



Ear to Asia podcast

Title: How seriously does Australia take the learning of Asian languages?

Description: For Australia, proficiency in the languages of its major Asian trading partners can yield important insights into what makes those societies and economies tick. But does Australia possess the linguistic skills for deep engagement with the region? And what will it take to get more Australians to take up Asian languages? Professor Melissa Crouch and Dr Lewis Mayo join presenter Ali Moore to examine the opportunities and challenges in learning the languages of Asia. An Asia Institute podcast.

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Voiceover:

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Ali Moore:

Hello, I'm Ali Moore, this is Ear to Asia.

Lewis Mayo:

As the structure of Australia's population changes, we'll have a population that is more disposed to the learning of Asian languages. But people ask the question "Well, what sort of a job will it get me?" And so we're faced with the broader problem of how to integrate the study of Asian languages and societies into people's cultural world view.

Melissa Crouch:

More broadly there is the benefits to Australia as a society and our place in the world and the region. I think we get taken more seriously when we can show that we have taken time to really understand another language and culture. So I think that's also part of the value of learning a language too.

Ali Moore:

In this episode, how seriously does Australia take the learning of Asian languages. Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne. Even taking into account the toll of the COVID-19 pandemic, there's little doubt we live in the so called Asian century with the dramatic rise of a number of Asian economies.

So you'd think countries like Australia, whose economic well being depends on growing trade ties with China along with India, Indonesia and other regional giants would take the task of understanding what makes their Asian trading partners tick very seriously. Such Asia literacy means coming to grips with the often complex histories, cultures and politics of Asia, and that often requires a degree of proficiency in the languages of Asia.



So is Australia sufficiently skilled to meet the linguistic demands of deep engagement with the region? How does learning Asian languages fit with Australia's national interest? And how committed is the government to encouraging language proficiency? And what would it take to get more Australians to take up Asian languages?

Joining me to discuss these questions via Zoom are Asia legal scholar Melissa Crouch, Professor and Associate Dean of Research at the University of New South Wales law school, and Asia historian Dr. Lewis Mayo of Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. Welcome to Ear to Asia, Melissa, and welcome back Lewis.

Melissa Crouch:

Thanks.

Lewis Mayo:

Thanks Ali.

Ali Moore:

When I was growing up in Australia, in secondary school in the late '70s, and early '80s, and I know I'm showing my age here, languages like Japanese and Indonesian were really growing in popularity. If we fast forward now to 2021. Can you draw us a picture of how healthy or otherwise Asian language programmes are in Australia? Melissa if I start with you?

Melissa Crouch:

Sure. And let me take the example of Indonesian language programmes. There's a couple of ways we can look at it. One, I guess, is to think about how many universities in Australia teach Indonesian? How's that compared to the past? If we go back to the early 1990s, we know there were about 22 universities in Australia that taught Indonesian. Today, there are perhaps less than 12 universities that still offer Indonesian language programmes.

So at the university level, there are far fewer universities now compared to 30 years ago, that offer the possibility of studying Indonesian. And as a result, the number of students overall who are studying per year has declined.

Ali Moore:

And what about other languages, particularly Chinese? For example, Lewis, can you give us a picture of what's happening with other language programmes?

Lewis Mayo:

So with Chinese, there's been a growth over the long term in the number of students taking these languages. But that is directly related, I guess to the large growth of what we call heritage learners, that is people of Chinese cultural descent, who are interested in learning the language because of their connections with it. I would say that the number of people from non-heritage backgrounds that is people educated in Australia who were not of Chinese background, that relative to the amount of promotion of the Chinese language, I would say that the uptake is quite small still.



Ali Moore:

Can I just explore that for a minute in terms of those with a heritage background studying, is it right that in a major university in Sydney, or Melbourne, a Chinese language programme will largely have students who are Australians of Chinese background or indeed students from China itself?

