

Submission to the Review of Australian Higher Education

by

Alicia Toohey and Elizabeth Ruinard

We are making this individual submission to the Review Panel as professionals in the post-compulsory education sector and out of personal concern for an area of study that we deem as critical for Australia's long term economic development and yet which rates only two references in the Discussion Paper - Higher Education language education.

The Discussion Paper refers to the study of languages as being of "national significance" (p. 63) and the graduate capability statements of most universities rate some version of intercultural communication competence as desirable. This is in recognition of the fact that Australia, along with other developed countries, is in transition to a knowledge based economy operating in a globalised context and that therefore the nation's Higher Education sector needs to undergo a process of internationalisation.

It is further stated in the paper that one strategy to achieve internationalised curricula is by pursuing "better quality and broader provision of languages" (p.59).

However, in stark contradiction to this stated government policy, we have observed a decline in the support of language students and a reduction in the reasonable provision of language education services in two large Queensland metropolitan universities over recent years. This has been evidenced by a decline in the number of face-to face teaching hours, a reduction in the range of subjects offered in the language education field, and an increase in the student to academic staff ratio.

The policy position on Higher Education language education was consolidated a number of years ago when the previous government introduced a funding model that gave extra money to universities for their students of languages other than English. The intention no doubt of this model was to ensure that appropriate pedagogical strategies such as a suitable number of contact hours and appropriate student / staff ratios could be provided. This is in acknowledgement of the fact that the acquisition of a second language requires the relatively intense application of resources over an extended period of time. Other disciplines also find themselves in the position of being of national significance and, at the same time, requiring a certain amount of subsidising, notably mathematics and the creative industries.

Yet, in practice it seems, the additional funding for language provision simply appears to augment the revenue stream from which university administrative functions can draw in order to supplement the financing of activities that are non-educational. We find therefore that, in 2008, the increased funding for language education has not translated into improvements to or "a broader provision of languages".

We ask the question, what is the point of the federal government giving extra funds to a clearly designated end if that money, or very little of it, does not arrive at its destination nor achieve the stated outcomes for which it is intended?

The situation regarding intercultural communication competence is particularly dire in Queensland as only 5% of secondary senior students study a language other than English. It is critical then that the only other educational sector which has the capability to skill workers to be multi-lingual and interculturally competent be sufficiently resourced to do so.

We submit the following recommendations in response to question 23 - *What is an appropriate role for government in assisting the Australian higher education system to internationalise?* - and question 28 - *To what extent are the current funding models adequate to secure the future of Australia's higher education sector?*

- That mechanisms be put in place to guarantee that the increased funds already targeted to the broader provision and better quality of Higher Education language education actually translate into teaching and learning resources for students in physical and virtual classrooms in Australian universities
- That such mechanisms may include:
 - Quarantining a pre-determined percentage of funds earmarked for language students for the actual provision of language education. These funds are not to be diverted to any other purpose.
 - Mandating the reporting by universities of how language education funds have been used against pre-determined measures (e.g. number of contact hours, student / academic staff ratio, development of learning resources)
 - Encouraging the development and implementation of an institute-specific language policy at each university so that language learning can be integrated into the daily practice of higher education