

March 30, 2011

Don't drop Asia in schools: Business urges Government

A group of leading Australian business figures is urging the Federal Government not to drop its Asia studies and languages program, due to end this year.

In letters addressed to all 226 Federal MPs, the group says Australia's future "depends on a bipartisan approach to our understanding of and relationship with Asia."

The business leaders, including Sir Rod Eddington, Hugh Morgan AC and Australian Industry Group CEO, Heather Ridout, say Australia will risk its wealth, harmony and security unless significant government investment goes to equipping the next generation of Australians to compete in the Asia Century.

"The world's wealth is moving to Asia," the business leaders say. "And we ignore this fact at our peril.

"We face many challenges in the coming century, many of which we cannot foresee. But if we do not take up the challenge of equipping our children effectively for the changes we do know are imminent, we fail as leaders, we fail as parents, and we risk Australia's wealth, harmony and security."

Sid Myer, Chairman of Asialink and the Asia Society, also a signatory, said today the letters were in response to deep concern among the business community that the Federal Government may decide to cut its Asia studies and languages program.

"We have one more school generation before China is the world's largest economy," Mr Myer said. "Investing in Asia skills is productive spending - and we now know the full extent of the decline in both Asian languages and studies education in Australian schools."

Asialink estimates there are just 300 students nationally studying Chinese language at Year 12 level who are non-Chinese-heritage learners. Examiner reports show these numbers are falling every year, and the challenge is to turn that around, Mr Myer said.

"The decline in the study of Indonesian is so severe that on current trends, there will be no Year 12 Indonesian language students in Australia in four to five years' time."

The business leaders' letter is also signed by John Walker AM, Chairman, Macquarie Korea, and Chairman, Australia-Korea Business Council, Maria Tarrant, head of the Business Council of Australia, Justin Breheny, CEO Asia, Insurance Australia Group, and Frank Tudor, Chairman and National President, Australia China Business Council.

“Leaders around the world have identified that the world will be transformed by mid-century, and predict that by 2050 Asia’s share of global GDP will be double that of the major western powers,” the letter continues. “Our children need to be fully aware of all the historical, political and geographical imperatives contributing to this global shift and to the Australian story itself. We do our children a deep disservice if we fail to equip them with knowledge of the cultures and the languages of not only the fastest growing region in the world, but the region that is on our doorstep.”

It goes on: “We urge you to encourage the study of Asia in our schools, and to support all Federal and State Ministers of Education in their commitment ... to include Asia as a priority across the curriculum and at all levels of schooling. This requires significant government investment in building capacity and, importantly, demand for Asian studies and languages.”

Asian languages in decline: the data

2010 data shows the size of the task is much greater than anticipated by the incoming Labor Government in 2007 when it committed to \$62.4 million over three years under the National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP):

- On current trends - in four to five years, there will be zero students studying Indonesian language at Year 12 (*The Current State of Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese and Korean Language Education in Australian Schools*: AEF 2010)
- There are an estimated 300 students across Australia studying Chinese at Yr 12 level who are non-Chinese-heritage learners; In other words 94 per cent of the cohort of Chinese language learners in Australia have Chinese background. (See AEF 2010)

Studies of Asia not part of school curriculum

- Very few Year 12 students learn anything at all about Asia in History, Geography, Economics, Literature and The Arts (*Studies of Asia in Year 12*: ACER 2009)
- In Year 12 English in Victoria, for example, while there were some Asian texts on the reading lists, there was no evidence of students having studied them, according to examiners’ reports.
- In Year 12 History in NSW, two per cent chose to study China, while 65 per cent chose Germany and 19 per cent chose Russia. (See ACER 2009)

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