Lewis Mayo:

Well, it's an extremely varied population in terms of linguistic profile, you'll have Chinese Australians who've grown up speaking nothing but English and having their education entirely in English, who may have familial connections to China, but not particular levels of linguistic proficiency, that's one group. Then you'll get people who may have had a small amount of their education in China before moving here and who have moderate competence but need help with their literacy because as you know, literacy issues in Chinese – character-based languages are quite serious because it takes a lot of time to learn to read and write Chinese even for native speakers.

I can give the example of my own family in New Zealand, I have two nieces who are native speakers of Chinese because their mother is a Chinese speaker, and they've grown up speaking Chinese with her and with her grandparents, but neither of them would have what I would call comfortable literacy in Chinese, because they haven't had a Chinese education. That means that catering to the needs of those Australians that, that very varied group is significant. And it is right for the universities to be engaged with that population.

And I would say that the universities have reasonably well calibrated programmes that distinguish between a big range of different kinds of learners, and that for students who actually take the language and persist through to second or third year, the levels of satisfaction with the subject are quite substantial.

But I guess the issue is how many people are taking the language as a total fraction of the Australian population, and also how many people are taking the language relative to its global importance. With Japanese, of course, you have a much smaller percentage of students who have a heritage profile. And Japanese programmes tend to be large, but there are substantial numbers of students taking Japanese at university who have reasonable competence in Chinese, and who therefore can draw on their knowledge of Chinese characters and Chinese vocabulary to learn Japanese.

Ali Moore:

Melissa you've given us the picture of Indonesian, and Lewis, you've given us the picture of Chinese and touching on Japanese. But Melissa I know it's not as easy to quantify as we might think it would be but what about other language programmes? I note that the Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne has recently closed its Chinese and its Japanese language programme. La Trobe has decided to close its Indonesian programme. Just generally, is it that maybe some programmes are closing, others are opening? What's this sort of overall picture?

Melissa Crouch:

I think at the moment sort of post COVID or during COVID, the picture is one of programmes closing. Some claim that on the basis of sort of financial issues, but others appear to have no correlation with the financial viability of the programme. So for example, we know at Swinburne that the university leadership there said it didn't really have anything to do with the financial viability of the programme that rather Swinburne University was sort of refocusing on the STEM disciplines.

And so I think it is part of the broader challenge of championing the HASS disciplines of humanities and social sciences in Australia is also one of the reasons why language programmes are under



threat. And you're right that the other universities, so Western Sydney University, I believe is in the process of closing its Indonesian programme and La Trobe also its Indonesian programme. The Hindi programme at La Trobe was also under threat. Although I understand at this point in time, they have still managed to keep it open for now.

And then other universities like Murdoch University, again had a consultation around potentially closing their Indonesian programme but again, have for now decided to keep it, though in many ways, I think we would expect that some of these programmes where they might be smaller at universities will potentially be subject to review in the future and remain under pressure.

Ali Moore:

And Melissa, do we know – this is obviously very much a tertiary education picture – do we know what the picture is like at the secondary school level, even the primary school level? Because is it fair to say that it would be unusual for someone to pick up a language with absolutely no connection to that language prior to entering university?

Melissa Crouch:

Yes, so the picture, the level of states and territories is diverse. Professor Joe Lo Bianco from the University of Melbourne actually did an excellent study on Victoria, where he found actually that enrollments in languages had actually been improving to some extent, contrary perhaps, to opinion in primary and secondary schools, and perhaps in part because of state government support. But that's certainly not the case, in other states across Australia, and so it is quite varied and diverse.

There is the Western Australian government I understand is putting in support and funding to boost the numbers of students who study Asian languages, particularly Indonesian at primary and secondary schools with the hope that, that would then flow on to universities. And you're right that at the university level in Australia, but I guess particularly for Australian students, that they are most likely to continue advancing their language skills that they started in secondary school, rather than sort of simply suddenly pick up a new language.

And so that's one reason why that pipeline from secondary school, in particular, is really important. And particularly for languages like Indonesian it's more often the case that a student will start learning it in high school and then decide to advance it at university rather than sort of simply pick it up cold at the university level.

Ali Moore:

And Lewis, of the Asian languages that we do teach and that are being learned, do we have any sense of which ones are the most popular and what's driving that?

