

Submission to ACT Government on the Future of Education

Canberra Academy of Languages, 5 December 2017

Introduction

The ACT's secondary colleges and its senior secondary system are outstanding assets, not just for the Territory but for the nation. As the national capital, seat of the Federal Government and base for Australia's foreign relations, the ACT should be achieving much better outcomes in completion of language studies by students to Year 12 level. This issue is not mentioned in [Discussion Paper One](#)¹ for the ACT Government's Future of Education conversation, or in the [overview of the ten themes](#) from the consultation so far.²

The fundamental reason for the current poor outcome in languages completions is that students in Year 11-12 do not have equitable access to language learning opportunities throughout the ACT. There is no government-run central facility in the ACT for students whose interests are in languages not offered by the schools they attend. In contrast, much greater provision is available to senior secondary students in most other Australian education jurisdictions.

The Canberra Academy of Languages (CAL) was established in 2016 as a private not-for-profit organisation to meet the needs of these students. In 2017, it gained registration as a specialist education provider for languages with the ACT Board of Senior Secondary Studies. In time for the commencement of the 2020 school year, the ACT Government should assume responsibility for CAL's operation, to ensure equity in access to languages programs for students in *all* areas of the ACT. This submission sets out why this proposal should be a clear recommendation to be taken from the Future of Education consultation.

Importance of languages

Language education in the ACT is important for two reasons:

1. Canberra's Position as the National Capital

Of all Australian jurisdictions, the ACT should be a leader in languages learning. As the seat of national government, Canberra has a global focus. It is home to agencies that regularly deal with international matters, including the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade; Department of Immigration and Border Protection; Department of Defence; Attorney-General's Department and the Australian Taxation Office. Canberra also has a [diverse multicultural demographic](#) with more than one in five households where a non-English language is spoken³ and, as the centre for national aboriginal policy, also has the potential to exemplify best practices in Indigenous language revival. These are important natural advantages that ought to be a central consideration in the ACT's Future of Education discussions.

2. Benefits of Languages Education

As stated in the [Australian Curriculum: Languages rationale](#), by learning languages, students gain:

- *communication skills in the language being learnt*
- *an intercultural capability, and an understanding of the role of language and culture in communication*
- *a capability for reflection on language use and language learning.*⁴

¹ Future of Education Discussion Paper One, ACT Government, 2017, https://www.yoursay.act.gov.au/download_file/979/640

² Themes Summary, Future of Education, ACT Government, https://www.yoursay.act.gov.au/download_file/1380/640

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics, http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/CED801#cultural

⁴ Australian Curriculum: Languages, <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/languages/rationale/>

Learning languages provides [cognitive, social and functional benefits](#). Mastering communication skills in another language delivers benefits that include improved thinking skills, ability to interact more effectively with speakers of the target language and broader employment opportunities.⁵

Languages in the Australian context

Australia is not just a sparsely populated English-speaking country in the Asian hemisphere; we are also a small population in a world where speakers of English as a first language comprise a diminishing proportion of the global population. These two facts alone underscore the need to develop and maintain capabilities of our people in languages other than English as a fundamental educational priority. Yet, we do not have a strong record in giving effect to the widely-agreed need to do this. Since the 1960s, [completions to Year 12 level in languages study](#) by students have dropped from about 40% to just 12% nationally.⁶

As noted by Professor Jo Lo Bianco in his 2009 publication [Second Languages and Australian Schooling](#), *“Australia has an impressive record of policy development and program innovation in second language education, but a relatively poor record for consistency of application and maintenance of effort. A large number of reports, enquiries, official policies and implementation programs is testimony to a lively concern for improvement, unfortunately undermined by lack of consensus about priorities and failure to devise an enduring rationale for what is ultimately needed: high standard, articulated, compulsory language education. While there appears to be public appreciation of the importance of second languages, there is less appreciation of the degree of institutional commitment, levels of funding and provider change required to achieve effective language knowledge through formal education.”*⁷ In simple terms, we have a significant capabilities gap between our policy aspiration outcome and what our current education system achieves. This is to the detriment of, not just students in the ACT, but the Territory and national economies.

Languages education in the ACT

The ACT Education Directorate has a well-developed [overview of languages programs](#)⁸ offered in public schools. A document linked from that overview provides the current languages pathway plan in Canberra public schools. The languages offered at each school are not guaranteed to run in any given year. This largely depends on student enrolment numbers and teacher availability.

