

# Learn new language and score good job

By BILL HOFFMAN

LANGUAGE education was languishing in Australian schools, denying students the opportunity to open up career options that are not even on their radar.

Sunshine Coast University Indonesian lecturer Phillip Mahnken said Australia needed to develop greater understanding of its regional neighbours, especially through the study of language and culture.

The Indonesian specialist said our nearest Asian neighbour with a population of one quarter of a billion people offered huge markets for Australian goods and expertise.

He said the Indonesia economy had emerged as among the most resilient from the global financial crisis.

However, there were massive misconceptions about Indonesia with many dismissing it as one Muslim state in an anti-Western alliance (which it is not) or just a place to surf.

"The superficiality and the needless fear are heart-breaking," Dr Mahnken said.

"The language is now struggling in schools and universities. We really need to be directing efforts into Year 11 and 12.

"Teaching of languages in Queensland lacks planning and focus. Principals who care are struggling to find teachers. Language teachers are dedicated fanatics but they can become depressed and worn down. There is no assistance to drive language learning and if parents don't endorse it as a choice for their children, it goes to the bottom of the ladder."

All languages study is valuable, he said, but the era of the "war on terror" means very few students now take up Indonesian while French and German are enjoying a resurgence.

This is almost a return to our elitist, colonial languages orientation rather than the "Asia literacy" urged in government policy and rhetoric.

While Japanese still attract-



**GREATER UNDERSTANDING:** Sunshine Coast University lecturer Dr Phillip Mahnken says there are massive misconceptions about Indonesia.

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ed healthy numbers, he said Australia's future would benefit from a greater understanding of Indonesian language and culture.

He said businesses were beginning to understand and reward employees with Indonesian language skills while the Department of Defence, Federal Police, immigration, cus-

toms, quarantine and diplomatic corps all had openings. An Australian leader in Indonesian studies, Professor David Hill of Murdoch University has praised the University of the Sunshine Coast's efforts to re-establish Indonesia's place as a designated Australian priority language.

Professor Hill said the effort

was helping Queensland bounce back from previous lows.

"While initial data is limited, the development is significant, given Indonesia's strategic importance to Australia.

"It reverses a worrying trend, as Queensland was losing its expertise in this crucial area," he said.