Australian languages education in the Asian century: deepening of linguistic and intellectual engagements with Asia

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On Wednesday 28 September 2011, Prime Minister Gillard announced that the Australian Government had commissioned a White Paper on *Australia in the Asian Century* for consideration by the full Cabinet in the first half of 2012 and subsequent release during the middle of the year.¹ In providing a national blueprint for Australia at a time of transformative economic growth and change in Asia, this White Paper is expected to help the Australian Government, and the people of Australia navigate the ‘Asian Century’; to seize the opportunities it offers and to meet the challenges it poses.

Languages and language education can be defined in various ways. A language can be thought of as an instrument, and language education in terms of the grammar, rhetoric and logic needed for exchanging information. Thus, it needs to be asked whether Australian policy-actors are about to construct the ‘Asian Century’ in terms of instrumentalist desires that mistakenly presume the possibility of ‘harnessing’ Asia’s economic power? Alternatively, a language can be thought of in terms of humanity and creativity, and language education in terms of personal expression, especially as captured in literature. From this perspective it can be asked whether the Australian Government will provide Australians with the means for securing substantive understandings of the complexity of Asia through genuine cultural and linguistic engagement. However, language understood as a practical social activity is seen as a necessary part of the very act of human creation, as constitutive of the development of social relationships. Language plays a dynamic role in the regeneration; production and reproduction. Language and labour of all kinds are seen as connected. Here it can be asked, what will the White Paper propose for the development of the labour force that Australia needs for engaging more closely with the peoples of Asia, to enable them to extend their joint activities and support each other in its terms of reference.
Policy informed by research

In this introductory essay we have taken this important opportunity to highlight the connections between the research reported in this special edition of *Local-Global: Identity, Security, Community* and the White Paper. The papers presented in this edition were prepared before the Government announced the commissioning of the White Paper, and therefore they do not refer directly to the issues in it, or its terms of reference. Moreover, not all of the papers make explicit connection with the question of educating Australians to navigate the ‘Asian Century.’ However, as editors we have set out below our argument for the connections between the issues raised in this research and the White Paper on *Australia in the Asian Century*. This is an opportunity for Australian language educators and their business, community and international partners to contribute to consultations for the White Paper that brings to the fore the place of Asian languages in Australia and European languages in Asia. As is exemplified in the directions outlined in the White Paper, Australia’s strategic policy (and arguably power globally) is shifting from the Euro-American sphere. In foregrounding the ‘Asian Century’ in this editorial, we argue that Australia can no longer rely on assumptions that English will remain a *de facto* ‘international language’. Nor can we instrumentalize second language learning as a ‘tool’ to make our Australian graduates competitive globally in an economic sense. The authors of the papers in this special edition argue instead for a deep, mutual and critical engagement with language and knowledge exchange.

As we enter the Asian Century a deep engagement with multilingualism in general and a specific capacity in Asian languages will be crucial, but the papers here all suggest that this must be grounded in a sense of mutual knowledge transfer between Asia and Australia. Yet, as we argue below, it would be naïve to think this means ignoring European languages. It is significant for Australian languages education that Chinese universities continue to offer French as a second foreign language. Moreover since 2005, another seventy-three higher education institutions in China have established the French language as a university major.² We contend that it is in this policy context that the concepts and innovations in language education reported in the papers in this edition are important.

Language education is a key challenge for *Australia in the Asian Century* because the effective teaching of ‘Asian languages’ is now important for the cultural, economic and intellectual life of Australians, and the national interests of this country. Of course, the category of ‘Asian languages’ is as questionable as it is troubling. Each of the (many) languages and dialects spoken in China, India, the ASEAN countries, Japan and the Republic of Korea are complex in themselves; this complexity is compounded by these countries teaching (and speaking) a range of non-Asian languages.
including French and German, and the varied forms of localized ‘Asian Englishes’ that are increasingly used throughout these countries.

**Crisis in universities’ languages education**

However, according to a 2007 report, ominously entitled *Languages in Crisis*, languages education in Australian universities is in a ‘shocking’ state. Languages education programs are in decline, and in some instances falling apart. This ‘crisis’ is said to apply to European and Asian languages alike. Only twelve per cent of students who complete secondary schooling study a language for university entrance examination, and most of these are native speakers of the languages, rather than second language learners. Furthermore, the number of languages taught by university languages departments has fallen from sixty-six to less than thirty in the past ten years. Research conducted by the Australian Academy of the Humanities and others indicates that over the past three decades, Australian universities have allowed the teaching and learning of languages to decline, alarmingly some might say.

