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Decline in Indonesian language courses damaging us

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A Perth meeting has heard it is good strategy to keep Australian-Indonesian lines of communication open. By Jeff Li and Annette Blackwell.

Just as Opposition Leader Tony Abbott was proposing Australia halt aid to Indonesian educators, language experts were gathering in Perth in an effort to rejuvenate Indonesian language learning in Australia.

Their concern is that unless the decline is tackled - and teaching of the language is boosted - it will have a further severe impact on our strategic relationship with our closest neighbour. Abbott proposed that the \$400 million aid Australia gives to Indonesian schools be redirected to schools in flood-hit Queensland. At a more complex level, his stance gives some insight into the priority he gives the Indonesian-Australian relationship, which experts say is already suffering - and will continue to do so - because of dwindling enrolments in Indonesian language courses here.

Educators attending the three-day colloquium at Murdoch University heard that the number of university students undertaking Indonesian had dropped 30 per cent over the past decade and that teaching programs had closed in at least five universities in the past eight years. Professor David T Hill, who organised the meeting, told *Campus Review*, said that unless the problem is addressed, government and business will struggle to recruit staff with advanced Indonesian language skills.

“Relationship is based on mutual understanding and mutual understanding is based on communication,” said Hill, professor of South-East Asian Studies in the School of Social Sciences and Humanities at Murdoch. “Our future relies on our ability to work positively with Asia. If Australia cannot relate effectively to its closest neighbour, we will pay a heavy cost in lost opportunities.”

Among those attending the colloquium, which ended on Friday, were representatives of Australian universities that teach Indonesian; APBIPA (Indonesia's Association of Teachers of Indonesian as a Foreign Language); the Indonesian Ministry of National Education; the multi-campus Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia; the University of Hamburg; Nanzan University in Japan; and Indonesian ambassador to Australia Primo Alui Joelianto. Speaking to *CR* on the final day of the colloquium, Hill expressed some optimism for the future. He said his understanding that Australia was committed to improving educational ties with Indonesia was underscored by a presentation from the Indonesian embassy. It said that during her recent visit to Indonesia Prime Minister Julia Gillard and Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono committed to increasing the number of students

studying in each other's country. The flow from Indonesia had increased but funding cuts were damaging Australian programs that could help with traffic in the other direction. For example, government support for the biggest collaboration, the Australian Consortium for In-Country Indonesian Studies (ACICIS) - a partnership between 20 local and three overseas universities that facilitates study in Indonesia - will be wound down from this year. Hill said the cut was "a grave error" because it threatened the most successful relationship between Australia and Indonesia. He said the consortium would appeal against the move and participating universities would try to continue with the program.

Funding cuts in teaching programs were also a worry, Hill said, describing as "extraordinary" the government's decision to close the Australian Learning and Teaching Council at the end of this year to free up funds for flood reconstruction. "Its cancellation has been a great blow," he said. "It seems a backward step at this time to cut funding."

But other factors were at play in the decline of interest, he said. One was Australians' "image problem" about Indonesia. Travel warnings tended to feed that image, he said, a comment supported by Professor Adrian Vickers from the Asian Studies Program at the University of Sydney. He said the number of students learning Indonesian has been in decline since the 1970s and part of that was because of perceptions or image. "If a school wants to go on an excursion to Indonesia, the parents will immediately see the government (travel) warning," he said.

As well as ACICIS, universities have smaller collaboration options such as the blended model and the Brisbane model, Hill said. In the former, one university is in charge of creating the teaching materials for the course, while others are responsible for delivering the classes to students. The University of New England, the University of Southern Queensland and the University of Wollongong practise this model, with UNE creating the materials.

The Brisbane model involves setting up a central language centre, where students from participating universities attend lectures. The Brisbane Universities Language Hub was established for this purpose, accepting students from the University of Queensland, Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and Griffith University to take language courses as part of their award courses in their home institution.

The success of the hub can be measured by the fact that after it was set up in 2009, some universities that had closed their Indonesian programs, such as QUT and Griffith, were able to offer courses again. To stem the decline in the long term, "there has to be an integrated system with increased collaboration and government support to teach Indonesian efficiently", Hill said.