

Statement: Four Asian language programs across Australia cancelled

Australia is nearing a crisis in the teaching of Asian languages at our universities.

Over the last six months, several language programs have faced threats of closure with some programs being put on notice and four language programs now already closed or confirmed to close by the end of 2021. Despite protest late last year the University of Western Sydney closed its Indonesian language program at the beginning of this year. After months of struggle and efforts to lobby the Department of Education, which has the power to prevent the closure of programs, Swinburne University is closing both its Chinese and Japanese programs. More recently, after postponing a decision late last year, Latrobe University has now confirmed it will close its Indonesian program at the end of 2021. The Indonesian language programs at Murdoch has meanwhile been given a temporary reprieve from closure while they attempt to build enrolments.

These program closures are concerning for different reasons:

- In the case of the University of Western Sydney and La Trobe University's Indonesian programs, these closures and the potential closure of further programs accelerates the collapse of the teaching of Indonesian across Australia, the language of Australia's closest Asian neighbour at Australian universities. In 2022 Indonesian will now only be available to students at twelve 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. The leadership of the university have deemed language training not relevant to the university's mission to emphasise research and education in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields. It is 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.

We acknowledge that these closures occur in the context of the acute financial pressures on Australian universities as a consequence of the COVID-19 induced crisis of the sector, however the ASAA and our members have been signalling for many years the ongoing neglect of Asian languages by both universities and the Australian

government. We are concerned that these closures represent a marked acceleration of a trend that may have far-reaching consequences for understanding our region of the world.

Perhaps most frustratingly, two decades ago successive Australian governments – and successive generations of university leaders – had a vision to recognize the importance of Asia and implement an Asian language strategy from primary through to university level that has had lasting effects. These leaders recognized that developing deep engagement with and understanding of Asian nations would be a key to Australia's future economic prosperity and security.

Yet government and university attention has drifted over the last two decades. Most recently the designation of Asian languages as strategic languages was removed from university funding agreements weakening the case for government protection of these programs from closure. At the same time, governments and education planners continue however to stress the importance of Asia. Currently 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 societies, now two decades on from a period of sustained government support, we are already seeing the effects of declining support for Asian language training. The number of students at postgraduate level who are able to conduct advanced research in Asian languages is declining, undermining the Australian 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.

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