

OPINION: Guest columnists comment on values-driven issues in education

Multicultural but still Monolingual:

A National Tragedy and an International Embarrassment

Luke Slattery (*Financial Review* 19 March 2007)

Business educators and business leaders talk loftily about the need for global skills. But one global skill manifestly lacking in the business community is bilingualism.

According to a report on language education before the Group of Eight research universities, Australian Chief Executives are less proficient in foreign languages than those of 27 other countries, including the US, UK and New Zealand.

This blind spot on the business education curriculum suggests that Michael Clyne, Melbourne University's honorary language and linguistics professor, is on to something when he observes that: *"Australia is a multicultural society with a monolingual mindset"*.

His colleague at Queensland University, Roly Sussex, adds that *"we are living in a monolingual cocoon in Australia, which doesn't augur well for our future business and cultural interactions with other countries."*

Discouraging as it is, the language deficit at the top tier of business and industry is to be expected. It's simply a reflection of a broader cultural failure.

Only 28 languages are now taught at Australian Universities, compared with 66 in 1997. The retention rate to Year 12 for languages other than English is about 13 percent – half of the goal set for 2001 in the Australian Languages and Literacy Policy. Queensland, for its part, retains only 5.8 percent of its languages students to Year 12.

Sussex and Clyne are co-authors of the G-8 language education report, of which the Australian Financial Review obtained a copy.

The state of language education in Australia, it says, is *"a national tragedy and an international embarrassment."*

"There has recently been much public discussion on the dangerously weakened status of mathematics and science in Australian education," it says.

"But the issue of languages other than English has been neglected and marginalized in the too-hard basket. It is no exaggeration to state that this area is now a catastrophe in Australian education."

Sussex and Clyne say that

- half the children in compulsory education are not being taught a language other than English in a mainstream school,

- most language students are being taught by teachers who have
 - not received sufficient training; or
 - are not sufficiently proficient in the language they are teaching.

Pressure is mounting on the federal government for a new policy direction on language education. The important thing now is to get the policy right.

Here we encounter another layer of complexity. Some of the most prominent advocates for bi-lingualism and multi-lingualism are calling exclusively for Asian language tuition.

The Asianist case is beguiling. It taps into the dream of an Asian Australia. But it carries with it the unmistakable whiff of social engineering.

Amanda Vanstone recently gave voice to the Asianist case. *"If I were in charge of Australia... I would ensure that every child from Year 1 was learning either Mandarin or Bahasa Indonesia,"* she is reported as saying.

"There'd be now way around it, and they would learn all the way through school, otherwise they just wouldn't progress. Asia is in our part of the world, that's where we sit, why can't we recognize that."

Vanstone is not the first of the political class to articulate this dream. I suspect it has some appeal for Kevin Rudd, a Mandarin speaker himself.

It is vitally important that we raise our efforts in language education closer to levels seen in Europe, where children in a number of EU nations study three languages compulsorily from the early years of school.

But this needs to be a heterogeneous language program rather than one skewed to any particular linguistic family.

Language demands shift rapidly. Japanese was all the rage in Queensland schools in the mid to late 1990s, before a softening of the Japanese economy slowed the frequency of flights from Tokyo to Cairns.

There was not much demand for Arabic speakers until 9/11 and the war in Iraq.

Bahasa, in turn, has lost ground since the deteriorating security situation in Indonesia.

Recent experience with the enthusiasm for Asian languages has shown, moreover, that without any overall increase in the numbers of language students, Asian tongues simply elbow out European languages.

What is needed, on the other hand, is growth in the overall numbers of language students.

For the mantra of globalization to have much substance, Australia needs to translate its multi-culturalism into multi-lingualism.

