Re-professionalizing the profession: countering juniorization and casualization in the tertiary languages sector

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Abstract

Recent decades have seen tertiary languages programs subjected to systemic (if not systematic) de-professionalization, particularly through marked erosion of senior leadership, and widespread juniorization and casualization of staff. The causes of this profoundly negative trend—which has implications for academic standing, research activity and morale across the sector—range from neglect within individual institutions to frequent societal perceptions of languages as being without value, or only of narrow instrumental value (for example, as an adjunct to commerce or trade). This article argues, however, that the re-professionalization process has begun. In particular, within the tertiary languages sector, there remain strong currents of resilience, dynamism and innovation, which have produced, among other things, a major initiative to counter the forces of erosion. The recently created Languages and Cultures Network for Australian Universities (LCNAU) will provide both a forum for safeguarding, enhancing and sharing professional expertise, and a framework for advocating a more strongly unified approach to the provision of language education. It will thus contribute to the sector’s long-term sustainability. It may even play a pioneering role in the wider sustainability of Australian universities.

Background

The aim of this article is to stress the sustainability potential of a recent grassroots initiative among university languages teachers, namely the creation of the Languages and Cultures Network for Australian Universities (LCNAU). Beginning with a definition of the distinctiveness of tertiary languages education, it maps the process of de-professionalization that has beset the field over past decades, with particular emphasis given to two major factors: loss of senior leadership, and the growing casualization of the workforce. It then goes on to argue that LCNAU, as a key instrument of the sector’s residual vitalities, can play a significant role in resisting further erosion and in restoring strength to the languages sector in Australian universities.
What distinguishes university-level languages education in Australia from other types of language provision? In principle and historically, it is surely the fact that tertiary language learning is explicitly and extensively integrated into other fields of study: even at the beginners’ stage, language acquisition is conceived of as part of a broader process that seeks to give learners access to a critical knowledge and understanding of other ways of seeing the world and acting in it. In addition, then, to providing the linguistic skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing, a university syllabus will seek to empower learners culturally, not just in the sense of learning about another culture, but in order to give them the ability to interact and act, fully and effectively, within that culture and in the intercultural space.

Language learning, therefore, is a pathway to other dimensions of human experience which may embrace everything from social behaviour to works of literature and cinema, as well as across a wide spectrum of geographical, historical, economic and philosophical domains, among others. At its highest levels, it shares the same ambitious goals as other university studies, engaging in original research and reflection in ways that allow ongoing exploration, mastery and reshaping of fields of study that are in constant evolution. For the individual, the purposes of such learning include expansion of knowledge, thinking capacity (seeing the world and ourselves through different perspectives), mobility, and creativity. But the aims are also strategic in their intention to provide the Australian community with the knowledge and communicative ability necessary for greater self-understanding, as well as autonomous self-positioning in the region and the wider world, a need which is ever more critical with increasing globalization. On the face of it, it is simply foolish to believe that because English is the dominant global language English-speakers do not need to know any others. However, Anglocentric monolingualism is so widely shared in the Australian community that it has provoked a deep and concerning crisis.¹

Over time, Australian universities’ languages programs have demonstrated their quality in many ways. While there is to our knowledge no recent thorough compendium of scholarly output, in terms of books or articles dealing with one or another aspect of the cultures of the plurilingual world,² even a rapid glance at the research websites of programs in different universities shows that it has been voluminous, and has earned many of our academics a deserved place in the international scholarly community. We can confidently assert that when it comes to cutting-edge knowledge about China, Japan, Indonesia, Europe, or the Hispanic or Islamic worlds, Australian voices are reliable and prominent (though not necessarily known at home).

Students from languages programs have also done well. Here again, more comprehensive research is needed about graduate destinations, but the anecdotal evidence is compelling. Some students have gone on to
become academics in their own right, thus helping to ensure the self-reproduction of the system. Others have gone into schools as teachers. Many have pursued other fields—business, diplomacy, the arts, law, history, political science and even more technical endeavours such as engineering and medical science. Over the last fifteen years or so, most Australian universities have established exchange programs for undergraduates that allow students to pursue their studies (across a wide variety of fields) in different countries and languages; the impact of this experience on personal confidence is enormous, but equally so in terms of linguistic fluency and cultural competence.

