

25th July 2020

Re: Issues facing diaspora communities in Australia

Dear Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee Department of the Senate,

I am writing this letter to submit the proposal to the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee for the improvement of some critical issues in NSW second language education.

I wish to explain the background of these issues. The language education in NSW currently disincentivises or prevents a significant group of students from pursuing appropriate levels of language education. The problems which require the improvement are;

1. Limited support to bilingual education from primary school level up to Y9 prior to commencing Y10 HSC language courses.
2. The eligibility criteria for HSC Asian four languages (Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese, and Korean) limit students to be placed to their appropriate language level at around Y10.
3. Higher language level (in Context and Literature) courses are not provided in HSC Arabic and European languages taken at around Y10.
4. As many as two to five different level HSC language exams complicate the assessment of the proficiency of students achieved and discourage them from undertaking higher level course.

NSW is behind in terms of second language education compared to the other states. All public schools, both primary and secondary in ACT, for example, are required to provide a language program in one of the eight languages: Chinese, French, German, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Korean and Spanish. Therefore, all students have learnt some language there. A similar effort is made in Victoria and QLD where they try to provide mandatory second language education in public schools from primary education level.

Many independent primary schools here in NSW are providing language courses, and some are bilingual schools; however, because there is limited support to continue to learn the language especially between Y7 and 9, our students are challenged to sustain and to improve their proficiency of the second language further.

The eligibility criteria imposed on our students to take a certain level of the language course is another issue. HSC language exams in Arabic and most major European languages have three levels:

1. Beginner
2. Continuer
3. Extension

Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese, and Korean, on the other hand, have higher-level courses and are made up of five levels:

1. Beginner
2. Continuer
3. Extension

4. in Context (formerly Heritage)

5. Literature.

(*There is no “Extension” course in Korean)

The levels up to Extension are equivalent between languages. “In Context” and “Literature” exams require significantly higher levels of language command.

The level of the course in which students enrol is not determined by the placement exam, but it is judged based on the students’ background by the principal of the school they attend at Y10. The requirements for the “Continuers” course, for example, are stated as follows;

1. Students have had no more than one year’s formal education from the first year of primary education (Year 1) in a school where the language is the medium of instruction.
2. Students have had no more than three years residency in the past 10 years in a country where the language is the medium of communication.
3. Students do not use the language for sustained communication outside the classroom with someone with a background in using the language.

The language command in English undoubtedly differs between individual students even if they had a formal mandatory English education. Determining the level of the students by the background is illogical. Rather than their background, which is vague and has thousands of individual variations, the student him/herself has to be focused. The students' proficiency of the language should be assessed by placement exam when they start the course.

Moreover, the students who took higher-level Asian language are especially disadvantaged by obtaining lower ATAR scaling. The HSC and scaled means of the 4 Asian Exams 2019 for example, were given as follows;

		Chinese	Indonesian	Japanese	Korean
Beginners	HSC	36.9	39.3	36.7	49.9
	Scaled	20.9	22.8	23.7	27.1
Continuers	HSC	42.7	39.6	40.5	
	Scaled	32.6	30.4	31.2	
Extension	HSC	44.9	42.2	42.2	
	Scaled	38.1	34.5	38.4	
in Context	HSC	44.3		41.6	44.6
	Scaled	30.4		28.3	28.8
Literature	HSC	41.5		42.4	43.0
	Scaled	24.8		24.3	22.7

(The results are available in the UAS: Report on the Scaling of the 2019 NSW High School Certificate. The means of the course with test-takers less than 10 do not appear.)

According to Prof. Cruickshank from Sydney University, the ATAR algorithm in NSW differs from Victoria where the ATAR of students taking “first” and “second” Asian languages are much higher. The significant reduction of the mean of “in Context” and “Literature” compared to the middle level, “Extension” is due to the NSW ATAR algorithm which compares with the students' performance in their two units of English. The scaling is irrational and unfair, especially for those who make an effort to study challenging levels and those who achieved high proficiency in Asian languages.

European languages educations also significantly fall behind. For the native speaker of English brought up in Australia, achieving a reasonable proficiency in major European languages is more accessible than learning Asian languages. There are always students who demonstrate excellence in literacy in any languages. Not providing the higher level language course equivalent to Asian “in Context” or “Literature” especially in major European languages also depriving our students of the chance of pursuing the achievement of higher level.

Since the HSC final language exams are divided into two (Arabic and some European languages) to as many as five (Asian four languages) levels, it sometimes causes controversial games by students who tried to gain better marks by taking a lower level of the course. Unfortunately, many students have learnt Asian languages at primary school stop learning it after graduation as they know that they are disadvantaged by choosing a language course in HSC exam. It is very disappointing and not beneficial for anybody.

Other English speaking countries such as the UK and the US have only one second language exam, the A-level and SAT respectively. They are uniform second language exams covering all the four aspects of the language: Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing, showing the exact level of a student’s command in a particular language. Here in Australia, IELTS (International English Language Testing System) is widely used for testing English proficiency for the entrance of university students, providing professional visa and for immigration. The final HSE language exam can be designed similar to IELTS assessing all the levels of proficiency in four aspects with reasonable accuracy. The problem of bargaining the level of a language course would also resolve as everybody has to aim for the high score in the final year uniform exam.

NESA curriculum review conducted by Prof Geoff Masters has just published last months. <https://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/portal/nesa/about/initiatives/curriculum-review> It recognises that students have varying cultural and language backgrounds and that these can result in mismatches between the assumptions and expectations of schools and those of local communities, and so place some students at a disadvantage. It also states the importance of the introduction of the second language from the middle year of primary school but it is still in “noted” level due to the limitation of funding to hire appropriate teachers.

Unfortunately, the current eligibility criteria for the language courses have not yet reflected the recommendations appeared in the NSW curriculum review. (<https://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/portal/nesa/11-12/stage-6-learning-areas/stage-6-languages/eligibility>)

To improve the second language education from the primary school level and the eligibility criteria to enrol a certain level of the language course, I wish to make the following proposals.

1. Mandatory second language education from primary school to high school in NSW.
2. The students who have demonstrated a higher level of language proficiency than extension should be accommodated to learn “in context” or “literature” course level in all languages as possible.
3. The enrolment of the level of the course to be determined by a placement exam in all the languages.

4. The introduction of a unified HSC exam for each language which can assess all levels of proficiency similar to IELTS. The students who demonstrated high skill would consequently obtain higher HSC marking and ATAR in the language exam.

Considering the great diversity of Australian society using various languages, the NSW language learning environment can be improved. There are countries introducing mandatory two language education system such as Canada, India, the Netherlands, Sweden etc and they are successful. It would be a significant benefit of Australia both nationally and internationally to have multilingual populations in addition to English.

I am grateful to the amelioration and support of second language learning system from Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee Department of the Senate.

Sincerely yours,

Chiaki Kojima
Mother of a primary school student