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Swings and roundabouts: changes in language offerings at Australian universities 2005-2011

Kerry S. Dunne

University of Wollongong, kdunne@uow.edu.au

Marko Pavlyshyn

Monash University

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THE NEXT STEP:

**Introducing the Languages and Cultures
Network for Australian Universities**

**Selected Proceedings of the Inaugural
LCNAU Colloquium**

Melbourne, 26-28 September 2011

Edited by John Hajek, Colin Nettelbeck and Anya Woods



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Office for Learning and Teaching
Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education
GPO Box 9880,
Location code N255EL10
Sydney NSW 2001
learningandteaching@deewr.gov.au

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Kerry DUNNE and Marko PAVLYSHYN

University of Wollongong and Monash University

Swings and roundabouts: Changes in language offerings at Australian universities 2005–2011

Abstract

In this study we report on changes in language offerings in Australian universities for the period 2005–2011, focusing on languages with small enrolments. We also give a progress report on collaborative arrangements that were introduced to ensure wider availability of language programs. These programs were surveyed most recently in the 2009 DASSH project on collaborative models for the provision of languages in Australian universities (Winter 2009). We find that there has been an increase in the number of less commonly taught languages (LCTLs) offered across the tertiary sector. However, it is not the case that all of these languages are institutionally secure, and we call for continued monitoring of the country's linguistic ecology.

1. Introduction

Over the last thirty years, there have been a large number of studies and reports on the state of language policy (e.g. Lo Bianco 1987) and language teaching at Australian universities (e.g. Leal, Bettoni and Malcolm 1991; Bettoni and Leal 1994; Baldauf et al. 1995; White and Baldauf 2006; and Lo Bianco and Gvozdenko 2006). In this article we present data on the languages on offer at Australian universities at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. The data derive from a survey conducted in mid-2011 and build on earlier studies that presented a picture of the languages taught at Australian universities. Of these, the two volume *Widening our horizons: Report on the review of the teaching of modern languages in higher education* (Leal, Bettoni and Malcolm 1991) and *Re-examining Australia's tertiary language programs: A five year retrospective on teaching and collaboration* (White and Baldauf 2006) give the most comprehensive picture of language programs at Australian universities. Other studies, while still relevant, focus on specific languages — e.g. Asian languages (Ingleson 1989); Chinese (Liu and Lo Bianco 2007) — or other categories such as low candidature languages (Baldauf et al. 1995; Mühlhäusler 1996).

The data discussed in this article derive primarily from a desktop survey of university websites.¹ This was not entirely unproblematic. As with any web-based survey, the data are only as good as the source sites. Some websites proved to be inaccurate as they had not been updated to reflect changes in the university's language portfolio. Where problems were identified, the data were checked and corrected. The initial survey was augmented with personal phone and email contacts with colleagues at the universities concerned.

A lack of uniformity in university organizational structures added to the challenge of putting together a comprehensive list of language programs on offer. The organizational location of language programs varies from institution to institution. This contributed to some initial problems with the data. Indigenous languages, for example, are often not located in faculties, although the individual subjects are sometimes listed as undergraduate subjects. Rather, they are located in administrative units such as centres for Indigenous students. Pitjantjatjara is offered as a summer school in the Unaipon College at the University of South Australia. Similarly, *Speaking Gamilaraay 1* and *Speaking Gamilaraay 2* are taught in the Koori Centre at the University of Sydney.

The final data set presents a picture of language offerings across the country at the time of writing. However, the cancellation of a collaborative venture at a regional university, James Cook University, and the possible withdrawal of a Japanese language program at a metropolitan university (Matchett 2011), both announced at the end of 2011, indicate that the data will need to be monitored and checked for accuracy at frequent intervals.

2. Data

The languages offered at Australian universities were divided into the following categories: widely taught languages (taught in more than 50% of the universities); moderately taught languages (taught in fewer than 50% and more than 10% of the universities) and less commonly taught languages (taught in fewer than 10% of the universities). To assess changes across the sector over the past six years, the data were compared with White and Baldauf's (2006) data for the period 2001–2005 and, for indications of longer term trends, with Leal, Bettoni and Malcolm's (1991) data collected for the year 1990. (See Appendix.)

