

## **DASSH Workshop on The Future of Languages, 18 September 2024**

In our workshop in Adelaide, around a dozen participants reflected upon the many struggles faced by languages disciplines in higher education in Australia and New Zealand – and debated potential solutions. From the insights shared, it became clear that languages disciplines at individual universities have already been implementing many initiatives and strategies to promote languages within their institutions and communities. To date, collaborative approaches between universities have made it possible to maintain a reasonably broad languages offering (e.g. Spanish is offered at UNE through Massey University), but the collaborations are becoming harder to establish and maintain.

While inter-institutional collaboration and partnerships are essential, it is also clear that focusing on action at the micro level will not be enough to stabilise and improve the overall position of languages in higher education over the longer term. The nature of languages is that they are acquired over a lengthy period, with early starts in life being highly desirable for success. At the other end, graduates are far more valuable to employers in business, government and non-governmental organisations if they have learned languages to a high standard and ideally fluency. It therefore makes sense to see languages as a pipeline. As universities themselves only control a limited portion of this pipeline, we need macro solutions that go beyond the capabilities of individual institutions to develop and introduce a whole-of-government approach. Above all, a reframing of the debate needs to happen to transform the overall narrative of languages in Australia and New Zealand. Instead of being a niche “nice to have”, they need to be seen as an essential pillar of successful globalised and multicultural societies. Languages create cross-cultural understanding. This is particularly relevant in the context of rising geopolitical tensions and divergent points of view in international relations. We need to stress the essential nature of languages when it comes to national security, international employment opportunities beyond the Anglosphere and the benefits that accrue from language learning to society as a whole. Languages have value: they are one of the best investments that individuals and societies can make.

At a more specific level, what could this macro approach entail? Governments and education ministries need to show the value they place on languages by making changes to language policies. An example would include the introduction and expansion of mandatory second and third language offerings in secondary schools. This would bring the benefits of early language acquisition and secure the flow of young people who are interested in learning more languages and deepening their existing language skills when moving into higher education. Related investments would need to be made in training language teachers for higher education and in further supporting research into how foreign or second languages (i.e. languages other than English) are learned and taught.

As Prof. Giselle Byrnes mentioned in her presentation on the situation of the university sector in Aotearoa New Zealand on the second day of the DASSH conference, a diversification of investments and incomes is paramount, as universities can no longer rely on government funding alone. What this could mean for languages is to approach financially strong stakeholders outside of university to offer their expertise and services. One idea that was brought up in our workshop involved the creation of long-lasting partnerships with the defence sector and, for example, providing them with language learning materials that are based on the latest language learning and teaching research. When it comes to the future of languages, it is perhaps these kinds of innovative and practical solutions that go beyond the institutional level that are needed most.

### **Further Reading:**

Clyne, Michael (2005). [\*Australia's Language Potential\*](#). Sydney: UNSW Press.

Critchley, Mark and Wyburd, Jocelyn. "Evolution of university internationalisation strategies and language policies: challenges and opportunities for language centres" *Language Learning in Higher Education*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2021, pp. 3-13. <https://doi.org/10.1515/cercles-2021-0001>

Fornasiero, Jean et al. (2020). *Intersections in Language Planning and Policy. Establishing Connections in Languages and Cultures*. Cham: Springer.

Kotzé, Ernst Frederick (2015). We need to remember why we teach and learn languages. *The Conversation*.

Lawrence, Sarah (2018). "Latin is for the Elite'... and other Zombie Myths.", Runcie, Catherine A. & Brooks, David (eds.) *Reclaiming Education: Renewing Schools and Universities in Contemporary Western Culture*. Sydney: Edwin H. Lowe Publishing, p. 247-263.

Mangold, Alex and Pogoda, Sarah (2023). "UK students are abandoning language learning, so we're looking for a more creative approach." *The Conversation*.

Marley, Dawn (2014). "We need to fall back in love with learning languages." *The Conversation*.

Martín, Mario Daniel; Jansen, Louise; Beckmann, Elizabeth (2016). *The Doubters' Dilemma. Exploring student attrition and retention in university language and culture programs*. Acton: ANU press. <http://doi.org/10.22459/DD.08.2016>

Miller, Geoffrey and Neigert, Miriam (2024). "Lost in translation: the geopolitical risks of declining foreign language learning in Australia and NZ." *The Conversation*.