There is in fact considerable evidence that, despite the previously noted Anglocentric pressure in Australia against languages, the message about their importance is getting through to students. Where universities have introduced mechanisms to facilitate access to languages study, enrolments have increased. The success of the Diploma of Languages adopted by many universities since the mid-1990s is a case in point. At the University of Melbourne, the introduction of the ‘Melbourne Model’ in 2008, which builds cross-faculty breadth requirements into the undergraduate degree, resulted in what that institution’s Vice-Chancellor, Professor Glyn Davis, described as an explosion in languages enrolments. The recent introduction of a readily available minor sequence in languages study at Swinburne University has had a similar outcome.

Over recent decades, however, Australia’s languages capacity has come under severe pressure, for a variety of reasons. Numerous reports have explored the underlying trends and causes—some of which will be referred to in what follows. Our focus here will be on one particular set of issues, namely those associated with what we identify as a systemic ‘de-professionalization’ of the tertiary languages teachers’ profession, through the marked erosion of senior leadership and the widespread juniorization and casualization of staff. We will explore the extreme implications of this negative trend for the sustainability of the sector: while our data about the present state of affairs are partial (and enriching them is a goal of our ongoing research), there can be little doubt about the trend. We will also argue, however, that thanks to remarkably strong residual currents of resilience, dynamism and creativity, it is still possible to counter the forces of erosion. In particular, as described in detail below, the grass-roots initiative to create a Languages and Cultures Network for Australian Universities (LCNAU), will provide both a forum for safeguarding, enhancing and sharing professional expertise, and a framework for advocating a more strongly unified approach to the provision of language education in the tertiary sector.
Senior leadership and juniorization

For the purposes of this article, the term ‘senior leadership’ refers only to Level E Professors. We of course acknowledge the crucial contribution of those Level C or D staff members, who often enough have to put up with being exploited by their institutions in order to protect their field as best they can, and who are indeed often very effective leaders within the confines of that field. The term ‘juniorization’ refers to the practice, in many institutions, of routinely appointing staff at Lecturer A or B level usually for financial reasons rather than considering the leadership and development needs of a program.

Level E Professors in languages are necessary for several reasons. The first is because they have the experience and achievements that should allow them to serve as models and mentors to more junior staff. A second is that their rank gives them the authority and the power to speak effectively for their fields at those levels of the university where key budgeting, staffing and curricular decisions are made. A third is that (whether one likes it or not) Level E appointments, within the power structure of Australian universities, have important symbolic value: they are a sign that the field they represent is respected by the institution. Without them, respect may be, and often is, expressed, but one must ask whether it is anything more than lip service. Similarly, beyond the university, that prestige and associated academic standing are precious tools in advocating for the field in all kinds of social and political settings.

To be sure, there are examples of professors who have not been successful at these roles, and in an area as vulnerable as languages, this can be catastrophic: a poor appointment can spell the demise of a whole field, or cripple it for years. There will therefore be instances where it could be better to postpone appointment. The existence of unworthy professors, or of non-professors who are better scholars than some professors, is not however an argument for, or even a satisfactory explanation of the erosion of Level E positions in languages across the Australian university sector over the past three decades. What has been the case in languages has not affected other disciplines, in law, medicine, science, engineering, or other humanities areas such as history or English – any of which will have had similar percentages of imperfect appointments. The fundamental explanation for the erosion lies in the cultural change, within the education sector and among the general public, that saw a shift during the course of the 1970s from an attitude that considered languages other than English as axiomatically valuable, to one in which languages are all too often only grudgingly seen as having any place at all in the tertiary curriculum. The situation is, to be sure, worse in some universities than in others, and there are a few universities where languages are doing reasonably well. Even the best performers, however, are affected by the general trend towards a downgrading of staffing, which, as we shall now see, is both stark and bleak.
A watershed study of languages in Australian universities was that led by Professor Barry Leal, together with Camilla Bettoni and Ian Malcolm, in 1991. It has become the fundamental reference for most of the many studies that have followed. The name of the report, ‘Widening our Horizons’, in retrospect is rather ironic, for the past twenty years have seen significant narrowing of those very horizons. A major concern expressed by Leal and his colleagues was precisely the relative paucity of senior staff members in languages, compared to other areas of the arts, humanities and social sciences: 13.5 per cent of languages staff occupied professor/reader/associate professor positions, while 26.2 per cent occupied senior tutor/tutor positions. In contrast, the distribution of the most senior and the most junior staff was reversed for English; history and politics; and psychology.