3. Discussion

Assessment of the state of languages across the tertiary sector differs depending on the variable being considered. The first variable is the selection of languages taught. Our data demonstrate that the same languages tend to be taught across the country: French, German, Italian, Indonesian, Japanese, Mandarin and Spanish. This membership of widely taught languages group differs from Bettoni and Leal's list (1994: 23) only by the addition in the last 20 years of Spanish.

The relative stability of the widely taught languages in maintaining their position has been facilitated firstly by university business models that require universities to make a profit or at least break even. Student choice is the determining factor rather than considerations such as ensuring that a range of languages is offered across the country as a whole. In such a climate, university administrators are not inclined to invest in staffing to enhance the intellectual capital of the country. Indeed, they would be negligent if they did so, thus incurring a loss for their university and thereby jeopardizing students' opportunities and staff salaries. Secondly, government policies have further entrenched some languages by directing funding programs to specific, strategically significant languages, such as Asian languages. The National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools (NALSAS 1994/1995–2002) and National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP 2008/2009–2011/2012) specifically emphasized Indonesian, Korean, Japanese and Mandarin.

A second variable to be considered is the number of languages being taught in the tertiary sector. There has been no decrease in the absolute number of languages on offer, rather an increase: 45 languages were taught to some degree in 2011 compared with 34 in 2006 (White and Baldauf 2006: 8). In addition to the seven widely taught languages, there are six moderately taught languages, and 32 less commonly taught languages. The increase in the total number of languages on offer may be more apparent than real, however, since White and Baldauf comment that data on a number of 'specialist' languages were not available (2006: 7), so that some languages listed as 'not taught recently' may in fact have been offered to some extent. In 1990, 40 languages were taught in Australian universities, a number that

did not include indigenous languages since the government's terms of reference for their report had specifically excluded these languages (Bettoni and Leal 1994: 22).

There have been increases in the number of sites at which some specific languages (such as Arabic, Mandarin and Spanish) are taught. For other languages (such as Thai, Yiddish, and Ukrainian) the number of sites has decreased. A fifth variable, the number of less commonly taught languages (LCTLs) available, also shows an increase (but see below). In their 2006 report, White and Baldauf list 20 LCTLs as on offer, and a further 38 LCTLs as not having been taught in the recent past:

Akkadian, Aramaic, Balinese, Bengali, Breton, Burmese, Cantonese, Cambodian, Catalan, Coptic, Czech, Dutch, Egyptian, Galician, Icelandic, Irish, Pali, Javanese, Javanese (Old) Kaurna, Latvian, Lithuanian, Malay, Maltese, Minangkabau, Occitan- Pitjantjatjara, Portuguese, Rumanian, Tagalog, Scottish, Slovenian, Sundanese, Syriac, Tibetan, Ugaritic, Urdu, Welsh. (2006: 59–60)

While our data show that some LCTLs on offer in 2005 have been subsequently cut, others are being introduced or reintroduced. Macedonian and Serbian are no longer taught at any tertiary institution in Australia, but Akkadian, Aramaic, Balinese, Burmese, Cantonese, (Ancient) Egyptian, Javanese, and Pitjantjatjara are being taught, albeit typically on a restricted scale. Moreover, a major in Portuguese is being introduced in 2012 at the University of Queensland, after previously being available only as a minor sequence at the Australian National University and La Trobe University.

The increase in the number of less commonly taught languages (LCTLs) on offer is the result of efforts by committed academics and administrators and is to be applauded. However, the contribution to the linguistic expertise of the nation is perhaps less than it may appear. A wide range of LCTLs is available only as individual subjects, minors or as summer schools, and not as majors. Several are offered irregularly on the basis of demand, generally to researchers and higher degree students. Subjects focusing on developing cultural awareness and cross-cultural knowledge are not necessarily also offered. Despite the commendable efforts of the Australian National University in offering the greatest number of LCTLs, it is nevertheless of concern that the majority of LCTLs is offered by one institution. Baldauf et al. (1995) noted a similar concentration in 1994: two thirds of the 37 LCTLs were then taught by one institution. The situation is both better and worse today. 50% of the LCTLs are located at the Australian National University, indicating that the LCTLs are more widely distributed. However, whereas 15 institutions offered LCTLs in 1994, in 2011 the number had declined to 9.² Should support for offering them evaporate, there would be a large decrease in language offerings, and a corresponding increase in the concentration of LCTLs at particular institutions.

