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For immediate release

Australia's 'Asia Capabilities' need bipartisan support

By Andrew Michelmore

Our geography, political and economic stability and natural resource blessing place Australia in the box seat for what the Australian Government White Paper suggests will be the 'Asian Century'.

In his Budget reply speech, Opposition Leader Tony Abbott made a commitment to work with the states and territories to ensure that at least 40 percent of Year 12 students are studying a language other than English within a decade, up from around 13 per cent now.

This emerging bipartisan support and long-term strategic planning is essential if we are to equip Australia's next generation with the skills to harness the secular rise of the Asian economies.

A theme across our governments, educators and businesses, and evident in the overwhelming volume of submissions to the Australian Government's forthcoming White Paper, is the need to equip Australians with Asia relevant capabilities. While our education sector will play a central role, the contribution of business, large and small, is essential to support this national shift.

To that end, I have now been part of the Asia Capable Workplace Taskforce for nearly 12 months. This group of committed Australian business leaders includes the CEOs of the Australian Industry Group and Business Council of Australia, along with CEOs of top companies in the mining, energy, banking, telecommunications and other sectors.

Australian business understands the importance of equipping our young people with relevant skills to work in, and with, Asia. Our future productivity gains and ongoing competitiveness depends upon it. We must build 'Asia capabilities' that go beyond essential language skills to include broader knowledge of, and experience within, the rich cultural diversity that makes up Asia.

'Asia capabilities' are developed through in-country experience, ongoing intercultural training, celebration of diversity and the deliberate building of links between employees in Asia and those in Australia.

These initiatives have been shown to work. In a study conducted by Asialink and the Ai Group last year, a clear correlation emerged between a business's level of Asia experience at the senior executive and Board level and its reported business performance in Asia.

In this sense, the business community relies on the high-quality talent pipeline provided by our education system. Businesses depend on schools and universities training graduates that are comfortable and capable working in and with Asia.

The Asia Capable Workplace Taskforce looks forward to the recommendations of the Australia in the Asian Century White Paper, due for release mid-year. We are encouraged by the robust discussion catalysed by White Paper process and support the Opposition Leader's commitment to the study of Asian languages.

Bi-partisanship on this issue is exactly what business needs. We look forward to the opportunities for business, education and government to work together to equip the Australian workforce with the capabilities to prosper in the Asian Century.

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