Against these claims the Japan Foundation proclaims that Australian teaching of Japanese is more extensive than in any other country and since 1991 has continued to be the most studied language in Australia. Likewise, while the ‘Bali bombings’ had a negative impact on the teaching of Indonesian, there are signs of recovery. The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority launched *The Shape of the Australian Curriculum: Languages* document in November 2011, and it states that Hindi, Turkish and sign language will be among the languages for which curriculum documents will be prepared. Thus, in addition to Mandarin and Italian, other languages in the Australian Curriculum will also include Arabic, French, German, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Modern Greek, Spanish, Vietnamese, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. This debate highlights the need for strategic, innovative action for language education in Australia; the White Paper on *Australia in the Asian Century* is an opportunity for all language educators to seize in addressing these challenges.

With these complex impediments and crises, it is unclear whether and how Australia will engage with, or participate in the multilingual Asian Century so as to address the concerns raised in the Australian Government’s commissioning of the White Paper. Continental Asia is multilingual, speaking diverse languages across China, India, the ASEAN countries, Japan and the Republic of Korea. For instance, Dutch, French, German, Italian, Norwegian, Russian and Spanish are among the languages taught as foreign languages in the Philippines. Thus, it has to be asked whether, in considering the challenges posed by the multilingual Asian Century, the Paper will consider the complex issues concerning Asian, European and other languages that relate to the terms of reference:
1. the current and likely future course of economic, political and strategic change in Asia, encompassing China, India, the key ASEAN countries as well as Japan and the Republic of Korea;

2. the domestic economic and social opportunities and challenges of the Asian Century for Australia;

3. opportunities for a significant deepening of our engagement with Asia across the board, including in the economy, science and technology collaboration, clean energy, education, business-to-business and people-to-people links and culture;

4. the political and strategic implications of the Asian Century for Australia; and

5. the role of effective economic and political regional and global cooperation.

European languages in Asia

Languages are constitutive of Australia’s systems and structures for navigating the Asian Century, setting limits, exerting pressures and permitting variations in responses to, and through engagement with the challenges and opportunities that present themselves. Among the impediments to the further development of languages education in Australia is the mistaken presumption that European languages are not being taught and used throughout Asia; this view limited Australia’s ability to meet the challenges of the changing multilingual landscape presented by the ‘Asian Century’. Learning French is integral to the ability of Asian countries to do business not only in Europe (Belgium, France, Luxembourg, Monaco, Switzerland, as well as Canada) but perhaps more importantly in Africa and beyond (Benin, Burkina-Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Gabon, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Madagascar, Mali, Niger, Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Senegal, and Togo, as well as Haiti, Seychelles and Vanuatu). In recent years, bilateral trade and investment by Chinese enterprises in French-speaking Africa has increased rapidly, with annual Chinese investment in Africa having grown from US$75 million in 2003 to US$1.5 billion in 2007.6

Over three quarters of Australia’s international students come from Asia; as do many of its migrants and refugees. Much of Australia’s off-shore international (transnational) educational operations are in Asia. One of the challenges is to demonstrate what changes are needed for languages and culture education to contribute to the processes of knowledge production and reproduction inherent in the global/local flows of students and graduates. The established formula of university languages departments has been brought into question. For instance, it is not always clear how they have addressed the increasing gap between the aspirations that students have for being bilingual workers with effective cross-cultural communications skills,
and the traditional structure of language education which appears to have been unable to broach the education/production divide.

One recent response has been seen through the gathering of 230 languages professionals from 25 universities, who came together in September 2011 for the inaugural Colloquium of the Languages and Cultures Network for Australian Universities (LCNAU). Funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC, now administered by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, DEEWR), this is a new national effort to network and revitalize the teaching of languages, cultures and knowledge, and to deepen linguistic and intellectual engagements with Asia and elsewhere through education for people-to-people links. LCNAU is working to make the reforms now required to ensure all university students in Australia have improved opportunities for language education and recognition of their bilingual—or multilingual—capabilities at university level.

