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University of Wollongong and NSW Department of Education make more of languages in Illawarra

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University of Wollongong and NSW Department of Education make more of languages in Illawarra

Abstract

There is a general recognition amongst language practitioners that learning of languages other than English is in decline and needs to be improved in Australia. In his 2014 Adelaide Languages Festival speech, the former Education Minister Mr Christopher Pyne acknowledged this gap by highlighting the target set by the current government to have 40% of year 12 pupils studying a foreign or classical language within a decade.

Keywords

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Modern Language Teachers' Association
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The University of Wollongong and NSW Department of Education make more of Languages in Illawarra

by Anu Bissoonauth-Bedford (UOW) and Enrichetta Parolin (Department of Education)

There is a general recognition amongst language practitioners that learning of languages other than English is in decline and needs to be improved in Australia. In his 2014 Adelaide Languages Festival speech, the former Education minister Mr Christopher Pyne acknowledged this gap by highlighting the target set by the current government to have 40% of year 12 pupils studying a foreign or classical language within a decade.

The Language Ambassadors into local schools project, led by Dr Anu Bissoonauth-Bedford, Head of Languages at the University of Wollongong and Ms Enrichetta Parolin, Italian Language Officer at the NSW Department of Education, was designed to help achieve this goal at a regional level in two ways. Firstly it aimed at engaging and motivating younger generations of Australians in high schools to learn foreign languages from their peers enrolled in University degrees. Secondly, it aimed to motivate university students to consolidate their learning by teaching their specialist language to their younger peers and build a bridge between secondary and tertiary education sectors.

After a successful pilot in French in 2012, we successfully applied for University funding to extend the scheme to other languages in the Faculty (French, Italian, Japanese, Mandarin) in 2014. Among the four local high schools that endorsed the grant application one of the state schools and the independent school had participated in the pilot and their feedback had been extremely valuable in enhancing the project.

In March 2015, the University of Wollongong launched its UOWx programme to formally recognise co-curricular activities carried out by undergraduates to help build their employability skills. The Language Ambassadors scheme has been included into

this programme which means that from 2016 student language ambassadors will receive official recognition for their voluntary assistance and teaching activities in schools through a formal UOWx record upon graduation. The table below shows the steady progression in the number of language ambassadors who make more of their language expertise by bringing it to their younger peers in local high schools.

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Smith's Hill HS	1	2	4	5	6
Kiama HS	1	1	2	3	3
TIGS	1	2	2	4	5
Keira HS	0	0	0	2	1
Corrimal HS*	0	0	0	0	2
St. Mary's HS*	0	0	0	0	3

Table 1. Number of Language Student Ambassadors from 2012-2016

In the government schools, the total number of languages students across a combination of French, Japanese, Italian, German, and Chinese in years 11 and 12 over the last 4 years show a fluctuation. As can be noted from table no 2 below. Although numbers at Smith's Hill and Wollongong High Schools seem relatively stable, numbers of students studying languages at Kiama and Corrimal High Schools have doubled.

It is early days to infer that outreach activities carried out by the University of Wollongong in collaboration with the Department of Education may have had a positive impact on increasing student numbers or indeed in motivating students to study languages at years 11 and 12. What is clear, however, is that the more stakeholders collaborate on the ground to promote the teaching and learning of languages, the easier it will be able to reverse the prevailing 'monolingual mindset' in Australia.

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