

Match language skills to booming markets

The West Australian, 11 February 2008, p.20

By David Hill*

This month hundreds of thousands of students across Western Australia are beginning a new academic year. Amongst more than 375,000 in our schools and about 85,000 in our universities, many will be making subject choices that will subtly shape their futures.

Chosen subjects open up – or, by default, impede – their employment options and life path.

At all levels of education, most students are missing an option that could enhance their employability and enrich their lives. They are ignoring the benefits of a language other than English.

There is no doubt WA's future prosperity and employment growth will be driven by the economies of Asia. The economic uncertainty experienced after the 1997 Asian economic crisis has largely given way to solid growth.

There may be some sluggishness in Japan, and the odd hiccup with the powerhouse Chinese economy. But long-term economic projections have the regions to our north and west, from the Indian Ocean through South-East Asia to South Korea, , surging ahead, stimulating increasing demand for our resources, goods and services.

China, for example, continues to build a city the size of Brisbane every month, generating massive demand for associated resources.

If WA is to maximise the opportunities this presents, we need the kind of education that equips our students to operate in this complex multilingual environment.

English is not sufficient. Individuals and companies need appropriate local language skills attuned to specific booming markets.

We need to develop a comprehensive blueprint to stimulate and support the learning of strategic and relevant languages other than English right across our education system.

As a report by leading Australian universities concluded last year, our educational policy on the teaching of non-English languages is in crisis. The report urged State and Federal governments to invest in Australia's linguistic expertise or risk losing a national asset. Little action has been taken since, despite the change in Federal government.

The WA Department of Education and Training's 2006-7 annual report shows student participation in languages other than English in Year 10 plummeted by half over the three years, 2003-6, from 53 per cent to 24 per cent.

By Year 12, only 5.3 per cent of WA students are studying another language, less than half the national average of 12 per cent at this level. Year 12 enrolments in WA public schools in 2006 were pitiful in our key strategic languages: Chinese (only 46 students), Indonesian (99) and Japanese (123). Yet demand for speakers of these tongues is strong.

The reasons for the decline are complex.

In assessing our failure to engage young Australians in study about Asia Kathe Kirby, Executive Director of the Asia Education Foundation and Asialink at the University of Melbourne, blamed 'declining funding to support teacher professional learning to deepen teacher knowledge and understandings of Asia'. She added 'You can't teach what you know little about'.

Enrolments at our universities are similarly low, raising concerns about our ability to even maintain, let alone build upon, our current linguistic expertise.

At universities undergraduates should be urged to complement their disciplinary subjects – like law, engineering, commerce, or tourism -- with a relevant language. They could then compete more effectively in the global employment market, with an edge over comparable, but monolingual, graduates when seeking work.

Sometimes fitting in a language can be difficult, with restrictive timetabling and few spaces for electives in many current degree structures. But students should press their case and persevere. Internationally, there is much encouragement. The 61st General Assembly of the United Nations proclaimed this year the International Year of Languages. The UN regards genuine multilingualism as a basis for 'unity in diversity and international understanding'. Like most international operations, its staff are expected to be multilingual.

Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO, emphasised that 21 February 2008, the ninth International Mother Language Day, should 'provide a particularly appropriate deadline for the introduction of initiatives to promote languages'. Will Australia heed Mr Matsuura's deadline?

For the first time in our history we have a Prime Minister who is fluent in an Asian language. Kevin Rudd's impressive competence in Chinese was demonstrated very effectively at last year's APEC summit.

More entertaining were the flurry of YouTube videos of interviews he did in Mandarin. Responding to some scepticism in cyberspace about how fluent the new Prime Minister really was, one Perth-based China scholar quipped he was 'bloody good'!

At least we now have a very powerful, positive model for students. Chatting animatedly in another language may sound unsettlingly 'odd' to monolinguals, but as Mr Rudd exemplifies, it is as natural and enjoyable as using English.

With at least one of the Rudd children also a Mandarin speaker, we have a new image of the modern successful family. They are fluent in a language other than English, not by virtue of their birthplace or heritage, but through study and application.

Such positive images don't replace the need for governments at all levels to invest in and promote the study of languages, to provide student scholarships, teacher support, and assistance with the development of stimulating, relevant learning materials. Mr Rudd's rise may augur well for our nation's linguistic future, but language teachers eagerly await his response to Mr Matsuura's call for action.

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