Lewis Mayo:

Oh, well, I think there's no question that the three large east Asian languages, Chinese, Japanese and Korean are the core of that. And they have different profiles, in terms of what student uptake and as I say, we have the contrast between heritage learners or non-heritage learners. In the case of both Japanese and Korean, I think the appeal to non-heritage learners is a lot to do with things like popular culture.

And in the case of Korean a very concerted strategy of promotion of Korean culture by the South Korean government running back into the late 1990s has been quite decisive in I suppose what we might call shaping Blackpink and BTS learners of Korean and creating a demand for that, which is a



very interesting phenomenon in world terms. We've seen that very recently with BTS's success in the global pop music scene.

Ali Moore:

For those who don't know BTS being the world's biggest band.

Lewis Mayo:

Yes. Thanks. And whereas in the case of Chinese, of course, you've got a complex set of issues. One being that everyone recognises that China is enormously important and influential, but because of the stances that the Chinese state takes in a number of issues, I guess, for people who are of non-Chinese background, there is a degree of what might be called caution in relationship to the learning of that language.

And indeed, I think more broadly, caution about engagement with Chinese society and culture as a whole, which is often very sad, because the Chinese state itself manipulates this sort of sinophobia in support of it's claimed that it is unjustly treated entity in the world system. So there are some complex issues relating to politics in terms of uptake of languages and people's perceptions of who the languages belong to, if you like.

Ali Moore:

Given Australia's economic reliance on Asia, and particularly China, and our geographic position, a little bit of context about why it matters, why language proficiency is important, Lewis. How do you answer that question?

Lewis Mayo:

Well, I mean, a very simple way of answering it in relationship to Chinese and Japanese, of course, is that a tiny fraction of what is written in Chinese is translated into English. And although a larger body of material that's written in Japanese is translated into English, then is that the case with Chinese, that means that overwhelmingly, people are reliant on mediated contact with that culture, which is an extremely unsatisfactory situation to be in.

I mean, if you imagined what it would be like if one's relationship with the United States involved no knowledge of English, and was entirely reliant on translations of American cultural products into say Spanish, the sense of engagement with what's going on in the United States would be shallow. I think that's certainly the case with people who are engaged with China, even those living there who don't have even a small command of the Chinese language, let alone something approaching literacy. I mean, that's a very easy point to make that you simply don't know, if you don't speak the language.

Ali Moore:

Melissa, it's so true, isn't it? There is so much nuance, there's so much around a language that goes far beyond just a simple word.

Melissa Crouch:

Yes, that's right. Look, I think for the individual, there is intrinsic value in learning a language, I think to spend your life monolingual is to, in many ways, limit your curiosity and capacity to understand the world. If you're a curious person, and engaged in a lifelong learning process. I think, the process



of learning a language really opens you up to different ways of thinking about the world, different ways of understanding and conceptualising the world.

And really, I guess, seeing the world through different eyes, if you like. Obviously there's also the kind of career advantages that sometimes get a more prominent place if you like when we're talking about the value of learning in Asian language for an individual. You know, if you're a student who is keen to apply for a graduate position with DFAT, Department of Foreign Affairs, it is a huge advantage for you as a candidate to have a language particularly ones like Indonesian that are crucial to our bilateral relations with our neighbours.

And you know, it's my understanding that DFAT is actually finding that the number of applicants that they're getting for their graduate programmes who have proficiency in an Asian language is actually, and particularly Indonesian, is declining. I guess then more broadly, there is the benefits to you know, Australia as a society in our place in the world and the region, I think we get taken more seriously when we can show that we have taken time to really understand another language and culture. So I think that's also part of the value of learning a language too.

Ali Moore:

And indeed on that and particularly on, I suppose the personal and the professional impact of knowing a language we thought that we'd bring to our listeners, the personal stories of a couple of Melbourne based professionals. So here's Greta Cunningham, and she's closely followed by Andrew Godwin.