If the variable of the availability of languages programs in metropolitan and regional universities is considered, the picture is less positive. This is a significant variable if regional students are to enjoy equality in educational opportunities and be enabled to compete in a globalised economy on the same footing as their

metropolitan counterparts. The data presented in the Appendix need to be analysed to show not only the number of universities offering a particular language in each state, but also how many of these institutions are in the major cities, and how many are regional or, like Open Universities Australia, enable regional students to study languages. If all institutions offering languages are within major metropolitan centres, then the nation's linguistic ecology may be less healthy than it at first appears. Our data show that languages are more likely to be offered in metropolitan universities than in regional institutions. Indeed, there are a number of universities, all regional, that have no languages on offer (e.g. Ballarat University, Charles Sturt University, Central Queensland University, Southern Cross University), an increase compared to the 1990s when two universities, Deakin University and University of Technology Sydney, did not teach any languages other than English (Bettoni and Leal 1994: 22). If a metropolitan institution were not to offer any language program, students would have other options. They would be able to travel across town to study at another institution. As the universities without language programs in their portfolio are regional institutions and usually the sole tertiary provider in the city, this option is not available to students. Some regional universities, such as the University of Newcastle and James Cook University, have been able to continue offering a wide range of languages by entering into collaborative ventures with other providers. University of Newcastle's language portfolio of French and Mandarin has been augmented by German, which is delivered in a cooperative arrangement with the University of New England. James Cook University expanded its offerings of French and Japanese by entering into a cooperative agreement with the University of New England for German, Italian and Mandarin. Collaborative ventures are vulnerable, however, to the constraints of the business model discussed above, and at the end of 2011 James Cook University decided not to renew its contractual arrangement with the University of New England, the distance provider, thereby losing three languages from its portfolio from 2012.

Government policy — and the availability of funds — have played a key role in influencing institutional decisions on language programs. The development of collaborative programs for delivering languages along with other disciplines was encouraged by the Australian government's Collaboration and Structural Reform (CASR) Fund (2004–2007). The subsequent encouragement for universities to diversify institutional missions and to address niche areas, supported by the Diversity and Structural Adjustment (DASA) Fund (2008–2011), resulted in the rationalization of offerings and the demise of some of the collaborative schemes. The Deans of Arts, Social Science and Humanities, recognizing the importance of language proficiency for the humanities, undertook a CASR-funded study and trial of six different collaborative models for delivering language teaching (Winter 2009).

Six collaborations were trialled. Four continued beyond the trial period, but only two remain active at the time of writing (2012). The most long-lasting and therefore most successful is the collaboration between the University of the Sunshine Coast, University of New England, University of Tasmania, and Charles Darwin University

for an in-country Indonesian program in Lombok. The Flinders University and Charles Darwin University collaboration to deliver Modern Greek is ongoing; however, undergraduate numbers declined sharply in 2010-11. The project remains viable nevertheless, because of marginal telecommunications costs and support from the Greek community. The Graduate Diploma in Modern Greek had a strong initial enrolment that has not been repeated and there were no students enrolled in 2011. The collaboration covering Arabic and Italian between Deakin University and the University of South Australia was in operation from 2008-2011. Enrolment was asymmetrical with strong student numbers in Italian, but fewer in Arabic, and the resultant financial implications were a challenge to the program's viability. The University of New England delivered Mandarin to James Cook University from 2008 until the end of 2011, when James Cook University did not renew the contract as already noted. The German Honours project between University of Western Australia, Monash University and Australian National University was moderately successful but has not continued, in part due to concern about losing valuable future postgraduate students to the collaborating partner universities (Winter 2009: 104-105). The Classics project (University of New England, University of Newcastle and University of Southern Queensland) failed to achieve its aims: Latin was not delivered to the University of Southern Queensland as that university elected not to proceed with the collaborative trial. The University of Newcastle appointed staff to teach Latin, rather than implement the collaboration. Classical Greek was delivered to the University of Newcastle successfully for a brief period and ceased when that university reinstated the major (Winter 2009: 78-80).

