

Languages as a Resource for all

A Position Statement endorsed by ACT Bilingual Education Alliance (ACTBEA), Canberra Academy of Languages (CAL) and Canberra Region Languages Forum (CRLF)

Multilingual Canberra

Data from the 2016 ABS national census indicate that more than 1 in 5 people in the ACT speak a language other than English at home (Figure 1). The vast majority (over 85%) also speak English well or very well (Figure 2). These bilingual skills are of great value to life and work in modern-day Australia. Austrade's website notes that Australia's educated, multicultural and multilingual workforce has the skills to drive innovation and grow international businesses.¹ Bilingual skills, together with the cultural understandings they embody, are important for the ACT's economy in relation to trade, tourism and international relations. Valuing and sharing these skills can also help to foster a more inclusive and cohesive society.

Recommendation 1

- A plan for actions to celebrate, support and promote bilingual and languages skills should be included under the 'Capitalising on the Benefits of our Cultural Diversity' section of the ACT Multicultural Framework 2018 – 2020.

Languages Education

Policy and action are needed to ensure that multilingual skills are not restricted to first generation migrants. Families speaking another language at home should be encouraged and supported to develop the bilingual skills of their children. This has significant benefits for the child, the family, and society as a whole.

The cognitive and educational benefits of knowing more than one language are well documented. As the ACT Education Directorate notes, these include helping students to:

- extend and apply their thinking and reasoning skills
- develop multiple intelligences
- improve their skills in using English and communicating effectively
- engage with other cultures using the skills gained by learning a language
- relate to their local society and culture as well as being able to operate globally.²

This is not to deny the need for targeted and specialised English language instruction for children who arrive at school speaking their home language more proficiently than English. However, learners draw on their first language when learning English. This is especially important for young learners.³

While few home languages are taught widely in mainstream schools (with the possible exception of Mandarin Chinese), schools nevertheless can support bilingual development by actively acknowledging the value and full range of linguistic skills CALD students bring to school and by encouraging families and community language schools to maintain and develop home language skills, both spoken and written. Bilingual friendly classrooms and schools can also encourage CALD parents to visit schools and have the confidence to become more engaged in their children's learning.

In addition to helping CALD students develop skills in English language, literacy, thinking and reasoning, maintenance and further development of the home language is very important for children's social and emotional well-being. Language is an integral part of cultural identity, "minority language children risk becoming alienated if they do not learn the home language."⁴ The home language thus helps maintain family and community relationships and communication. Young people well-grounded in their heritage culture and language are less likely to have mental health issues associated with cultural dislocation.

¹<https://www.austrade.gov.au/International/Invest/Why-Australia/innovation-and-skills>

²https://www.education.act.gov.au/school_education/enrolling_in_an_act_public_school/languages_in_act_schools/languages

³<http://www.tesol.org.au/Advocacy/Place-of-First-Language>

⁴ 'The Advantages of Bilingualism' National Literacy Trust UK <https://literacytrust.org.uk/resources/understanding-bilingualism-early-years/> [accessed 14/10/18]

Therefore, support for all languages in mainstream schools would assist CALD students to succeed at school and to strengthen their personal and social capacities for life and work in the 21st century. Acknowledging and actively capitalising on the languages of the children and the wider school community can also benefit the education of all students. It can add to the language and intercultural awareness of all.

Recommendation 2

The Multicultural portfolio should work closely with the Education portfolio to promote language learning within mainstream schools and in cooperation with families, the broader school community and community language schools. This will help:

- ensure all CALD students reach their full potential
- enrich the educational experience of all students - in language learning plus other areas of the curriculum e.g. intercultural education
- improve school relations with CALD families, improving the level and quality of parental engagement with school
- empower parents to help develop their children's language, cognitive and pre-literacy skills.

Recommendation 3

- The ACT Multicultural portfolio cooperate with the Education portfolio to develop a comprehensive Languages Education Policy to complement the forthcoming Language Service Policy.

Community Language Schools

Over 2500 school-aged students attend Community language schools (CLS) in the ACT, which provide programs in more than 30 different languages. These CLS are potentially cost-effective hubs of language learning that could greatly contribute to the education of the CALD communities and promote language learning and intercultural understanding in the ACT more broadly.

However, CLS in the ACT are not as well valued, supported and linked with mainstream educational providers as in some other jurisdictions – for example NSW and Victoria. CLS in the ACT require guidance and assistance to further develop their curricula and teaching skills to raise the quality of education they provide. Failure to invest in CLS is a missed opportunity for all parties, most importantly students. Fostering the connections between mainstream and CLS schools will enable the transfer of language skills and enhance perceptions of language learning and the many cultures that make up our ACT community.

Other jurisdictions and bodies, such as Community Languages Australia, the umbrella body for all State and Territory Ethnic/Community Languages Schools Associations and Federations, and the ACT Modern Languages Teachers' Association, which provides professional development to CLS, can provide advice to help capitalise on the potential of CLS to promote bilingual skills and to foster a more inclusive, cohesive and creative ACT society.

Recommendation 4

- The Multicultural portfolio consult with the community and relevant bodies within and outside the ACT to plan how to best support CLS so they can fulfil their potential as valuable resources for ACT students, their families and all mainstream schools and also how to support continuation of language studies for students in Years 11-12.

Recommendation 5

- The Recommendations in this paper should be considered for inclusion in the topics to be discussed at the ACT Multicultural Summit in November 2018.

Figure 1 Language spoken at home – Summary

Australian Capital Territory - Total persons (Usual residence)	2016			2011			Change 2011 to 2016
	Number	%	Australia %	Number	%	Australia %	
Speaks English only	288,986	72.7	72.7	278,025	77.8	76.8	+10,961
Non-English total	86,668	21.8	20.8	64,624	18.1	18.2	+22,044
Not stated	21,739	5.5	6.5	14,490	4.1	5.0	+7,249
Total Population	397,393	100.0	100.0	357,139	100.0	100.0	+40,254

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, [Census of Population and Housing](#) 2011 and 2016. Compiled and presented by [.id](#), the population experts.
(Usual residence data)

Figure 2 Proficiency in English

Australian Capital Territory - Total persons (Usual residence)	2016			2011			Change 2011 to 2016
	Number	%	Australia %	Number	%	Australia %	
Speaks English only	288,990	72.7	72.7	278,035	77.8	76.8	+10,955
Speaks another language, and English well or very well	76,249	19.2	17.4	56,949	15.9	15.2	+19,300
Speaks another language, and English not well or not at all	10,566	2.7	3.5	7,810	2.2	3.0	+2,756
Not stated	21,595	5.4	6.4	14,412	4.0	5.0	+7,183
Total population	397,400	100.0	100.0	357,206	100.0	100.0	+40,194

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, [Census of Population and Housing](#) 2011 and 2016. Compiled and presented by [.id](#), the population experts.
(Usual residence data)