

## **Attachment A: Language needs at Universities**

### **1. Postgraduate language training**

There is no provision in the structure of research degrees or in the DEST funding of Australian Postgraduate Awards (APAs) to enable doctoral students to acquire the language skills they need to carry out their research. Given the structural pressures to complete the doctorate in less than four years, this has a major impact on work where research may be published in English but is carried out in, say, Chinese, French, Korean or Italian.

If students have the high level disciplinary skills to gain an APA, there is no systematic support for them to apply those skills to areas which require language competence to do their research. This skews most humanities and social science research to topics easily worked on through English, or in some cases through an existing competence in a foreign language. In particular, few students already have research competence in an Asian language from a non-background basis.

This is particularly severe for those wishing to work in Asia, where the languages are at least four times harder to acquire than the Romance languages. Two recent Australian non-language background students who had received APAs—one to work on modern Japanese cinema and the other on dress as an index of modernity—had to suspend their degrees for two years so as to acquire Japanese skills through in-country experience, financed by Japanese government and other scholarships. A University Medal-winning Australian non-background student working on Vietnamese colonial art and modernity could not acquire the requisite level of Vietnamese in Australia and has been awarded a scholarship to do so by the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. All these students have had to suspend or defer their APAs to acquire language competence, which indicates the commitment and resilience needed to acquire such skills. However they remain disadvantaged in comparison to their peers, having had to ‘waste’ two to three years to acquire such languages and delay their research work.

It would be logical to make research language competency compulsory within the PG research degree structure for all research students in certain disciplines. The disciplines requiring this support are in particular Anthropology, Art History, and almost all Social Sciences when not working on the Anglophone world. Departments in the USA, such as the Art History programme at the University of California, Berkeley, already require competence in two foreign languages before students are admitted to the graduate school. This measure would need to be accompanied by the provision of a longer period of scholarship support for those so admitted.

Most in-country training in East Asian languages requires Intermediate Level competence as a condition of admittance. This means students have to acquire this competence before they go to a country-based intensive course. Effectively the only way to provide this is by an initial ten-month intensive course in Australia before their in-country language studies.

The requirements are therefore threefold: making research language competency compulsory, restructuring scholarship support to give students time to gain competency,

and providing appropriate courses in Australia to enable them to achieve basic competency before intensive in-country experience.

## **2. In the interim**

### **Proposal A**

If the first requirement is met and research language competency is recognised as integral and compulsory, then additional scholarship funds, and funds for language tuition, will be required. About two hundred special one-year language training postgraduate scholarships for successful APA candidates could be nationally funded, grouped competitively around those universities able to provide intensive training to intermediate level in specialized language courses. This was the situation in the UK from 1968, with Chinese located in Leeds, Japanese in Sheffield, and SE Asian languages at Hull. All of these centres also attracted, in addition to research students, fee-paying language students from government and business. The funding required would be \$12,500 fees and \$12,500 living expenses, for a total budget of  $\$25,000 \times 200 = \$5,000,000$ .

It would also be possible to increase the number of students covered by such a budget if a differentiation were made between Asian and European languages, with the latter being funded for six months:  $\$25,000 \times 100$  [Asian]+  $\$12,500 \times 200$  [European] =  $\$5,000,000$ .

## **3. In the Longer-term**

There are broader systemic problems that give rise to the linguistic impoverishment now manifesting itself at the PG research level. To address them we suggest:

### **Proposal B**

That the federal government consider the issue of certain levels of foreign language competence being increasingly incorporated into undergraduate degree structures. There is a serious mismatch between our by now thoroughly multicultural society and the structure of our undergraduate degrees, which do very little to encourage students to acquire foreign language skills.

### **Proposal C**

That Australia-wide initiatives be taken to ensure that higher numbers of students in secondary schools take a foreign language. There is a history of good intentions in this regard. The states set themselves a target in the 1990s of 25%; at that point only 16% of NSW students took a language to HSC—and since that undertaking the number has not increased, but actually dropped by one percentage point each year. It is now in single figures. Other states, e.g. Victoria, do much better and ensure a significant flow-through of non-native speakers into undergraduate language departments.

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