A very timely edition of *Local-Global*

*Martin Mulligan*

Given that there has been so much talk recently about the rise of the ‘Asian century’ and of a need for young Australians to gain—through their formal education—a ‘global passport’ to travel and work anywhere in the world, it is truly alarming to learn that language education is shrinking within our schools and universities. There has been a decline in the diversity of languages being taught, less requirement for students to learn non-English languages, and a surprising shift back from Asian to European languages in many schools and universities. Furthermore, university academics working in the fields of languages and culture education often decry the fact that there tends to be an instrumental interest in learning another language because this obscures the fact that languages reflect different cultures and ways of seeing the world.

The decline in languages education at Australian universities can be attributed to reductions in public investment in the university sector and the need for university administrators to cut budgets for 'non-essential' teaching. Subsequent cuts to languages programs undoubtedly reflect a rather arrogant, and misplaced, assumption that it is enough to get by in the world with ‘global English’. Furthermore, it is assumed that students who come to study in Australia from non-English speaking countries will simply have to become proficient in the language that is assumed to have a pre-eminent place in world affairs. Non-languages academics worry that students who do not have a good knowledge of English can compromise education standards and the finger of blame is commonly pointed at Asian students. Yet multilingual Asian students often put monolingual Australian students to shame, especially when they have to become competent in both everyday English and academic English. Such multilingual students undoubtedly gain a much deeper understanding of the contemporary world than Australian graduates who may have little or no linguistic competence beyond English.

Fortunately, the growing presence of international students in Australian universities and schools is highlighting the need for greater linguistic competence. There are new opportunities for linguistic and cultural exchange between students in Australia and as a result of partnerships
between Australian universities and schools and suitable institutions in other countries. It is also important to note that talented academics working in Australian universities have continued to enhance the practice of language education and a new national network has recently been formed to further develop this important field of practice.

This special edition of *Local-Global* was initiated by academics working in languages and interpreting in the School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning at RMIT University in Melbourne. However, papers have also been contributed by academics working at the University of Melbourne and the University of Western Sydney and Professor Michael Singh (UWS) joined the editorial team. The edition editors have provided an introductory essay which clearly explains why languages education needs to be more highly valued and better resourced in the Australian university sector. That essay also introduces the other papers that have been included in the edition.

It falls to me as a member of the *Local Global* editorial committee to simply congratulate Lynne, Michael and Shanthi for the diligent work they have done to put this timely edition together.