A follow-up study in the 1990s by the National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia, which examined the profile of nine specific key languages, noted the negative pressure on chair-level appointments, and the tendency to replace, if at all, retiring senior academics with lower-cost staff appointed at much lower levels. The Italian profile published in 1994, for example, pointed out that only six out of thirty-six tertiary institutions teaching Italian had chairs; in the equivalent profile of French, a language with stronger enrolments, difficulties were specifically linked to unfilled chairs and to a plethora of ‘short-term junior appointments’. Unfortunately, developments since the early 1990s have led to a staffing situation which, overall, is considerably worse in 2011.

If we look at the Group of Eight (Go8) universities as an example, on the assumption that this elite group of Australian universities are likely to offer the most positive face of tertiary languages education, we can see that while they do indeed teach comparatively large language programs, the number of level E positions is by no means convincing evidence that, as a group, they have fully embraced the implications of their international leadership ambitions. Taking the Asian (which by convention includes Arabic) and non-Asian (including European as well as Hebrew) languages together, there are a total of twenty-six Level E positions in the Go8. That is an average of 3.25 for each of the group, when many of them are teaching more than the seven languages identified as being ‘taught widely across the university sector’. Like many university discipline areas, languages have undergone significant organizational restructuring: individual departments have been merged into large schools, typically gathering all languages under a single roof, or under two broad groupings – Asian and European. More than in other areas, however, this process has coincided, for languages, with a sharp reduction of Level E positions. The average figures cited above present a more optimistic picture than is in fact the case in most of the Go8 institutions. Not unexpectedly, given Australia’s growing strategic focus on Asia, the Asian area has fared less poorly than the non-Asian: there are eighteen Level Es in the Asian area and eight in the non-Asian. But the spread is far from even. Two universities account for almost half the
total number of E-level appointments in languages (twelve out of twenty-six); four Go8 universities have no level Es at all in European languages; and there is no longer a Level E appointment in Indonesian. A further clarification is needed: a number of the Level E positions described here are occupied by scholars whose fields are area studies with little direct link to languages. In fact, many are not engaged in any form of language teaching, so that their presence does not therefore always serve to signal a positive status for languages within an institution. Little wonder that the Go8’s own report on languages was entitled Languages in Crisis!14 This discussion paper proposed ‘co-operative action between Commonwealth, state and territory governments to achieve a consistent national approach to language education at all levels of the education system’.15 Unfortunately, this worthy and necessary aim is not always reflected by the practice of the institutions expressing it.

To its credit, the Go8 continues to exercise some leadership in the languages area, by making explicit public statements about the importance of languages. In August 2009, it issued an information sheet about LOTE incentive schemes which included the following:

Learning to speak a Language Other Than English (LOTE) is increasingly important for effective participation in a globalized world. Group of Eight universities play a vital role in the delivery and support of languages education in Australia. All twenty-nine languages currently available at tertiary level in Australia are offered at Go8 universities. In addition, a wide range of LOTE incentives are available both for entry to and while enrolled in programs of study at Go8 universities. The Go8 welcomes the opportunity to work with government, schools and other higher education institutions to promote and encourage the study of Languages Other Than English.16

We would argue that while such statements constitute a necessary condition for ensuring a sustainable future for languages in the Australian tertiary sector, they are not in themselves a sufficient condition for that future, and will not become so until their logical corollary is enacted by all institutions who share the goal. That corollary is that for university-level languages education to thrive, it must be supported by policies that acknowledge and encourage its full academic status, including its central connections to ongoing research and its right to top-level academic leadership. Baldauf and White, in a recently published survey, make the following observations:

There is a tacit assumption throughout respondents’ comments that while enrolments in languages education are being maintained and, in fact, increased in a number of languages, there is little encouragement at senior levels in universities or at governmental policy levels for languages education. This has made good quality programs more or less invisible, and hence
more subject to attrition and eventual demise. (...) Without a strong national policy with corresponding resource support, university and school systems overall are finding it difficult to maintain existing programs. Thus, in order to make the best use of Australia’s languages resources, leadership and policies must be pursued.17