Greta Cunningham:

My name is Greta Cunningham, I am currently working for the Victorian Government and have worked in government for about 15 years as well as with the United Nations and with Asia link at the University of Melbourne. I have had a bit of a long standing general obsession with all-things Asia, and I guess I chose Indonesian given that it's our largest neighbour to the north, and highly populous, but I really didn't know what I was getting myself into.

And I really wanted to travel, to live, to study and to work in Indonesia. And the more I learned, the more I wanted to spend time there. And I guess what I really understood is that while there are Indonesians who speak some English being able to communicate in Indonesian, it really allows for a far deeper connection, and of course, that's true for any language.

And what I understood more than anything about language is it's never about just the language but it's about gaining a deeper insight into a culture, a psyche, politics and economy. And I really can't state strongly enough how important that has been for me. In my work for government, I have used Indonesian quite directly when I was working for the Premier's department for the state government of Victoria and working in international relations I worked quite closely with, for example, the consulate, Indonesian consulate here on Victoria's relationship with Indonesia and the language enabled me to build a much deeper rapport and trust than I would have been able to do without language.

I've also used Indonesian directly when I was working for the United Nations in Jakarta in Indonesia on refugee issues. Learning Indonesian for me has been as much about understanding the language as it has been about understanding the experience of being a migrant, refugee, or visitor here in Australia, and indeed, the broader experience of being other or different. Really, it's helped me develop a strong passion for social justice and equity.



Andrew Godwin:

I'm Andrew Godwin. I've been an academic at Melbourne Law school for the past 16 years. Prior to that I was in practice for 15 years 10 of which was spent as a foreign lawyer in Shanghai. My decision to learn Chinese goes all the way back to secondary school, I attended a school that taught us Chinese, I had a number of Asian friends. It also helped that I had a bit of a photographic memory. So learning the characters was relatively easy for me. I then continued my studies at University where I majored in Chinese as part of my Arts degree.

And what the language did for me was give me a window into Chinese history, Chinese culture, and it opened up a whole new world for me, and that world has had a huge impact on me since then. It's been an important part of my professional life. I spent 10 years in China, 10 years in Shanghai, where I practiced as a foreign lawyer.

And without my Chinese language skills, I wouldn't have been able to do the work that I had to do, I wouldn't have been able to review the laws in Chinese, I wouldn't have been able to communicate in Chinese. It was an incredibly important tool for me during my professional career in practice, after I finished in practice in 2006, I came back to Melbourne and continued in academia, and Chinese has continued to be an important tool for me, particularly in my research.

Ali Moore:

So that was Andrew Godwin there and before him Greta Cunningham, two Melbourne based professionals with their personal stories about the importance of having learned a language and I suppose, Melissa and Lewis, for me, Greta's point that it's never just about the language but gaining a deeper insight and Andrew echoing that with language being a window into history and culture. Melissa, what do you think you'd miss if you don't speak the language?

Melissa Crouch:

Certainly from the experiences of my students, some of whom I supervise for research projects, I think, what they miss if they are studying a country or a system, but don't have the skills to read sources in that language is they are entirely reliant on secondary sources and what other people are saying about the country in English. And so, as Lewis mentioned before, I think there is a huge dimension that they miss. And in many respects particular at the university level where we would really be wanting students to go deep in their knowledge. I think that's really, really difficult.

Ali Moore:

And Lewis that was the point that you were making earlier about mediated contact, you will always to a certain extent your connections, if you don't speak the language, will always be through the filter of someone else.

Lewis Mayo:

That's exactly right. And one of the things I'd like to add in response to the sound grabs that we've just heard is that different individuals who learn a language that is not related to their own society will engage in radically different ways with that society. You might get people who's interest in sport for example, and whose competence in Chinese or Korean permits a deeper engagement with golfers, for example. Or you might find scientists whose work on say environmental issues is enormously enhanced by their capacity to engage with on the ground situations, which you can't do if you don't know that language.



And when you think about the incredible diversity of different contexts in which Chinese Australians are engaged with different parts of Australian society, you would think, well, we would want those of different community backgrounds to be as engaged with societies like Indonesia, and China and Japan in as big a way as is possible. And it's not simply about people with high levels of aptitude for learning languages, I cite myself as an example, think of myself as an extremely average language learner.