**Local-global knowledge flows**

This special edition of *Local-Global: Identity, Security, Community* is a contribution to the federal government’s invitation—as outlined in the White Paper on *Australia in the Asian Century*—to discuss the implications of the ‘Asian Century’. It argues that there should be a strong focus within this discussion on languages education. This collection of research papers provides concepts, arguments and evidence to engage Australian university academics in the White Paper’s current consultations and debates over university languages education. The researchers whose work is represented here are making a small but nonetheless nationally and internationally significant contribution to questioning established formulas for university language education, but more importantly elaborating pedagogical and theoretical alternatives for framing Australia’s medium to longer-term policies, moving beyond an exclusive focus that connects language and literary culture, to innovations that link language with the intellectual cultures of China, India, the ASEAN countries, Japan and the Republic of Korea with Australia’s intellectual culture. The focus here is on local-global flows of knowledge within, among and across these countries. In speaking beyond the well-worn strategies in language education, these researchers are working to reconfigure university students’ multilingualism (or bilingualism in some instances) in terms of their capabilities for accessing multiple sources of knowledge. Such students are seen as intellectual agents who can enable linguistic and theoretical contacts between Australia and China, India, the ASEAN countries, Japan and the Republic of Korea (many of whom speak European as well as Asian languages), and in particular between Australian speakers of Chinese, Indian, ASEAN, Japanese and Korean languages and these countries. Such students provide the cross-linguistic and intellectual bridgeheads needed to position Australia economically, politically and strategically with respect to the reinvigorated knowledge-producing societies of East and South Asia.
The medium to longer-term policy debates driving *Australia in the Asian Century* seem to have escaped robust attention with respect to the need to increase rather than decrease languages education as integral to the internationalization of Australian universities and their curricula. The provision of languages education in Australian universities is necessarily connected with the provision of languages education throughout Australia’s primary and secondary schools, including community schools. Children tend to learn a second language better than adults.

**Concepts and frameworks**

The analysis by Michael Singh and Laurence Tamatea argues for a novel conception of internationalizing Australian universities, namely deepening Australia’s linguistic and intellectual engagements with Asia through education for people-to-people links. Their analysis places the transnational exchange of knowledge, and especially of higher order theoretical knowledge, as central to defining and constituting Australia’s local-global intellectual connectedness in the Asian Century. Eighty per cent of international students are from continental Asia, and there are also many Australians of immigrant and refugee backgrounds from continental Asia enrolled in Australian universities. Understanding the history of local-global knowledge flows suggests that the likely trajectory for future sources of knowledge innovation will come from continental Asia, especially China, India, the ASEAN countries, Japan and the Republic of Korea. This provides an intellectual basis for re-orienting Australian universities to make intellectual connections with Asia via the students we are teaching—those who have linguistic and intellectual connections with Asia, and those who want to build such linguistic and intellectual connections.

Building linguistic and intellectual connections between Asia and Australia can no longer be considered inconsequential or peripheral to internationalizing Australian higher education, teacher education and languages education. Singh and Tamatea speak to the need for the development of intellectual partnerships between Australia and China, India, the ASEAN countries, Japan and Korea to drive research-based teaching and learning, including languages education. With innovations in transport, information and communication technologies there are increased prospects for engaging bilingual/multilingual and monolingual students in Australian universities in languages education that makes the two-way exchange of knowledge a defining feature of an Australian education.

The challenges Australia confronts in navigating the ‘Asian Century’ entail complex issues that have impeded languages education; the current ‘crisis in languages education’ in Australia has provoked ambivalent reactions. The crafting of the new strategy for Australia in the ‘Asian Century’ is being undertaken by economists, business leaders and an intelligence analyst. Thus, one approach is to engage the analysis of the economic value and the political power of multilingual knowledge and skills to encourage
university management to listen to the calls for the deepening of linguistic and intellectual engagements with Asia through languages education for people-to-people links. Another approach is to denounce monolingualism and English-only pedagogies, while celebrating the local-global presence of multilingualism and the knowledge and employment opportunities it provides to the diversity of students in Australia. Although not evading the questioning of efforts at internationalizing Australian university curricula in terms of educational principles, Lynne Li analyses mechanisms through which linguistic knowledge is exercised and acted upon. Li analyses various sources for university curriculum to consider for manifestations of multilingual and multicultural knowledge representations. Acknowledging the establishment of LCNAU as a significant endeavour by Australian university academics, Li maps the tough road ahead for languages and cultures knowledge professionals if they are without the support of strategic priorities and policy initiatives at the national level as well as the university level that can fuse the economic value and political power of languages together with the rich diversification of Australian demography.