We agree with these views, and in fact believe them too gently expressed. During the 1985-1995 period, when some languages enrolments in university were in decline, university administrators cited lack of student demand as a reason for cutting staff numbers, senior positions, and even whole offerings. The reverse has rarely been true; increases in student demand have not normally resulted in a concomitant rise in resources, far from it. As the Level E discussion has shown, the trend has gone in the opposite direction. It is well established that Federal Government support for tertiary education, as a proportion of the costs of that education, has been falling steadily for many years. Universities, in the current Australian political climate, are not seen as good political capital: among OECD countries, Australia invests a smaller percentage of its GDP in higher education than most; and in terms of public funding of its universities, it was, in 2010, in the bottom three of more than thirty countries surveyed.18 So much for investment in the ‘knowledge economy’ so widely touted by Australia’s politicians responsible for its education provision. It is easy enough to see how, as the effects of this catastrophic funding model cascade down into individual institutions, inadequate financial resources become the norm for those areas of study that have little ability to supplement their EFTSL earnings. With overall funding limited and shrinking, competition among faculties within any particular university becomes inevitable and ruthless, with a decided advantage for the so-called ‘professional’ faculties (medicine, law, engineering, commerce) over the arts, humanities and social sciences. Inside those weaker faculties, competition becomes even more cut-throat, and it is safe to say that languages frequently receive the worst treatment of all.

Once again, there are exceptions to the trend. Some universities have proved themselves able to generate sufficient supplementary income to maintain, and even improve, their research output and their teaching performance in the languages area. It tends to be in such universities that the practice of ‘socialization’ or ‘cross-subsidization’ is most widely practised, whereby areas of greater earning capacity donate (more or less willingly) resources to areas of lesser earning capacity that the institution as a whole considers important to its status and strategic goals.19 It is no accident that the two Go8 universities that house twelve of the twenty-six current Level E positions have successful languages programs: their performance results from a deliberate and carefully elaborated set of policies since the 1990s designed to foreground and mainstream the teaching and learning of languages and cultures, and to provide sufficient resources for that to happen, including academic leadership positions. Even these institutions, however, as we shall see, have not escaped reductions in staffing, nor the spread of casualization of their staff.
Casualization and its impact on the languages sector

Baldauf and White show that the period 2000-2005 saw significant growth in student demand for many languages in Australian universities. This growth was quite spectacular in Mandarin and Spanish, and marked in French; German, Japanese and Italian remained reasonably stable. Only Indonesian lost ground. In her analysis of enrolments in Asian languages, McLaren demonstrates that the upward trend has continued into the 2008-2009 period, especially for Mandarin, but also for Arabic and Korean.

But Baldauf and White also show that permanent staffing does not increase with student demand: it declined, not just in Indonesian (where it might be expected), but also in Japanese, German, French, and even Mandarin. The proportion of teaching of these languages assigned to casual staff, between 2000 and 2005, doubled for German and Spanish, and increased sharply in French, Mandarin and Japanese. Although we do not yet have hard data for the post-2005 period, all the anecdotal evidence shared by us and others suggests that the trend is intensifying.

The reasons for the trend lie largely in the funding issues raised above. Casualization is not a phenomenon limited to languages: there is a growing body of literature that shows that since the early 1990s it has been affecting all university faculties and programs, in the US and Britain as much as in Australia. There is general agreement that it is a result of the imposition of business-based models and the market economy on university life. Schibik and Harrington even argue that it is an equivalent of the business practice of ‘outsourcing’. This process has hit languages particularly hard. Many of the existing studies, quite justifiably, concentrate on the disadvantages faced by the casual workers themselves and their experience of marginalization. While we take this into account, the main thrust of our argument is that casualization, as it becomes more normalized, threatens not only the sustainability of university-level languages programs, but their very raison d’être and their ability to deliver on their strategic goals.

We recognize that some level of casual staffing is not only acceptable, it is a sensible means to maintain budgetary flexibility and sustainability. Most university courses include a measure of choice for students, which inevitably makes for a certain amount of variation and unpredictability in enrolments. In such circumstances, it is important for course managers to be able to adjust staffing according to need. We are not, therefore, arguing against the use of casual staffing per se, but rather against a situation that has become too pervasive for the good of the sector.