**At the start of our workshop, we gave our workshop participants a selection of prompts and asked them to jot down their immediate thoughts:**

<p>1. The doom-and-gloom mentality around languages is self-fulfilling.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Agreed!</li><li>• We have seen this for a long time in humanities – it's important to face the stats but make positive arguments for why languages are important</li><li>• We need to talk about the numbers, there is not getting around that. BUT Murdoch showed in 2020/2021 that the narrative can be changed with Indonesian.</li><li>• This also applies to HASS in general</li><li>• It's a reality. Stats with the broader narrative about languages &amp; with decline in schools</li><li>• Not really. Probably is lack of demand coming from schools, lack of value by employers and parents.</li></ul>
<p>2. All universities should make learning a foreign language mandatory.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• If <u>all</u> universities did it? Possibly, but it is not realistic.</li><li>• A good idea but would ruin enrolments</li><li>• Would be a risky move</li><li>• It would be great but not. All students have space in degrees/time to put the work in: language study is time intensive<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>i. Yes, not great for accredited courses</li></ul></li><li>• Imprudent because this would require student to pay for something they may not have chosen/understood/appreciated the need/ value of</li><li>• We can't resource everyone learning a language. The scale would not be manageable. Especially given its intensive and interactional teaching and learning.</li></ul>
<p>3. What is the current situation of languages at your institution?</p>

- In crisis, low numbers
- Largely in crisis, but one or two (Japanese and French) are viable at 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> level
- Declining enrolments but still reasonably strong esp. in French and Spanish
- Dying – I don't know how much longer we can hold on
- Low numbers
- Few students, reduced staff & offerings; continued decline
- Ok in one language, poor in another – but we are working on it 😊

4. There is no place for languages at universities, as most people these days learn languages via apps or in-country.

- I spent 12 months in China. I can order a cold beer in Mandarin and that's about it...
- I would love the opportunity to learn a language in a university setting. I learned 2+ languages in high school, and did not take them further. Given the opportunity, I'd love to try this and perhaps try out some subjects I'm already familiar with in my native language – in another language.
- Languages have important links to other disciplines / politics, IR, literature, film, linguistics...
- No! Language are critical to the academic mission:
  - i. Cognitive Development
  - ii. Understanding of cultures

5. AI is the final nail in the coffin for modern languages.

- Nah
- No
- Unless the penny drops that languages are more than code
- Learning is contextualised in culture
- AI should be trained in cultural contents within languages and could be used in the reconstruction of language and culture if used well, responsibly, ethically and in a planned and considered way with outcomes in mind.

6. What are your predictions for the next 5 to 10 years (if nothing changes)?

- Gloomy
- Slow death of languages in most universities
- Less opportunities for different languages to be introduced into curriculum
- Continued decline; closures; staff losses
- Ours will be gone – you can't teach with no students

7. What can language disciplines learn from successful disciplines (languages and non-languages) at your institution?

- Tailoring language learning to the personal interests/motivations of students (i.e. not simply focusing on what students need to learn, i.e. competencies, but why they want to learn).
- Foster interdisciplinary connections & offerings
- Accessibility through streamlining offerings.
- Facilitating study of a language together with other subjects e.g. writing an honours thesis on philosophy in the German language
- Marketing of programs to attract more students

8. Have any changes been made to languages at your institution in the last five years or so?

- Not that I am aware of but as we move into a new university, the languages from existing unis will move across there will be a greater focus on Aboriginal languages
- No, but we are considering consolidating our European languages into a single major.
- Yes: discontinuation of Italian, Greek and Latin; Reduced staffing in other languages; increased offerings in Māori

- Yes: Closed Indonesian, reduced levels of all others; Japanese and Greek available online
- Yes: reduced number of contact hours; risk of losing language in-country experiences (“too expensive”)
- Yes: we expanded offerings
- Reduced staff numbers; expanded sites at which it is taught; online learning

9. Elephants in the room - Covid, Duolingo, AI, languages in schools?
- Hooking languages to anything that is an “issue” for languages loses sight of their fundamental contribution what it is to be human.
  - Is there a risk connecting language learning to perceptions of national risk? (e.g. foreign interference, grey zone challenges)
  - Decline in languages in school has direct flow on effect to universities
  - We have a real challenge because of poor/minimal language teaching in the / our local feeder high schools
  - They reduce incentives to study, make language study more scholastic.

10. Based on Australia’s and New Zealand’s geopolitical place in the world, we should only offer Chinese, Hindi and Indonesian.
- Disagree.
  - Australians and New Zealanders travel extensively
  - Why not consider our languages, i.e. First Nations, heritage languages?
  - This would ruin language enrolments further
  - Situations change if we need to be agile & self/sufficient as a Nation with wide capabilities (including Indigenous languages)
  - Not Māori or Indigenous languages?
    - i. Yes!
  - Never a good idea to limit languages. It cuts off too many other opportunities across international collaborations etc.