**Dynamic and resilient practice**

Despite claims of a ‘language crisis,’ the papers in this edition also present evidence that in Australian universities, both within and beyond language departments, there are strong currents of resilience, dynamism and innovation despite complex impediments. These are producing modest but nationally significant initiatives to counter the erosion of languages education. Colin Nettelbeck, John Hajek and Anya Woods explore the possibility for a shift from existing assumptions about the language education profession and a move towards its reconfiguration and its re-professionalization as a central part of the task of revitalizing languages education in Australian universities and schools. These issues speak strongly to the politics and pedagogies of language educators, calling for more active interventions rather than just critical reflection. The goal of engaged re-professionalization traced out by Nettelbeck, Hajek and Woods is central to LCNAU and its prospects for safeguarding, enhancing and sharing professional expertise, and for advocating a more unified approach to languages education in Australian universities. The engaged re-professionalization conceived by Nettelbeck, Hajek and Woods is expected to be evident in language educators making a major contribution to the public debate surrounding the White Paper and the establishment of major new directions for Australian public policy.

The everyday teaching and learning of higher degree research students provides an important focus for deepening and extending their bilingual capabilities, thereby positioning them as a source of demand for increased official academic recognition of their linguistic repertoire and re-engagement in language education. Dacheng Zhao argues that the bilingual competence of international (as well as migrant and refugee) students is an important
asset to help the Australian government, and the people of Australia, navigate the ‘Asian Century’. Focusing on the phenomenon of Australian universities seeking to better understand Asia and engage with knowledge from across that continent, Zhao provides a case study which shows how Australian research education programs can position international students as bilingual (rather than speakers of English as a foreign language) through the explicit encouragement of making effective use of their bilingual capabilities in writing their theses. The importance of this initiative for Australia is in gaining increased access to knowledge of, from and about China, whether it be about science and technology collaboration for clean energy, or for political and strategic changes associated with the rise of neo-conservative nationalism. This study points to the prospects for engaging bilingual students in interrupting Australia’s complacency with English-only education. In Australian universities, English-only education is habitually and uncritically accepted with little or no regard given to students’ bilingual capabilities. This applies irrespective of whether these be local, Indigenous, international, immigrant or refugee students.

Teaching languages in Australian universities is a matter of policy and politics. Shanthi Robertson provides a reflexive analysis of her own experiences to conceptualize ways of integrating approaches to sociopolitical issues into languages and cultures teaching. This perspective offers insights for other disciplines that will be expected to implement the federal government’s new policy direction. Robertson contends that collaborative learning can be highly effective in facilitating a deep exploration of the global-local intersections, language differences (and perhaps more importantly language similarities) and language exchange. The ideas presented offer alternatives to the tradition-bound conception of language education and cultural engagement, and reveal that engaging the experiences of international, immigrant and refugee students in collaborative learning encounters with Anglo-Australian students is an effective means for all students to understand the political complexities of language policy and practice on local, national and global levels.

**Learning second/foreign language skills**

One of the challenges in producing bilingual students in Australia is developing their understanding of what higher order knowledge they need to acquire for advanced scholarly, research or diplomatic language. Such linguistic capacity goes beyond everyday language to the specialist language needed to engage economic, political and strategic, scientific and technological development, and business, social and educational opportunities, as well as the challenges of the Asian Century. For students from China, India, the ASEAN countries, Japan and Korea studying in Australia there may be the assumption that the written English learnt in those countries, often using tests to direct teacher scripts and English vocabulary and grammar textbooks, is all they need to know about English.
This does not take into account the fact that academic English is, as with any academic language, no one’s first language. Academic English is something to be consciously learnt—and deliberately taught within the discipline being studied. Jinghe Han has investigated how a group of international higher degree research students from China studying in Australia made use of information in their research writing using English. Han’s analysis reveals these students’ uses of higher order English language capabilities include evaluating information in terms of their research problems; synthesizing information to construct new concepts; transforming information to accomplish their specific purpose; and presenting information to suit the needs of prospective readers. This knowledge provides a basis for academics to make these capabilities explicit to students themselves, so that they better understand that engaging in the production and dissemination of knowledge requires the use of critical information literacy skills.

