



Statement on Indonesian and Hindi programs at La Trobe University

On behalf of Asian Studies academics in Australia we express our grave concern about the potential closure of programs in Hindi and Indonesian at La Trobe University.

The current funding crisis of the Australian university sector caused by the COVID-19 pandemic should not be an occasion to wind back teaching programs in areas of vital national significance.

The flagged cessation of both programs is a matter of great concern, but for somewhat different reasons.

In the case of Hindi, La Trobe offers one of only two programs in this language, spoken by about 550 million people, in Australian universities (the other is at the Australian National University). For several years, successive Australian governments have prioritised strengthening Australia's cultural, trading, diplomatic and defence ties with India. Australian universities have mostly failed to match this turn with major investment in India expertise, even as they have sought to attract ever greater numbers of Indian students. Closing one of the nation's only two tertiary-level programs in India's most-widely spoken language would be a strong signal that Australia lacks seriousness in its new engagement with India.

In the case of Indonesian, La Trobe has since 1989 offered a vibrant program in this language, as part of a relatively robust environment for the teaching of Indonesian nationally, reflecting the geographical proximity of Indonesia to Australia, the country's obvious strategic significance, and its growing economic weight. Yet the teaching of Indonesian at Australian universities is in slow decline, with the total number of students studying the language recently dropping below the levels of the late 1980s. The closure of La Trobe's program would be the most serious blow yet to a prolonged national effort of training in Indonesian, at a time when the Australian and Indonesian governments are promoting ever closer ties (symbolised, among other things, by the 2019 Indonesia-Australia Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement).

Closing these programs involves elevating short-term calculation over long-term interest. For decades, Australian universities have maintained teaching programs in key Asian languages, even when such programs have attracted relatively limited numbers of students. They have done so in recognition that developing Asia expertise is a matter of vital national importance, and that doing so is also strategically significant for individual universities and for the higher education sector at large. Deep Australian engagement in Asia requires investing in training new generations of Australian experts,

businesspeople, diplomats and others with intimate knowledge of our most important neighbours, including their languages. Teaching Asian languages also provides symbolic recognition that Australia is serious about its engagement, and that we value and respect the cultures of the region.

It is important for the federal government to exercise leadership in this area. The time is ripe for serious reinvestment in Asia expertise, including by finding ways to safeguard vital programs in Asian languages amidst the current financial shock being experienced in the university sector.

The current moment of crisis should not be a time for Australia, or for Australian universities, to divest from Asia knowledge. On the contrary, it is a time for a clear-sighted recognition of the ever closer ties that bind us to our region, and for renewed commitment for the long term.

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