In many if not most university languages programs across Australia today, casual staff outnumber establishment staff, typically by a factor of several to one. At present, we have no general study of this cohort of teachers, even though such a study is much needed. Many of them hold higher degrees, or are enrolled in them; many have undertaken this kind of work
in the hope of securing a permanent position. For many, casual teaching has become a permanently insecure way of life. Paradoxically, this change in the composition of the teaching force has not necessarily resulted in poorer teaching. On the contrary, recent studies have suggested that the overall quality of teaching of languages, from the student perspective, is first-rate. Taking into account the scope of their contribution to languages programs, we can thus deduce that the ‘casuals’ are doing very good work at the frontline with students in the classroom.

So where is the problem? In brief, casualization is the extreme manifestation of juniorization of the languages sector, with direct impact across a range of areas outside the classroom, such as teaching-related workload; research productivity; staffing levels; and academic standing—which then all feed into a general pressure on the morale of those working in languages.

These issues deserve closer examination. First, the coordination of casual teaching has become an important workload issue for those permanent staff responsible for it. This responsibility can involve many variables:

- **Timetabling:** casual staff, often juggling two or more jobs, may have limited availability, and, especially in smaller centres, the pool of possible casuals is itself limited. This can lead to situations where the timetabling is actually dictated by the needs of the casual staff, and may not be ideal from a student perspective, resulting in students being forced to choose more conveniently timetabled subjects.

- **Curriculum coordination:** frequent meetings are often required in order to ensure that the particular program is proceeding as planned. In many instances, groups of casual staff involved in teaching large cohorts of students must meet regularly, under supervision, to ensure synchronicity in course delivery; meetings across such a large number of staff with different availabilities can be difficult to schedule.

- **Maintaining quality of teaching:** supervisors, in order to make sure that teaching quality is maintained, must keep a close eye on the work of casual staff, which can include mentoring, meetings to discuss student evaluations, complaints and so on—a further demand on time.

- **Coordination of marking:** supervisors are required to ensure uniform and fair marking practices in a given course; where there are multiple staff involved in marking, the supervisory workload is increased in terms of the time and effort required to maintain this consistency.

The impact of these responsibilities for permanent staff members includes additional stress and a diminution of time available for research, and even time available to apply for research grants that might allow some relief from teaching and supervision.

A second factor relates to research in a more structural way. The systematic reduction of the number of permanent staff in languages programs means
both that there are fewer people, with less time, of whom a research-active profile can be expected, and a smaller community of scholars who might work together to generate particular research directions or collaborations. As a result, the kind of deep cultural knowledge that is the distinguishing feature of university languages education is itself reduced. Many programs across Australia have become culturally narrower in their offerings, and hence less likely to attract the interest of the best students at later-year levels. We would be foolish to ignore the real danger of a downward spiral leading, especially in the most weakly-resourced institutions, to university languages education becoming indistinguishable from commercial low-quality languages courses offered to the general public, if offered at all.29

Third, in many universities, casualization has resulted in languages programs being reduced to one or two permanent staff. We are not speaking here of languages of small enrolment: there are plenty of instances where the appointment of a single staff member allows the introduction and/or maintenance of a language that might not otherwise be able to be offered. Nevertheless, there are too many cases where student cohorts are large enough to justify several permanent positions, but where deans or heads of school rely on casual appointments to balance their budgets. Once the number of permanent staff becomes reduced in this way, questions begin to be asked about the viability of the field, given its potential impact on surviving staff, as outlined above, and unfortunately, the answer to those questions is often informed by purely budgetary considerations, rather than any sense of, or commitment to, a vital languages culture.

Finally, as Kimber and others have shown,30 endemic casualization is also a form of exploitation of the casuals themselves. Their contracts are short-term and their rights within the university community are strictly limited. They cannot be expected to participate — although to their immense credit, many do — in the intellectual life of their discipline. Often, in order to make ends meet, they are obliged to accept work at a number of different institutions and undertake extensive commuting. Because their need for work is often great, they are understandably reluctant to complain about shortcomings in their conditions or treatment. If there are so many excellent and talented casual teachers in Australian languages programs, we must ascribe it to their own enthusiasm, dedication and resilience, and not to the ethical integrity of the institutions that hire them in such large numbers.