But I'm incredibly persistent, you don't have to have a photographic memory to succeed with Chinese, you simply just have to spend the time. And you'll get there, it's a very much a skill which combines intellectual propensities and capabilities and willingness to repeat enough to be able to become competent. And that is a time issue as much as a skill issue, and I think that question of when it is that people give up with a language that has to be addressed in terms of strategy for language planning.

Ali Moore:

You're listening to Ear to Asia, from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. And just a reminder to listeners about Asia Institute's online publication on Asia, and its society's politics and cultures. It's called the Melbourne Asia Review, it's free to read and it's open access at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. You'll find articles by some of our regular Ear to Asia guests and by many others. Plus, you can catch recent episodes of Ear to Asia at the Melbourne Asia review website, which again, you can find at melbourneasiareview.edu.au.

I'm Ali Moore and I'm joined by Asia researchers and educators Melissa Crouch, professor and associate dean of research at the UNSW Law School, and Dr. Lewis Mayo of Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. We're talking about Australia's commitment to Asian language proficiency. Given the enormous benefits that you've both just talked about of having proficiency in another language, and particularly given the topic of this podcast, Asian languages, let's turn to that very cool question of why the decline in the numbers and the popularity of Asian language programmes. Lewis, do you have a, I'm sure there's a myriad of reasons, do you have a sense of what is the overwhelming reason.

Lewis Mayo:

Part of it is just to do with the demands of early study, and the disillusionment that people experience when confronted with something that is hard to acquire. Often, one of the problems is that learners come in with perhaps unrealistic expectations of how quickly they will acquire competence. And when those expectations are frustrated, then there's a high dropout rate.

And we know that if you're learning a related language, you're going to acquire it much more quickly, because you've got a vocabulary, and a grammar repertoire that you can draw upon. And so when you come to say, the distance between East Asian languages and English, you're looking at fairly long term investment if you're going to get any kind of return. And I think that's a practical reason why people give up.

Ali Moore:

Lewis do you think that also in that context, that there's a part of giving up because, especially when we look at, for example, Chinese language programmes, if you have a number of people in the course who are of Chinese heritage, those who are not think, "Well, it's really hard, and there's no way I'm ever going to be able to match the proficiency of my fellow students."



Lewis Mayo:

That's true. I think that certainly at tertiary level, the programmes, and certainly our programme at Melbourne, the programmes are very careful to ensure that, that inappropriate grouping of students doesn't occur, I would suggest that there's a broader problem of perception, which is that in contrast to countries in which language learning is taken for granted is something that you have to do. And an example of that would be Finland. Finnish and English have nothing in common, it's as hard for a Fin to learn English, as it is for an English person to learn Finnish.

But we know that the Finnish education system is extremely successful at producing very high levels of bilingualism, as well as very, very successful outcomes that there is in Australian society and in New Zealand and Canada and in the United States. In other words, in the broad white dominated Anglophone societies, there is a general sense that language learning is not something that you really need to learn to do.

And this situation contrasts with the very high levels of bilingualism found in most other parts of the world, throughout Africa, throughout Asia, in Latin America, and indeed in much of continental Europe. So there is a kind of cultural problem that I think is specific to the white Anglosphere, language learning is simultaneously too hard and unnecessary.

Lewis Mayo:

And I think that quite a lot of work has to be done to overcome that perception. You know language learning is considered to be something that's done by people with a talent for languages. And I think this is a mistaken view, language learning should be seen as essentially something like driving, something that any adult can actually accomplish.

Ali Moore:

Melissa, do you agree that this I suppose this perception too hard and not necessary? And if you do, I wonder to what extent that need for a greater appreciation of the importance of Asian languages is something that is driven by government policy, by funding policies?

Melissa Crouch:

Yes. So I'm reminded of something that I, for some reason frequently hear my students say now, which is, "Well, if I don't know the answer or how to a translate it, I'll just use Google Translate."

