successive generations of university leaders – believed that developing deep engagement with and understanding of Asian nations would be a key

to Australia's future economic prosperity and security. Making Asian languages available to Australian students from primary school through to university was a pillar of this approach.

Yet government and university attention has drifted over the last two decades. Governments and education planners have failed to match their Asia engagement rhetoric with long-term investment in Asia literacy at schools and national universities. Australia lacks a national strategy to promote the learning of Asian languages. As a result, the teaching of key Asian languages has been in long-term decline at both schools and universities.

As scholars of Asian countries, we are already seeing the effects of declining support for Asian language training. The supply of Australian graduates capable of conducting advanced research in Asian languages is declining, undermining the Australia university sector's long-recognised global leadership in the field of Asian Studies. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the shortage of graduates is also being felt in other sectors requiring high-level Asian language skills, including the Commonwealth government.

It is time for renewed national leadership on this issue.

We call upon our members and other persons in favour of deepening Australian engagement with Asia to raise their voices in defence of the teaching of Asian languages in our schools and universities.

Professor Edward Aspinall (ANU), President, Asian Studies Association of Australia

Associate Professor Kate McGregor (University of Melbourne), Vice-President, Asian Studies Association of Australia.