Resisting de-professionalization: the Languages and Cultures Network for Australian Universities (LCNAU)

It is abundantly clear, from what precedes, that juniorization and casualization are two significant trends in the languages and cultures sector in Australian universities. It is equally clear that they must be resisted, if the sector is to remain sustainable. One potentially powerful means of resistance is the newly created Languages and Cultures Network for Australian Universities (LCNAU). Established early in 2011 as the focus of a national
project entitled ‘Leadership for Future Generations: A National Network for University Languages’, funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC), and strongly supported by the Australian Academy of the Humanities, LCNAU is in fact a grass-roots initiative. The idea for its creation emerged from language educators themselves in the course of the two major Academy of the Humanities Studies and during the subsequent national colloquium held in 2009 and entitled ‘Beyond the Crisis: Revitalizing Languages in Australian Universities’.

LCNAU is a strongly improvement-oriented and positively-focussed network with a number of explicit aims. It will:

- create avenues of communication to facilitate sharing of good teaching, research and administrative practice across the sector and to enable the best-informed discussion of models of delivery and collaborative arrangements;
- facilitate and institutionalize effective cooperation thus far hindered by imposed ‘silo’ structures which have separated colleagues and weakened their power to represent their fields;
- provide a mechanism for more effective promotion of languages programs and advocacy of their needs, and will provide a strong forum for the defence of languages of small enrolment; and
- encourage initiative and leadership qualities at all levels.

It will also address, in a concerted and collaborative way, the many challenges facing the languages sector. Such challenges include high attrition rates, inconsistent student pathways, and inadequate resourcing, as well as the increased casualization and juniorization of staff analysed here. They affect both student learning and staff wellbeing and morale. And there is an even greater challenge in widespread public diffidence about the critical importance of language learning.

Advocacy and promotion of languages are two of LCNAU’s key goals. Languages are a vital part of education, not just in the instrumental sense of enhancing the nation’s trade, economic or security position, but because of the immense benefits at the community level and for individuals. LCNAU is still in its infancy, but it has already responded to the Draft Shape of the National Curriculum: Languages, highlighting the need for greater contact hours at primary and secondary levels than have been proposed, and for the inclusion of content-based teaching as a means of achieving this. (The need for frequent, quality exposure to the target language is equally an issue faced in the university sector too, where the reduction in contact hours has inevitably impacted upon language and culture proficiency outcomes.)

LCNAU’s primary goal is to establish links between colleagues who otherwise would not be connected or visible to each other, despite being part of the same sector, and to facilitate communication. A significant means
of enabling this communication, and a key focus of LCNAU’s activities for 2011, is the staging of another national colloquium in September 2011 which once again brought together educators across Asian and European languages. Following the colloquium, a number of nation-wide virtual cluster groups will now operate, out of which further professional development and policy development workshops will be developed. One of the cluster groups has specific carriage of the issues relating to casualization and juniorization. Immediately critical for this group is detailed research investigating the current specifics of these two phenomena in individual universities and across individual languages, as well as across the entire sector in order to obtain an accurate up-to-date overview. This work will generate further, data-driven research and, it is to be hoped, contribute to national policy initiatives to manage and reduce the extent of casualization and juniorization in languages teaching in Australian universities.

LCNAU’s website is also being developed to maximize ongoing communication and collaboration through the establishment of online discussion forums and an extensive library of resources. This, too, will facilitate a more cohesive and enduring approach for the whole of the tertiary languages sector to the problems raised above.

LCNAU is predicated on experience and research showing that languages are more likely to prosper if their representatives work together to help transform the ambient Anglocentric monolingualism in Australia. From its conception, LCNAU has promoted the idea that the teaching and learning of both Asian and non-Asian languages in the Australian tertiary sector, whatever their particular needs, will benefit by collaborating on the many areas they have in common. By raising the profile of language educators and public awareness of the cultural, strategic and economic importance of language education for Australia, the network will contribute to the long-term sustainability of a sector that is presently under acute stress. In doing so, it will have significant benefits for growing numbers of students, as well as for individual academics (casual and permanent, junior and senior), academic programs, universities, and, we believe, the nation.