And of course, we kind of cringed at that. Because while Google Translate may be helpful in some circumstances, it's not necessarily always accurate, or it's not something you can rely on if you're wanting to be precise, necessarily, depending on the language and what you're translating.

Ali Moore:

Gosh, that could end up with some very, very difficult situations, I'd imagine, if you relied on Google Translate.

Melissa Crouch:

Yes. So I guess one thing I want to say, first of all, is the role of the media. A number of years ago, when I was teaching Bahasa Indonesia in primary schools and a little bit in high schools, I was really struck by what students had heard about Indonesia from the Australian media. And at that time, it was all about things like the Bali bombings and terrorism. And they were hearing all these negative things about Indonesia. And sometimes they'd even say, "My parents told me this."



It was frustrating, because one of the things that you often say, as a language teacher is, well it's good to learn this language, because one day you might go to Bali or Indonesia for a holiday.

And my students will go, "Well, no, we don't really want to go, we've heard this country's like this from the media." And so it was really hard to, as a language teacher, I think you're often confronting some of the negative perceptions that the Australian media might have about a country like Indonesia, or at least a very distorted perception that only picks up on one aspect of something that's happening in that country, rather than the whole range of things that many of which are much more positive about our relationship with Indonesia.

Ali Moore:

Which reflects the political side of the debate and the caution that Lewis was talking about earlier.

Melissa Crouch:

That's right. Yeah, yeah. The other thing I just want to say was around I guess incentives and access. And again, let me just give you an example from my own experience. While I studied Indonesian in high school and university, I did want to study Burmese. Now obviously it's a slightly rarer language, or one that's less common. But it was literally, it was impossible for me to do it as part of my degree so it wasn't offered at the university I was at.

Only in more recent years has it been offered ANU. But again, I think it's the only University in Australia that offers it. And so I sort of came to the end of my degree, and it took a while because I really, one I had to find funding and then I had to find a way to study this language, which is I think harder for many of these smaller languages where materials are maybe harder to come by.

It's harder to find courses and the access issue is much more difficult. So I think having structures and courses in place where it's easy for students to pick up a language is really important. And then I guess the other thing related to that is just kind of the incentives. So again, I recall in my year 11, and 12 there were incentives at that time in Victoria to study a language as part of year 11 and 12 studies and there was some sort of benefits to doing that. I think you got some sort of extra marks and students knew that.

And again, I think at the university level, there are smart ways that universities can think about making languages easier and more attractive to students, particularly from STEM disciplines where there might sort of traditionally be less students from STEM disciplines taking languages simply because it often adds a year to their degree. You know if they have to add a whole diploma course to their programme, you're then looking at a six-year degree rather than a five-year degree.

Whereas if, as I understand at Melbourne, and maybe Lewis can correct me on this is some universities where there are breadth degrees to start with for the undergraduate degree, there is actually strong encouragement for a science student, for example, to take courses outside of science and one of that could be a language. So I think those kinds of structural incentives are really important for students.

Ali Moore:

Lewis, that's obviously incentive for students but what about incentives for institutions to offer courses, and that's particularly relevant given when we go back to the point that a number of Australian universities have recently cancelled Asian language programmes. And I know that a number of years ago, the Australian government committed to promoting national strategic languages, to what extent has government support waxed and waned over the years, and where are we now?



Lewis Mayo:

It's been erratic. I think that's the broad view of it. I don't think that any working language teacher at tertiary level in the Asian language field feels that we are adequately supported in our endeavours. When the government mouths platitudes about commitment to the study of Asian languages, we're often left wondering, "Well, how do we get access to that support?"

We tend to be in a situation where Asian language knowledge is a specialised, field rather than something that is general across the university.

That means that it's fairly rare for senior university administrators to have an understanding of what is involved in the learning of Asian languages and what resources need to be committed to the learning of those subjects. And so we're very much prey to the shifting whims of internal administration. And it's extremely hard to get any kind of long term security in terms of planning and the recent closures of Asian language programmes across the country are signs of that instability.

And I'm sure we're going to be looking at a situation in five to six years time where people will say, "Well, how did that all happen?" And there'll be another tidal wave of, maybe that's too large, tsunami of interest in Asian languages, and then it will fade away. This is something that those of us that have been in the system for a while are used to having experienced.

