

OPINION

Is Australia Asia smart?

Kathe Kirby

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd announced a commitment to making Australia the most Asia literate nation in the western world last week. It's not a moment too soon.

The fact that Asian languages are currently on the decline in our schools and no state curriculum in Australia explicitly requires the study of Asia has left us in dire shape for the emerging Asian century.

Only 5.8 per cent of Year 12 students currently study an Asian language and close to 80 per cent of students studying Mandarin come from Chinese backgrounds.

A 2006 study found the majority of children surveyed in one Australian state believed all Muslims were terrorists, with most saying they had learned little or nothing about Islam in school.

We live in a complex region yet currently only half of Australian schools teach anything about Asia.

The Rudd Government has committed to reinvigorating a national Asian languages and studies program in schools. With a focus on Mandarin, Japanese, Korean and Indonesian languages and cultures this is a real boost to our Asia literacy.

But it's going to take much more than \$62 million to get there for every young Australian.

The Asia Education Foundation at the University of Melbourne has produced an impressive range of curriculum materials and teacher education programs to help achieve Asia literacy.

However, the majority of our teachers did not learn about Asian history or culture in their own education and there is no overarching plan to comprehensively address this shortfall with future teacher training. There's a shortage of Asian language teachers and we need native speaker teacher assistants.

Importantly we are in a moment in time to make a difference.

Australia's key education stakeholders have formed Australia's Asia Literacy Alliance to call for Asia skills for every young Australian. The alliance is calling for the new Australian National Goals for Schooling to respond to the rise of China and India and be explicit that for young Australians to comprehend their world and be active and informed citizens they need to develop a sound understanding of Asia. A new national curriculum is being developed for English, History, Geography and Languages. The alliance calls for the histories, geographies, arts, literature and languages of Asia to be taught alongside those of Europe and the US which now dominate the curriculum content in our schools.

We only have one generation to get it right. If you think the exercise of Asia literacy is a luxury, think again. The economic argument is irrefutable. China, Japan and Korea will continue to be our top trading partners for the foreseeable future.

For our children to operate effectively in Asia - and in Australia - we require up-to-date knowledge of Asian countries and cultures. By 2020 Asia will account for 40 per cent of the world population. Mandarin and Hindi will be the most spoken languages in the world. The rise of China and India cannot be ignored and western nations will be competing for this lucrative market. Already the US is making solid ground in education on Asia with a focus on China and the UK has mandated that every primary student and 80 per cent of secondary students will learn a second language including Mandarin and Urdu.

Our proximity to Asia means we have an edge but we need to move now. Our kids will graduate into jobs where workforce mobility is the norm. They'll more likely work in Beijing, Mumbai and Tokyo than London or New York. When they holiday it is just as likely to be Thailand, when they chat to their friends they may well be online to a mate in Indonesia. This is not simply about language acquisition. Core 21st century skills demand the ability to operate in multi-cultural, multi-national and multi-faith environments.

"My vision is for the next generation of Australia's businessmen and women, economists, accountants, lawyers, architects, artists, film-makers and performers to develop language skills which open their region to them," Kevin Rudd said. We will be in high demand in both eastern and western countries if we get the marketing of 'Australia Inc' right. Asia literacy is a big part of that.

This is not just about Asia to the north either. It is about understanding the complex nature of our own identity and ensuring social cohesion within Australia.

Close to 10 per cent of Australians are from Asian backgrounds and more than 800,000 Aussies speak an Asian language at home. Our fastest growing religion is Buddhism, our third largest source of migrants are Indian and over 20 per cent of our university students are Asian. Then there's dealing with climate change, water quality, energy and food supply and no doubt new global issues that our children will need to respond to like health pandemics.

Collaborating with our neighbours, speaking our neighbour's languages, knowing how they think and why they hold certain beliefs will all be an imperative if we are to have any chance to work together to help resolve global issues in our own backyard.

Asia literacy is no longer simply a nice thing to have - it's a core skill for a 21st century Australia.

Kathe Kirby is the executive director of the Asia Education Foundation and Asialink at the University of Melbourne. This address was given on 18 August 2008