

**ASIAN LANGUAGES
AND
AUSTRALIA'S ECONOMIC FUTURE**

**A Report Prepared for the Council of Australian Governments on a
Proposed National Asian Languages/Studies Strategy for Australian
Schools**

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Asian Languages and Australia's Economic Future

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In a world where production is becoming increasingly international, the relevance of multi-linguistic skills and cross-cultural knowledge is heightened. To effectively service customers and react to rapid changes in the economic environment requires firms to efficiently co-ordinate the production and distribution of goods and services across national boundaries. Accurate information and clarity in communication are fundamental to these tasks.

Against this background it is critical that Australia attaches the highest priority to the adoption and implementation of a long term strategy to ensure that the Australian workforce of the future is equipped with language skills, and associated skills of cultural awareness, of direct relevance to our national economic interest. Specifically, this will mean targeting the principal languages of Asia.

1.4 Declining Study of Second Languages in Australia (1982-1992)

There has been a substantial body of official and professional literature produced on the importance of radically increasing and improving Asian languages/cultures teaching in Australian schools. There is a clear consensus in the literature that there is a direct relationship between languages/cultures skills and Australia's capacity to maximise its economic opportunities in export markets.

Notwithstanding the recommendations of multiple reports over the last two decades on the need for Australia to increase its emphasis on languages/cultures education, the actual proportion of Australian Year 12 students studying a second language today is in fact declining.

In the late 1960s (ie. at the time the Auchmuty Report was commissioned) almost 40% of final year school students studied a language other than English (Commonwealth of Australia, 1991: 15).

By 1982 only 16.1% of Australian Year 12 students were studying a second language.

In 1992, only 12.5% of Year 12 students were studying a second language (although this represents a minor recovery from a trough of 11.7% in 1990).

Of these, only 4% were studying a priority Asian language (ie. less than one third of the total number of Year 12 students studying any second language although this figure of 4% itself represents a relative increase on previous years).

Table 1 below details these generally disappointing trends.

Plainly, direct government intervention of the type called for by Heads of Government in their 1992 COAG communiqué is necessary if this overall trend is to be reversed and previously stated national targets are to be achieved.

Table 1
STUDY OF SECOND LANGUAGES
AT YEAR 12 1982 TO 1992 - AUSTRALIA

	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992
Total Year 12 Second Language Students											
• Number of Students	15944	16849	17462	17580	17928	20630	21969	22128	21377	22251	22666
• As % of Total Students	16.1	15.5	14.4	14.2	12.72	13.25	13.0	12.9	11.7	12.1	12.6
Priority Asian Languages/ Students											
• No. of Students	2467	3183	2607	2439	2494	3382	4373	5140	5824	6117	6787
• As % of Total Second Language Students	5.5	18.9	14.9	13.9	13.9	16.4	19.9	23.2	27.2	27.5	29.9
Japanese Students											
No. of Students		599	722	695	881	1266	1395	1918	2555	3329	3828
• As % of Total Second Language Students		3.6	4.1	4.0	4.9	6.1	6.4	8.7	12.0	14.9	16.9
Chinese (Mandarin) Students											
• No. of Students	610	1043	890	854	794	1213	1766	2040	2162	2192	2007
• As % of Total Second Language Students	3.8	6.2	5.1	4.9	4.4	5.9	8.0	9.2	10.1	9.9	8.9
Indonesian Students											
• No. of Students	1278	1542	995	890	819	901	1212	1182	1107	596	952
• As % of Total Second Language Students	8.0	9.2	5.7	5.1	4.6	4.4	5.5	5.3	5.2	2.7	4.2
Other Language Students											
• No. of Students	13477	13666	14875	15141	15434	17248	17596	16988	15553	16134	15899
• As % of Total Second Language Students	84.5	81.1	85.1	86.1	86.1	83.6	80.1	76.8	72.8	72.5	70.1

SOURCES: NATIONAL POLICY ON LANGUAGES (1978-86), STATE SECONDARY ASSESSMENT BOARDS (1987-92)