

# The Australian

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## Strategic status of Indonesian language overlooked

- by: **bernard lane**
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Kylie Hill teaches Tanasha, Damir and Tyler the language of our nearest neighbour, Indonesian.

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**GOVERNMENT reaction to news of a collapse in Indonesian enrolments has avoided any reference to the special status of the language.**

Launched in Canberra this week, the Hill report cites a 40 per cent nationwide decline in student numbers at university between 2001 and 2010.

The author, Murdoch University's David Hill, pointed out that apart from Arabic, Indonesian was the only language classified as "nationally strategic" by the federal government.

Yet the education department lacked detailed enrollment figures, several universities had closed Indonesian programs, and on present trends Indonesian will disappear from campus in most states by 2020.

Since 2006, when Indonesian was designated a "nationally strategic language," universities in theory have needed government permission to close a program.

Professor Hill's report, funded by the former Australian Learning and Teaching Council, has been given to the tertiary education minister Chris Evans.

The HES asked Senator Evans's office about the collapse in enrollments in the light of Indonesian's national strategic status.

A spokesman said the government understood "the strategic national importance of languages education and the key role it has in developing Australia's interaction with other nations".

There was no reference to the special status of Indonesian.

And the spokesman implied that like any other discipline, Indonesian had to contend with the new demand-driven system of funding.

"Under the demand-driven system, from 2012, public universities will determine the number of students they enrol in bachelor level courses (excluding medicine) and will receive funding for these places," he said.

"Universities will be able to increase the number of Commonwealth supported bachelor level places they offer in particular disciplines, including Indonesian language, in response to employer and student demands."

Shadow foreign affairs minister Julie Bishop, who was education minister in 2006 when Indonesian gained its special status, said that designation "doesn't have the same impact, clearly, if universities aren't embracing it and if the funding is not following it".

She said this would be one of the issues the Opposition would examine in education and foreign affairs portfolios in the run-up to the next election.

Ms Bishop said the Hill report was "very important and very timely" and she would be "considering it in detail for the input into our policy development.

"I've spoken on a number of occasions about the need for Australia to embrace Asian languages, and I think that this report makes a very powerful case for the focus on Indonesian," she said.

Although the Hill report shows a national trend of decline from 2001 to 2010, Murdoch University did manage to end 2010 with enrollments higher than in 2001.

And a few universities have reported growth in Indonesian this year and last year.

In 2011, the University of Melbourne saw a 29 per cent increase in student numbers. Numbers looked similar this year but were fluctuating, given semester had just started, according to convenor Michael Ewing.

At the University of Western Australia, there were 52 students in first year beginners, said arts dean Krishna Sen.

"This is more than double this time last year and more than UWA has had in an Indonesian language course ever," she said.

The Australian National University had about 100 students enrolled in Indonesian language courses at the start of this semester, up a third on 2011.

"I think we are doing better every year, although not dramatically," said Ariel Heryanto, head of ANU's Southeast Asia Centre.

The reasons for growth at these institutions include broader liberal arts degrees that encourage languages, promotional campaigns in schools, charismatic teachers and bonus entry points for school leavers with a language.

The Hill report's recommendations include incentives for Indonesian language staff to work with local schools and university measures to accommodate languages, such as the concept of a "language entitlement," and language diploma courses for students in often inflexible professional degrees.

The report calls for an urgent government intervention to keep the discipline afloat while outdated and unflattering images of Indonesia among Australians catch up with Indonesia's present reality as a boisterous democracy with rapid economic growth.

Tim Lindsey, professor of Asian law at Melbourne, said it was "clear that the market is failing to produce the expertise Australia needs to exploit its competitive edge as the only Western country in Asia and Indonesia's close neighbour.

"If Australia is to be able to engage effectively with Indonesia a very large investment by the Commonwealth in Indonesian studies is required," he said.

"Ultimately, failure to invest now will cost us a great deal more in terms of national prosperity and security in the future.

"Western countries will increasingly compete for influence in Asia as power and wealth shift from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

"Will Australia even be at the Southeast Asian table -- and if it is, will it be using a German interpreter?"

Goethe-University of Frankfurt attracted 150-odd students to a new 2010 bachelor's program focusing on Indonesian and Malay. Traditional strongholds of Indonesia expertise -- Australia, the Netherlands, the US and UK -- have grown weaker.

Professor Lindsey said the Hill report was "a disturbing confirmation of national policy failure in Indonesian studies.

"Let's hope someone in Canberra is listening. Ken Henry perhaps?"

The Hill report has also been given as a submission to the Asian Century white paper under former treasury chief Ken Henry.

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