The collaborations were innovative, yet met with varied success. Some collaborative models were not implemented or were discontinued after the trial (Classics; German Honours), while others were in place for longer until, in most cases, financial issues led to their being abandoned (Arabic/Italian, Mandarin, German, French, Italian at James Cook University).

The largest current collaborative venture is the DASA-funded Brisbane Universities Languages Hub (University of Queensland, Griffith University and Queensland University of Technology). This collaboration will increase the range of languages available in Brisbane by adding Portuguese in 2012. However, there are no clear data on whether the collaborative venture has increased the absolute number of student enrolments and therefore the nation's linguistic expertise (Lane 2011). Smaller collaborative ventures continue: The University of New England delivers Indonesian to the University of Wollongong and the University of Southern Queensland, and German to the University of Newcastle. The University of New England's decision to move to a trimester system in 2012 will add to the complexity of running these collaborative delivery programs and it remains to be seen if having markedly different academic sessions will mean that these programs are abandoned.

4. Conclusions

There was a constant flow of press articles on the state of languages in Australian higher education during 2011, and extensive research into this topic was carried out in the past three decades. Nevertheless we do not have a truly comprehensive picture of current language teaching at the tertiary level. The *Widening our horizons* report is the most comprehensive account of language programs, but it is twenty years old. White and Baldauf endeavoured to replicate it, but non-compliance by some institutional respondents rendered their data incomplete (White and Baldauf 2006: 53).

Our data are limited to the languages on offer in 2011. Some languages may have been missed if they are offered in alternate years. There are also many aspects of a language program that are not reflected in our data. Although websites generally contained information on whether the language is available as a major or a minor or as individual subjects, it was beyond the scope of our survey to gather data on the shape of the major. Majors vary greatly from university to university. Some majors are a lean six subjects, while others mandate additional minimum numbers of ‘culture’ or ‘content’ subjects.

It is therefore necessary to conduct a more extensive survey of language programs and subjects across the higher education sector and to collect data on:

- languages on offer;
- load in EFTSL;
- the shape of the program: major or minor or single subjects;
- the shape of the major (language only or language and ‘content’ subjects);
- the availability of honours and higher degree studies;
- staffing (casual, contract and tenured academics); and
- collaborative ventures.

The number of LCTLs on offer may seem to be reassuring. However, the apparent health of the tertiary sector’s linguistic ecology, based on the number of LCTLs on offer, is illusory and potentially misleading. The majority of the LCTLs currently on offer is located in one institution, the Australian National University. It is a cause for concern that LCTLs are concentrated in one institution and are therefore vulnerable to changes in its financial climate. Moreover, since this state of affairs reflects the initiative of a single academic leader, it raises a long-term issue: will the LCTLs continue to be offered at the Australian National University under other circumstances. The fate of collaborative programs and other initiatives that depended on the agency of one person or a small group would suggest that the future of LCTLs in the tertiary sector is not as rosy as it would seem.

Notes

1. We would like to acknowledge the contribution of our research assistants, Floriana Badalotti and Lukas Bauer.
2. Open Universities Australia (OUA) is not included, since the languages offered by OUA are located at other, provider universities. Similarly only the University of Queensland has been counted in connection with Portuguese, and not the other two languages in the Brisbane Universities Language Hub.

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Appendix: Languages (all) taught at Australian Universities 2011