Ali Moore:

And Melissa, let me ask you, I wonder how that ad hoc and that lack of consistency in policy sits with one thing that is consistent in government policy, regardless of the political leanings of the government, is the rhetoric about the vital importance of Asia. So on the one hand, all sides of politics acknowledge our position in the region, but then it doesn't seem to flow through on a consistent basis to the need to be proficient in regional languages.

Melissa Crouch:

Yeah, I think in the past, Australia was certainly looked to by others around the world as a centre of Asian Studies and was really a leader in the field. I think that comes under threat when many of the core pillars of that language programmes, in particular, are shrinking in many respects. I think the government while it has had, for example, these national languages and strategic priorities, if you like, and in the Asian Century White Paper of 2013, that included Arabic, Indonesian, Chinese, Hindi, Japanese and Korean, although it potentially included other languages over time.

While those statements are there in the past, and in policy, it hasn't necessarily flowed through into the funding agreements that governments have with Australian universities. And one of the things that was most disappointing this year is that even that language around national strategic languages appears to have been taken out of the Commonwealth funding agreements with the universities and replaced with just sort of a broader reference to languages, which we're not quite sure what that means.

And so I think the overall effect of that is, whereas in the past, a university would have to advise the minister that they were planning to, for example, close a language programme. And presumably there would be some sort of discussion at the government level about that closure. Now it seems much, much easier for a university to simply be able to close a programme and there's very little government pushback on these efforts.



Ali Moore:

Melissa, at the same time though, we do have now in Australia, this job-ready graduates package, and it's interesting that, that actually discounts the cost of a language major to students. So on the one hand you would think that would make a big difference. But I note that it also discounts the cost of other courses, for example, psychologists, other professions that the government deems we're going to need in the future and that's received quite a bit of publicity but it's hard to find a headline about the discount of a language programme.

Melissa Crouch:

Yes. So on one hand fantastic, that language is now, appear to cost students less than they did in the past. I think the challenge is, is that's not necessarily well known by students. So while the government may say, "Well, this is an incentive for students," if students don't know about it, then it can't be an incentive. So I think there's work to be done both by the government and universities, if they do want to use this policy change as an incentive for students to take a language, they need to tell students about it.

I think more broadly, though the challenge is also that the job ready graduates package appears to sort of divorce language learning from some of the broader humanities and social sciences subjects. For example, it's usually common for a student who's learning a language to also take some courses perhaps on, for example, if you're doing Indonesian, Indonesian media or Indonesian politics or Indonesian culture. But the job-ready graduates package, as I understand it, sort of differentiates between those two groups of subjects, and the student would be paying more to study Indonesian history as opposed to studying Indonesian language, whereas really, we should see those as two kind of interconnected areas of study. And in many ways, your language learning is enhanced by, at the same time, learning about its history and its politics.

Ali Moore:

So Lewis, as we draw this podcast to a close, and we look ahead, how do you think that we get this greater appreciation of the need for language proficiency? I mean, it's obvious in terms of where our economic interests lie in terms of our geopolitical interests, given our physical location in the region. What do you think we need to do to get a greater appreciation.

Lewis Mayo:

This debate has been going on for decades. And so there's obviously no quick fix. And I think it's one where you sit down in a meeting room full of people, and they say, "Well, learning an Asian language is very important," everyone will nod and say, yes, that's quite true. And then they will go away, and none of them will think about actually sitting down and trying to do it.

So I guess, what we need is a broader culture that acknowledges the importance of the learning of Asian languages. In particular, I suspect that there will be as the structure of Australia's population changes, we'll have a population that for various reasons is more disposed to the learning of Asian languages as it becomes, in a sense, less dominated by Anglo-Celtic and European background people. And of course in Western Europe, Asian languages, were of minority specialised interests rather than things that are part and parcel of everyday life.