As stated in the directorate’s 2017 Language Pathways document, *“the Curriculum Requirements in ACT Public Schools (P-10) Policy 2009 requires all Canberra public schools to provide a language program for a minimum specified time in one of eight priority languages: French, German, Italian, Spanish, Indonesian, Japanese, Chinese/Mandarin, and Korean. The policy requires all Canberra public school students in years 3-6 to learn a language for a minimum of 60 minutes a week and all years 7-8 students to learn languages for a minimum of 150 minutes per week. In addition, schools may choose to offer other languages, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.”*⁹ In practice, implementation of this policy relies on teacher availability for programs supported by local communities on an ongoing basis, and some schools in

⁵ Why learn languages, Canberra Academy of Languages, <http://cal.act.edu.au/index.htm#whylearn>

⁶ Rebecca Vukovic, Foreign concept: Why learning a second language is vital to our global future, Education HQ, 2016, <https://au.educationhq.com/news/33846/foreign-concept-why-learning-a-second-language-is-vital-to-our-global-future/>

⁷ Jo Lo Bianco, Second Languages and Australian Schooling, ACER, 2009, available for download at <https://research.acer.edu.au/aer/8/>

⁸ https://www.education.act.gov.au/school_education/enrolling_in_an_act_public_school/languages_in_act_schools.

⁹ Language Pathways Plan, ACT Education Directorate, 2017, https://www.education.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/123396/2017-Language-Pathways-PEA.pdf

some years may not be able to implement it¹⁰, but the ACT's commitment in terms of languages for Years 3-10 is clearly stated.

For students in primary schools and high schools, languages programs in the schools are supplemented by community language programs. The ACT Community Language Schools Association states on its [website](#)¹¹ that it has over fifty schools as members, with about 2500 students learning community languages, up to Year 10 level. Community language schools in the ACT thus provide a sound option to complement school-based programs in languages for Years K-10, but compliance requirements for senior secondary programs, such as those involved in gaining and maintaining registration as a specialist education provider, are insurmountable obstacles for most of them.

Languages programs for Years 11-12

Students may discontinue their senior secondary studies in languages after completing a minor (two semesters, generally undertaken in Year 11). In the ACT in 2016, for example, about three in five course completions in languages in the Year 12 cohort were majors (courses undertaken across Years 11-12, not just in Year 11). These were the students who pursued their languages studies to the equivalent of Year 12 level. In that year, according to the [ACT BSSS Year 12 Study](#)¹², 15.8% of students completed courses (major or minor) in languages; about 8% of the overall Year 12 cohort completed a major in languages.

The ACT, with around just 8% of its 2016 Year 12 students completing a major in a language, falls far short of the national target to have 40% of Year 12 students studying a language by 2024, announced in [Minister Pyne's address](#) at the Adelaide Language Festival in 2014.¹³ The estimated figure of about 100 students for completing a major in languages at continuing level is only about 3.5% of those who received a Tertiary Entrance Score (2,864 students) or 2% of the overall 2016 Year 12 cohort (4,546 students) – a substantial and worrying under-achievement. For this precise reason, the mission of the Canberra Academy of Languages is to complement existing programs available to Canberra's senior secondary students by offering Continuing and Advanced courses in languages.

For many students, particularly international students, our schooling provision is not creating their languages capability. It is merely maintaining, refining and giving recognition for that capability and does nothing to extend second language capabilities of most of our English-speaking background students. Building capabilities is an important educational policy goal that is not being achieved in practice. Students who undertake advanced courses in languages in the ACT senior secondary system are, by definition (under the languages enrolment eligibility rules), students who engage in "sophisticated use of the language (spoken and written) outside the classroom". These are not Year 11-12 students whose mastery of the language derives from their schooling experience in our school system, except those who have participated in bilingual programs such as the French-Australian one at Telopea Park School and Narrabundah College.

For schools, it is often difficult to meet the hopes and expectations of all their families in terms of languages programs. In any one school, there may be small numbers of students interested in each of several languages. Principals are faced with competing demands on school budgets and staffing provision. The cost of broadening students' curriculum choices by running small classes is high, even if there is a well-qualified teacher available. Moreover, if there is only one class running in the language, it may not be possible to identify other teaching roles in the school for which the teacher has relevant qualifications and

¹⁰ Languages in ACT Schools, ACT Education Directorate, 2017, https://www.education.act.gov.au/school_education/enrolling_in_an_act_public_school/languages_in_act_schools

¹¹ ACT Community Language Schools Association, <https://actclsa.wordpress.com>

¹² Act BSSS, Year 12 Study 2016, http://www.bsss.act.edu.au/year_12_and_vocational_data/year_12_study

¹³ Christopher Pyne, Opening address at the Adelaide Language Festival, 2014, <https://ministers.education.gov.au/pyne/opening-address-adelaide-language-festival>

experience. Many teachers are not able to accept a 20% position that may prevent them taking up other employment opportunities.