**Conclusions**

While our emphasis in this article has been on the sustainability of a particular sector, we would argue that languages are well placed to play a wider positive role in the regeneration of Australian university life, and that in that broader context LCNAU can be viewed as a pioneering initiative of major importance. In a recent study, Cathryn Hammond and Deborah Churchman paint a gloomy picture of present day universities. Basing their analysis on the Barron and Gauntlett principles of social sustainability, they show a range of institutional failings, with a culture of extreme competitiveness leading to fragmentation of any sense of scholarly community, and poor salaries, increased stress and reduced opportunities for creativity tending to make academic careers less attractive. They suggest
that a renewal of community ‘is possible only in the event that a plurality of voices contribute to debates and decisions on the academic environment.’

LCNAU is precisely such a plurality of voices, and moreover, it already meets the first four of the Barron and Gauntlett principles. The field it represents, languages and cultures, is the very embodiment of diversity. As a network that seeks the sharing of best practice across institutions, it fulfils the criterion of interconnectedness. As a grass-roots initiative aiming to stimulate creativity and leadership at all levels, it satisfies the conditions of equity and democracy. Only time will tell, of course, if the final principle, that of an improved quality of life, will be met. Hammon and Churchman, among many others, leave little doubt about how strong and pervasive are the obstacles to be overcome. In the meantime, the enthusiastic commitment of language practitioners across Australia’s universities is heartening.

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Endnotes

1. ‘Crisis’ is not an overstatement, as is confirmed by the title of the call to arms Languages in crisis: a rescue plan for Australia released by the Group of Eight universities (see also below) in 2007. Moreover, this crisis situation is paralleled in other English-speaking countries, especially Great Britain. See, for example, Language matters, a policy statement released by the British Academy in 2009.

2. It would be useful, for instance, to have a version of Wallace Kirsop’s Research on Western European languages and literatures in Australia since 1958 (Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1975) that was both up-to-date and covered non-European areas as well.

3. Colleagues in languages might not have shared his view that ‘the number of our students who wanted to study languages turned out to be much higher than anyone anticipated’. See S-J. Collins, ‘The Very Model of a University Man’, The Age, 29


5. For example, J. Lo Bianco and I. Gvozdenko, Collaboration and innovation in the provision of languages other than English in Australian universities, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, 2006.

6. Many examples of this vitality can be seen in G. Wigglesworth, ed., Marking our difference: languages in Australian and New Zealand universities (proceedings of a conference held in 2003 on language education in Australian and New Zealand universities), University of Melbourne, Melbourne, 2004.

7. This point is sadly confirmed by the number of Australian universities that have drastically reduced their language offerings to the bare minimum or, worse, offer no language study at all to their students.


9. Ibid.


12. They are the Universities of Adelaide, Melbourne, New South Wales, Queensland, Sydney, Western Australia, Monash University, and the Australian National University.


19. We are referring here of course to ‘cross-subsidization’ that seeks to help languages. Some institutions are so indifferent to their languages programs that they do not pass on the Commonwealth funding loading for Languages EFTSLs. There are
also cases where the earnings of languages programs are diverted to other areas of activity rather than being invested into proper staffing profiles.

20. By ‘casualization’, we mean the staffing practice that leads to the hiring of teachers on an hourly or short-term contract basis rather than into permanent or tenured positions.


25. They show that in US universities, since 1970, the proportion of part-time staff has risen from 22% to 42.5%. Schibik and Harrington, 2004, pp. 393-94.

26. This information is based on the authors’ direct experience, as well as recent feedback from colleagues at other universities.


28. The roles of fixed-term contract staff are an important issue that will be considered in a separate study.

29. See note 7.


31. C. Nettelbeck et al., Beginners’ LOTE (languages other than English) in Australian universities: an audit survey and analysis; Nettelbeck et al., An analysis of retention strategies and technology enhanced learning in beginners’ languages other than English (LOTE) at Australian universities.


33. The website can be viewed at <www.lcnau.org>.

They are: equity, diversity, interconnectedness, democracy and quality of life. L. Barron and E. Gauntlett, ‘Model of social sustainability’, Housing and Sustainable Communities Indicators Project, Western Australian Council of Social Service, Perth, 2002.