

Action call to arrest decline in Indonesian

With the teaching of Indonesia in sharp decline in Australian education, urgent strategies are required, says DAVID T HILL.

In their 2010 study *The current state of Indonesian language education in Australian schools*, Michelle Kohler and Phillip Mahnken¹ concluded that, while Indonesian remains a major language in our schools, 'the number of programs offered and students studying the language are in serious decline'.

Indonesian is now 'an "at risk", low candidature language' at senior secondary level attracting only 1167 (or less than 1 per cent of) of Year 12 students. The 2005–08 data indicates Indonesian enrolments are declining by an average of 10 000 school students annually.

The Australian Government's National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP) aims to invest \$62.4 million over 2008–11, and aims to have at least 12 per cent of students exit Year 12 by 2020 with sufficient competence in one of the target Asian languages (Mandarin, Japanese, Indonesian and Korean) to enable them to participate in trade and commerce in Asia and/or in university study.

But, while we would all support its goal, NALSSP currently has neither sufficient funding—nor funding of sufficient duration—to achieve this.

In universities, enrolment figures collected by three different exercises² show the number of students studying Indonesian has been declining steadily and relentlessly, at least since 2001. Between 2001 and 2007 the fall was about 24 per cent. By 2009 only two universities had an EFTSL load greater than 30 (which we might very crudely convert to about 100 actual students in total across three years of study).

My own survey underscores these general findings, with provisional data for 2002–09

pointing to a drop of 30 per cent nationally, by 39 per cent collectively in Tasmania, the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory, and by nearly 49 per cent in Queensland. First-year enrolments of more than 30 individual students are now a rare phenomenon in any Indonesian program, with upper-level units commonly falling into single figures.

Kohler and Mahnken found less than 1 per cent of Year 12 students were studying Indonesian. My very rough calculation, based on 2008 figures, comparing Indonesian EFTSL load (about 245) to total bachelor's degree EFTSL (559 440), indicates that Indonesian language load at universities is not 1 per cent, not half a per cent, but about 1/20th of 1 percent, or 0.05 per cent of the total. That is, less than one in every 2000 students was doing any Indonesian.

We have to take the initiative—even if that is confronting for us, our colleagues, our universities, and for the government which sets education policy.

Despite the closure of at least five university Indonesian programs in the past eight years, Indonesian still remains available in at least one university in every state and territory. Fifteen Australian public universities offer self-sustaining independent Indonesian language programs. Five others include Indonesian through arrangements under which staffing and materials are provided by another university.

In five of those 15 universities, there is only a single tenured staff member attempting to offer three (or four) years of Indonesian language instruction, sometimes together with associated area studies (or 'content') units about Indonesia. Across all of the Northern Territory and Queensland there are only three tenured staff members (and a single fixed-term contract position) catering for the entire population of Continued page 5>>

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<< From page 4 these two jurisdictions. Under such conditions, the future would have to be judged precarious. If the current trajectory continues, by the NALSSP target year of 2020, in several states there may well be no university Indonesian programs for the anticipated 12 per cent of post-NALSSP Year 12 students with Asian-language competence, to enter!

We need to evaluate realistically the challenges we face, and determine practical, implementable solutions. If we do not intervene decisively, the consequence is clear: Indonesian enrolments will continue to fall, programs will continue to close, departing staff will not be replaced. We have to take the initiative—even if that is confronting for us, our colleagues, our universities, and for the government which sets education policy.

What strategies are there?

An individual university might attract more students to its Indonesian course without additional cost by simply promoting its Indonesia profile more effectively via its website; being more flexible with its degree structures; offering an entry-point (LOTE) bonus to language-learners; encouraging cross-institutional enrolment in languages and related units to broaden its suite of units available—that is, by fundamentally changing (what one might call) the institutional psyche, the attitude towards language learning and language skills within the university.

How might such attitudinal change come about? A second language might be designated a desirable attribute in all academic staff recruitment, whatever the discipline: a polyglot staff model and embody for students the benefits of language competence. Influential officers, like a vice-chancellor or a dean, have a powerful potential influence.

Currently—at least at a cursory glance—polyglot vice-chancellors or senior administrators are very rare indeed and where they exist, they are rarely fluent in an Asian language. How different would be their counterparts in universities in

Europe or Asia where multilingualism is the norm, not the exception?

There are various national strategies to consider for Indonesian that might require us to put aside our institutional interests.



David Hill—call to action.

Would Indonesian be stronger if we had a national core curriculum; if we collaborated nationally to develop a common textbook or a bank of teaching resources available to all? Would our external Indonesian

courses be of higher quality and more popular if we had a national provider, funded and with staff trained specifically for external delivery? Would the credibility of our graduates be higher if we adopted a national proficiency rating scale for Indonesian? Are the current models of inter-university collaboration in the provision of Indonesian working, and are they worthy of expansion?

What would be the impact if the government funded the establishment of a national centre for Indonesian, such as it has effectively done for Chinese at the Australian National University and for Indian studies at the University of Melbourne? Would such a 'centre' strengthen Indonesian or would it paradoxically undermine the current diverse strength and spread of Indonesian studies around Australia, 'putting all our eggs in one basket'?

The establishment of a key centre for Indonesian studies may send shivers down the spines of staff in smaller programs.

Crucially, what is the role of government—of governments, Indonesian as well as Australian—in the future of Indonesian in our universities? There are indications the Indonesian Government appreciates the 'soft power' benefits—and indirect economic advantages—that accrue when large numbers of Australians learn the Indonesian language, visit Indonesia, and support electorally Australia's foreign aid contributions to Indonesia. But we await clearer signals from

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<<From page 5>> Jakarta, particularly at a time when investment from China, Korea, and Japan in supporting their languages in Australia appears to be increasing markedly.

What does Australian Government funding to universities say about the value it places on languages—and on Indonesian particularly? Has the government ever determined which, if any, of the world's languages are of strategic national importance, and would such a determination increase funding for the teaching of designated languages.

In May 2004, the Australian parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade recommended 'that Indonesian Studies be designated a strategic national priority and that the Australia Research Council and the Department of Education, Science and Training be requested to recognise this *in prioritising funding for both research and teaching* (italics added).

Since 2006 the Australian Government funding agreements with universities do officially designate Indonesian and Arabic as 'nationally strategic languages'. Universities must seek the government's approval to close a nationally strategic language permanently. While I understand no request to close an Indonesian department has been received by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, it is widely known that Indonesian language courses have ceased at various universities.

As for the committee's recommendation that Indonesian studies receive prioritised funding, absolutely nothing has been done.

Other strategies have transformative, even threatening, implications for our own positions: the establishment of a key centre for Indonesian studies, for example, may send shivers down the spines of staff in smaller programs that may fear being undermined by such a concept. Yet I believe we need to face all these possibilities, and debate them. Even if they are threatening to some, if they offer the best likelihood of strengthening Indonesian

studies overall, then we should not shirk from them.

References

1 M Kohler and P Mahnken 2010, *The current state of Indonesian language education in Australian schools*. Report to Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Curriculum Corporation, Canberra. Downloadable from: <www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/NALSSP/Pages/Resources.aspx>, sighted 20 October 2010.

2 P White and RB Baldauf 2006, 'Re-examining Australia's tertiary language programs: a five year retrospective on teaching and collaboration', pp.11 and 16. Downloadable from <<http://www.dassh.edu.au/presentations/whitebaldaufreport.pdf>, sighted 18 January 2009>; the ASAA annual surveys, and my own attempts last year.



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