	State	Akkadian	Arabic	Aramaic	Austrian	Burmese	Cantonese	Catalan	Croatian	Egyptian (Ancient)	French	German	Greek (Ancient)	Greek (Modern)	Hebrew	Hindi	Indonesian	Italian	Japanese	Gamilaraay	Javanese
Aust. Catholic U	VIC																				
U Adelaide	SA										M	M	M	(M)			M	M	M		
Aust National U	ACT		M		E	E					M	M	M		E		M	M	M		E
U Ballarat	VIC																				
Bond U	QLD										M										
U Canberra	ACT																				
Charles Darwin U	NT												M				M				
Charles Sturt U	NSW																				
Central Queensland U	QLD																				
Curtin U	WA																				M
Deakin U	VIC		M														M	M			
Edith Cowan U	WA										M							E		M	
Flinders U	SA										M			M			M	M			
Griffith U	QLD																				M
James Cook U	QLD										M	M									
LaTrobe U	VIC				PG		E				M	M	E	M	M	m; sc	M	M	M		
Macquarie U	VIC										M	M	M	M							
U Melbourne	VIC		M								M	M	M	M	M		M	M	M		
Monash U	VIC		E ¹								M	M	X	E			M	M	M		
Murdoch U	WA							E			M	M					M	M	M		
U Newcastle	NSW										M	M ³									M
U New England	NSW										M	M					M	M	M		
Notre Dame U	WA													M				M			
Open U Australia															E ⁴		M ⁵	E ⁵			
Queensland U Technology	QLD																				
RMIT U	VIC		sc								sc; E	E					sc	E	E; sc		
Southern Cross U	NSW																				
Swinburne U	VIC																	M	M		
U Sydney	NSW		E	M	E						M	M	M	M			M	M	M		E
U South Australia	SA										M	M	M	M			M	M	M		
U NSW	NSW												m				M				
U Queensland	QLD										M	M					M		M		
U Southern QLD	QLD											M					M				
U Sunshine Coast	QLD																M	M	M		
U Tasmania	TAS										M	M	E				M	M	M		
U Technology Sydney	NSW										M	M						M	M		
U Western Aust.	WA			M ²									m				M	M	M		
U Western Sydney	NSW			M														M	M		
Victoria University	VIC																	M	M		
U Wollongong	NSW										M								M		
Total (universities)		1	8	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	20	16	6	8	2	3	21	23	27	1	1

Legend

Widely-taught languages: taught at more than 50% (= 20) of universities AND more than 4 states

Moderately-taught languages: taught in more than 3 states and/or more than 10% of Aus Universities

Less commonly taught languages: taught at less than 10% of universities AND up to 2 states

Abbreviations

sc	Short course
E	Individual undergraduates subject/s (Arts or other)
M	Major
m	Minor

Languages list based on: http://www.go8.edu.au/_documents/newsletters/2011/go8_newsletter_sept2011.pdf.

	Korean	Latin	Lao	Malay	Mandarin	Mongolian	Pacific pidgins	Pali	Pigmejtjara	Persian	Polish	Portuguese	Russian	Sanskrit	Spanish	Swedish	Syriac	Tetum	Thai	Turkish	Ukrainian	Urdu	Vietnamese	Yiddish	Yolngu	TOTAL (langs offered)	
ACU																										1	
Adelaide					M										M												10
ANU	M	M	X	X	M	m	E		M		m	m	M	M			E	M	m		M	M				26	
Ballarat																											1
Bond															M												4
UC																											3
CDU																								M			4
CSU																											0
CQU																											0
Curtin	X																										2
Deakin																											4
ECU						E																					5
Flinders																											5
Griffith					M																						4
JCU					M																						4
La Trobe					M; sc					m			M	M	M												13
Macquarie									M				M	M	M												10
Melbourne		M											M	M	M												13
Monash	M	M		?E	M															M			M				16
Murdoch																											2
Newcastle																											4
UNE																											6
Notre Dame																											2
Open U					M ⁸																			E ¹⁰		4	
QUT					M ⁹																						1
RMIT																	E; sc										8
SCU																											0
Swinburne																											2
Sydney	M				M		E						M	M		E											16
UniSA					M		E																				7
UNSW	M											M	M	M													6
UQ	M											m; E	M	M													9
USQ					M																						3
USC																											3
UT		E																									7
UTS																											6
UWA	M ⁷	m																									9
UWS																											5
VU																							M				1
UoW																											6
Total	7	7	1	1	28	1	1	1	1	1	1	3	5	3	18	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	

Notes

1. 2012?
2. From 2012
3. through UNE
4. through La Trobe
5. through Charles Darwin/Griffith
6. through UniSA
7. staggered introduction from 2012
8. through Griffith
9. first year only
10. through Charles Darwin