The debates over ‘second language acquisition’ versus ‘second language learning’ (and its associated ideas concerning how to make a second language learnable) present an important focus for revivifying scholarly research about the medium to longer-term policy driving Australian education in the languages of China, India, the ASEAN countries, Japan and Korea. With regard to these debates, Bingyi Li’s paper emphasizes the language capabilities rather than deficits of international students in the Australian academy, arguing that many students already know a second language, and therefore many are bilingual. Her study draws on Amartya Sen’s capability approach to re-interpret second language acquisition as a process whereby bilingual students explore the choices they have (or do not have) for making adjustments to their identities. Li demonstrates how an advanced second language learner actively draws on different choices in adjusting her identities in new social communities. Li’s study provides an insight into the contradictions inherent in the local-global dimensions of Australia’s policy for navigating the ‘Asian Century’. With respect to the challenges for *Australia in the Asian Century*, Li indicates that the amount and quality of interactional communication with monolingual speakers enhances bilingual learners to develop much needed identity-adjusting strategies which are likely to contribute to the transformative economic growth and change in Asia.

This focus on interactional communication is perhaps an ironic and unintended outcome of languages education and Orton notes that, ‘By senior secondary school, the teaching and learning of Chinese in Australia is overwhelmingly a matter of Chinese teaching Chinese to Chinese.’ In other words, Chinese-Australians—as teachers and students—are making a substantial contribution to Australia’s priority in securing the nation’s linguistic and intellectual engagements with China and the Chinese speaking diasporas within Australia and abroad. While this points to a significant absence in English-only education, Li’s papers also points to the potential for making intellectual connections between Australia’s monolingual, English-
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speaking university students and bilingual students as a means of mutual knowledge transfer and the building of their language capabilities.

French is spoken in the ASEAN nations of Cambodia, Vietnam, and is taught in China, India, Japan and Korea. The constant challenges posed by the university drive for larger class sizes, reduced contact hours and the intensification of academics’ workloads poses significant challenges for the language education of Australia’s tertiary students, and thus Australia’s policy for navigating the ‘Asian Century’. It is within this context that Kerry Mullan analyses the prospects for, and effectiveness of, a peer mentoring language program through reference to a French mentoring program which she leads. Mullan argues that this French mentoring program responds well to the challenge faced by universities in counteracting the high attrition rate among beginning language students. Collaboration seems to be not only integral to forming communities of language learners in Australian universities, but also to delivering on complex—and often contradictory—university managerial drivers.

Understanding context

This collection of research papers offers a variety of novel concepts and approaches for informing the White Paper on Australia in the Asian Century that could lead to specific initiatives for implementation during this term of government; thereby revitalizing the debates over languages education in Australia, and in Australian universities and schools. There is no one best way to deepen Australia’s linguistic and intellectual engagements with Asia. A teaching profession with the knowledge to plan and enact learning strategies that make languages learnable is needed to ensure students undertake the systematic study of the grammar, spelling and writing system. However, engagement with the language’s cultural, historical, social, political and literary aspects are also highly important. Compared with other OECD nations Australia’s federal and state governments have made ‘extremely low’ investment in the structures, including the staffing, teacher professional learning and curriculum development, required to deliver on policies that promise Australia’s rising generations a better future in the ‘Asian Century’. Policy failure is the key reason for the under-performance in all Australian students’ learning of one of any number of second languages in schools and universities.

These papers are intended to stimulate anew policy interventions and fresh research directions concerning language learning, teaching and research in Australia’s local-global universities. What has been achieved here is the sketching of some possible lines for the Australian government, and the people of Australia to navigate the ‘Asian Century’, in particular the argument for a stronger focus on multilingual knowledge and skills, and the claim for intellectual interconnectedness as an overarching driver on reforming Australian university linguistic and intellectual engagement with China, India, the ASEAN countries, Japan and Korea. There is a need for
an understanding of the complex history of impediments to the delivery of sustainable language education programs for engaging Asia to serve Australia’s economic, political and strategic interests. Moreover, to address the vulnerabilities Australia now faces, there is a need for knowledge of the manifold dimensions of transnational knowledge flows throughout Eurasia and the likely trajectory of the ‘Asian Century’. Language learning needs to be contextualized within the complexity of local/global knowledge production and exchange occurring across individual and collective networks within the Asia Pacific region and beyond. Within this, the capabilities and potentials of the bi- and multilingual learners and teachers as agents of linguistic and cultural change and exchange come to the fore.

The research reported in this special edition brings to light the ways in which social, economic and political concerns combine with deepening the linguistic and intellectual engagements with Asia through education for people-to-people links. This has included showcasing initiatives associated with innovations in languages and cultures education in Australia and the recent efforts of the Languages and Cultures Network for Australian Universities (LCNAU). Together these can provide the White Paper with key elements to frame the medium to longer-term policies needed to increase Australia’s linguistic and intellectual engagement with Asia and to maximize the economic and other net benefits to Australia of the Asian Century.

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**Endnotes**


