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Educating Australia for the Asian Century

‘Australia has a ‘language deficit,’ whose precise economic and political consequences have not been analyzed or costed. It is nonetheless clear that knowledge of Asian languages is critical for Australia as a nation seeking influence in the region and for Australians as individuals seeking gainful employment in the Asian Century,’ says the President of the Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (DASSH), Professor Krishna Sen.

Representing 60 per cent of the world’s population and the world’s fastest growing region, Asia will increasingly become more important to Australia’s cultural diplomacy, economic prosperity and sustainability in the twenty first century. Australia’s ability to develop trade opportunities, to promote our national interests, to influence our business and diplomatic relationships and to ensure a secure and cohesive multicultural society, will increasingly depend on citizens who have a broad and sophisticated understanding of Asia and its languages.

It is imperative that we develop an education system that not only strengthens students’ literacy, numeracy and science skills, but also helps them become global citizens by expanding their knowledge of Asia – its languages, cultures, economies and histories.

DASSH members, as leaders of the section of the university sector, most engaged in teaching of languages and linguistic and cultural research, are uniquely placed to help develop policies for an Asia-ready Australia and to help educate Australians for an Asian Century.

DASSH welcomes the Queensland Premier Anna Bligh’s recent announcement of the $7.5 million Asia Pacific Exchange scholarship program, the Federal Government’s proposed development of an Asian Century Strategy and Minister for School Education Peter Garrett’s recent announcement to seek advice on how to boost Asian-literacy strategy in schools. In DASSH’s view no expansion program in schools is going to succeed until we address two issues (a) valuing of language education by school students, their parents and teachers and (b) the availability of substantial numbers of teachers with capacity to teach Asian languages in schools.

We need to recognize the central role of higher education in creating a polyglot generation, literate in the significant languages of Asia and aware of Asian perspectives, politics and cultures.

In its recent submission to the Asian Century Review, DASSH outlines its immediate recommendations including universalizing language bonuses across universities, providing all university students with opportunities to study an Asian language, and providing incentives to universities for setting and meeting language education targets.
DASSH members believe that an ‘Asia-ready’ generation of graduates will help not only to ensure the future sustainability of Australia’s economy, its political security, its cultural harmony but that young Australians will have global career security and be amongst the global leaders of the Asian Century.

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Who is DASSH?
The Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (DASSH) is the authoritative agency on research, teaching and learning for the arts, social sciences and humanities (ASSH) in Australian and New Zealand universities.

Our members - Executive Deans and Pro Vice-Chancellors - represent the faculties, where languages and international studies are taught across 45 universities in Australia and New Zealand. ASSH disciplines currently represent 33 per cent of all students studying full-time at Australian universities.1

1 Calculated from Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), Equivalent FT Load by Discipline by Citizenship Category, Higher Education Statistics Data Cube (uCube), 2010.