And of course, the connections between Australia in the North Atlantic world are substantial, and so moving away from that will take some time. But the problem is, as Melissa alluded to earlier, that the approach to Asian languages and studies of Asian societies and cultures has been extremely instrumentalist. People ask the question, well, what sort of job will it get me. And so we're faced



with a broader problem of how to integrate the study of Asian languages and societies into people's cultural worldview.

And this is something that involves a lot of work, and I don't get the sense that there's really commitment to engagement in that work. And we, as overworked professionals in this field, are expected to do this. And we simply don't have the time and resources to do the teaching, and promote the subjects at the same time.

So one important example of this is the field of Asian Studies, which doesn't involve Asian language acquisition, it's supplementary to it, has no backup in the high school system. So enrollments in Asian Studies remain small, simply because people don't have that as an area of inquiry at high school level. And that means, of course, that you don't follow the path that I myself followed, which is basically from interest in Asian histories and cultures and societies into the learning of Asian languages.

So you know, that's one area that I think needs discussion, and I think it's also very important to think about different constituencies in Australian society and their interests and needs as far as learning Asian languages are concerned. For instance, I don't think people think about people in rural areas who are actually very practically engaged with Asian economic and cultural worlds, as a constituency that might be targeted in terms of the promotion of Asian languages.

Ali Moore:

I suppose if we're talking about how to generate a greater appreciation of language proficiency, Melissa, that need to really inspire people at a very young age, to provide a pathway, to provide access? That's pretty key, isn't it?

Melissa Crouch:

Yeah, that's right. I think that there definitely needs to be a holistic focus. And to be honest, I think many of the answers we know, a lot of it comes down to political will and will at the university level. If we take, I guess, four areas, business, state governments, federal governments and universities, from the business sector I think we know that there are many in the business sector who are on board with wanting to see more graduates who have linguistic skills and skills in appreciating and understanding Asian cultures and societies at a very deep level, they know the business arguments for that.

You know, at the state level, I think while we do have some good or perhaps emerging examples in Victoria and Western Australia, certainly more can be done. I think other states can learn from that. But I think there's a lot to do for states to then be working with the federal government and for the federal government to really put its money where its mouth is, I think it talks a lot about the Indo-Pacific region. But we don't really see that translate into concrete support and funding for Asian languages.

And then you have universities, and again I think there is a symbiotic relationship between the federal government and universities. I think universities in Australia need to see themselves and their leadership role in the region. And I think language programmes and supporting students to learn languages is a key part of that role. As Lewis mentioned before, I think we do need to see vice chancellors and other university management leaders, who have come through Asian language programmes, Asian Studies programmes, who have an appreciation for the persistence that it takes, as Lewis talked about, but also just the real benefits that it brings to the individual and to society.



Ali Moore:

I think both of you have given us a very good picture of those benefits. Before I let you go Melissa, can I ask if listeners want to hear more of your thoughts and look at your research? Where can they find you? You're active on social media?

Melissa Crouch:

Yes, you can find me on Twitter. My Twitter handle is "melissaacrouch", C-R-O-U-C-H. There's web pages, I'm sure if you search my name, you can find it. But I would also recommend the Asian Studies Association of Australia. That is one of the academic associations that does try to advocate for Asian Studies and the study of Asian language programmes in particular.

Ali Moore:

And Lewis is there any way you would point people to go to?

Lewis Mayo:

I'm extremely unactive on social media, I spend most of my time learning languages at home, so you can look for me on the Asia Institute website.

Ali Moore:

Terrific. Thank you both so much for, well your commitment to Asian language proficiency, but also for explaining to us why it is so important and some of the challenges involved. Thank you very much for talking to Ear to Asia.

Melissa Crouch:

Thanks Ali.

Lewis Mayo:

Thanks Ali, a pleasure as always.

Ali Moore:

Our guest have been Asia legal scholar Melissa Crouch, Professor and Associate Dean of Research at the UNSW Law School, and Asia historian Dr Lewis Mayo of Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute, you can find more information about this and all our other episodes at the Asia Institute website. Be sure to keep up with every episode of Ear to Asia by following us on the Apple podcast app, Stitcher, Spotify or SoundCloud.

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