Having only one class can also lead to challenges, for schools, teachers and learners, since students can have quite different levels of proficiency in the target language due to previous schooling and/or family background. Such composite classes can be a formidable disincentive not only for some students to enrol or continue in a language program, but also for teachers, who have additional preparation for each level in the classes and who may therefore move to another curriculum area or another career.

There are three community language schools that currently have Specialist Education Provider registration with the ACT Board of Senior Secondary Studies (ACT BSSS) to deliver senior secondary courses in specific languages – Chinese, Polish and Spanish. In addition, the [Canberra Academy of Languages](#) has ACT BSSS registration and offers courses for Year 11-12 students to continue learning in their chosen languages.¹⁴ It is delivering Continuing and Advanced senior secondary programs in French in 2017 and is offering French, German and Indonesian for 2018. The Convener of the Canberra Academy of Languages consults on a continuing basis with the President of the ACT Community Language Schools Association.

Options for provision in senior secondary languages

The broader setting of the Canberra region offers both the scale and scope to form viable groups that cannot be sustained in a single locality. The Canberra Academy of Languages was established to do this. It complements provisions for language learning available through schools, through ANU's Extension program and through other specialist providers such as the Australian School of Contemporary Chinese.

This is the first time there has been a specialist languages education facility for the Canberra region of the type that has long existed in some other jurisdictions - such as the South Australian School of Languages and the Open Access College in Adelaide; the Victorian School of Languages in Melbourne; the Darwin Languages Centre and the Alice Springs Languages Centre in the Northern Territory; and the New South Wales School of Languages and Saturday School of Languages in Sydney. In each of these, delivery is cross-sectoral. Some have different fees for students from public schools and non-government schools, while others do not.

In contrast to other schools of languages, the Canberra Academy of Languages is not currently government-funded. As at centres such as the South Australian School of Languages, students may be school-sponsored or family-sponsored for the cost of enrolment. However, this cost for ACT students is substantial, without government funding. During the enrolment process, we recommend that students who are undertaking a reduced study package at their school or college, supplementing this with a languages subject from us as an external provider, may be school-sponsored; and that students already undertaking a full-time program with their school or college may be family-sponsored.

A significant gap that we have identified in ACT curriculum for Years 11-12 is in Indigenous languages. In July, after investigation and consultation with a reference group, I sent a proposal to ACT BSSS for course writing in this area. ACT BSSS now has work under way on this, along with further community consultation.

At present, The Canberra Academy of Languages is running programs as proof-of-concept (with Advanced French and Continuing French delivered in 2017), but by the commencement of the 2020 school year, we believe that it should become the responsibility of the ACT Government to deliver these programs, as it is in the four other jurisdictions – [South Australia](#)¹⁵, [Northern Territory](#)¹⁶, [New South Wales](#)¹⁷, and [Victoria](#)¹⁸ –

¹⁴ Canberra Academy of Languages, <http://cal.act.edu.au/index.htm>

¹⁵ South Australian School of Languages, <http://www.schooloflanguages.sa.edu.au/> and Open Access College, <http://www.openaccess.edu.au/curriculum/languages>

¹⁶ Darwin Languages Centre, <http://www.darwinlanguagescentre.com/> and Alice Springs Language Centre, <http://www.alicespringslanguagecentre.com/>

where similar programs are provided. This will ensure greater equity of access to languages programs in the long term for ACT students in Years 11-12. It will offer economies of scale and will also achieve enrolment numbers that reduce the prevalence of composite classes and enhance the quality of program delivery.

The solution to the current intractable problem in the ACT, where the lack of options impedes continuation in their language learning by students in Years 11-12, is not to mandate learning of languages in senior secondary years of schooling. Students who choose to acquire a second language as a high priority goal, and who pursue that learning intention consistently for several years with the intention of achieving bilingualism and engaging with another language and culture, deserve our support. There are many students who would take up the challenge of language learning at this level, if the programs in the languages that interest them were available to them. We believe that provision of a central facility with good access for all, complementing existing programs in schools and colleges, is an important step in addressing the need for us to build capacity in our community for global connections and multicultural inclusion.

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¹⁷ New South Wales School of Languages, <http://www.nswschoolang.schools.nsw.edu.au/> and Saturday School of Community Languages, <http://www.sscl.schools.nsw.edu.au/>

¹⁸ Victorian School of Languages, <https://www.vsl.vic.edu.au/>