Languages, the Asian Century White Paper and three provocations for the committed from a pragmatic humanist
three myths obstructing our success

Abstract

This talk is purposefully provocative—even polemic. As a language teacher, learner of a second language, speaker of a language other than English at home, humanities researcher, and foundation member of the Languages and Cultures Network for Australian Universities (LCNAU), I know, believe, and am committed to the humanist and universal arguments for the deep support of all languages. However, as an academic manager and dilettante public policy advocate, I understand and appreciate the need to be pragmatic in prioritisation of limited resources available to dedicate to language learning and research support. Using the Australian Government’s White Paper ‘Australia in the Asian Century’ for context and as a reflective point (particularly its ‘centre of global activity’ and ‘Asia-relevant capabilities’), I make three provocations in the area of language policy. Firstly, I encourage us not to reject automatically the English-is-enough argument for not studying languages. Second, I challenge our humanist assertion that any and all language learning is equally positive. Third, given the current financial environment, I argue against the applied linguistics research that says the earlier the exposure to language learning the better.

In May 2013 after the submission deadline for the LCNAU Colloquium, University of Canberra announced it was going to cut its language programs, and a senior correspondent for The Age wrote an op-ed piece arguing Australian schools do not need to teach languages because most acts in Eurovision sang in English. These two events made me realise that it was much too soon for my planned provocative paper on language policy and a simpler argument was appropriate. So, rather than focus on provocations, this paper concentrates on deconstructing myths about languages. I deconstruct the myth that language programs are expensive to run and do not attract students. I also return to the English-is-enough-in-a-globalised-world argument to point out its utter fallacy. I conclude by arguing that it is time for the languages community to stand together, and speak with one political voice that has passionate humanism but also incorporates pragmatic considerations in providing realistic options for largely monolingual policymakers.
1. Introduction

When I set out to write this, I was feeling feisty. I had been having a long debate with a number of very learned colleagues about the ‘Asian Century’, language policy in the shadow of the ‘Henry Report’ (see below), and whether English was sufficient. The end point I got to was wanting to provoke my language colleagues into a more pragmatic response to the legitimate critiques of language learning in Australia that some educated, but monolingual colleagues were making. While I knew I would be subjecting myself to arrows from my colleagues, I thought I could personally handle it and the debate was sophisticated enough and sufficiently advanced to progress from a bit of ‘true friend’ critique (known in Chinese as zhengyou).

I was wrong. On 24 May 2013 perhaps the dumbest article I have ever read on language policy was published in The Age and reprinted in its sister publication, The Sydney Morning Herald (Flitton 2013). The article concluded its argument that language learning was not necessary with the evidence that “in the Eurovision contest, English songs have overwhelmingly turned out the winner”. I kid you not. A senior correspondent in two of the largest and most influential broadsheets in the country was arguing that because ABBA sang in English, Australians don’t need to learn Chinese in the Asian Century.

I was still on the fence about my proposed talk, but shortly thereafter the University of Canberra (UC) announced that it was closing down all of its language programs (Lane 2013b). Of course, La Trobe University, the University of New South Wales (UNSW), the University of Western Sydney (UWS), Curtin University and the University of Canberra (for a first time) had all threatened to do this between 2012-2013, but this time nothing could save Canberra’s programs from academic managers (a tribe to which I too, unapologetically, belong) making poor decisions. Surely, I worried, it was the wrong time for my nuanced message on language policy seeking to provoke insiders, and I had to resort to the personally safer territory of the blunt, broad and even hackneyed argument for support of languages directed at university leaders and public policymakers.

In rewriting the paper, however, I go about it a bit differently. My aim is to address policymakers, but through you—my languages colleagues. To be effective in this approach, I need all of us to do something that is unnatural for academics. I need each of us to be willing to compromise our idealistic perfect public policy for policy that is achievable—that is, to be pragmatic in an environment where limited resources mean difficult priority decisions have to be made. I am not asking you to give up your ideals or compromise your humanistic DNA. I do, however, seek of all of us to follow through our logic to the furthest end so that, for example, if we say ‘give languages more money’, we also answer from whom we take that money and what result we promise to deliver and on which measure our success will be judged.

In this paper, I return to the original task of talking about language policy in the context of the Ken Henry-chaired White Paper on ‘Australia in the Asian Century’ (also known as the ‘Henry Report’; The Australian Government 2012). In considering
the White Paper, I focus particularly on its ‘centre of global activity’ and its ‘Asia-relevant capabilities’, and how these relate to Australian language policy. I had then intended to introduce three nuanced provocations about language policy, but will only give those passing mention. Instead, I introduce the threat to language programs at universities and some of the vox populi since the Henry Report as additional context, and then explore three myths of language learning at universities. Namely, I deconstruct the myths that languages are expensive to teach and not of interest to students, and then return to the well-worn argument that English is enough in a globalised world. I conclude by encouraging language advocates to speak with a coordinated voice tempered by pragmatic and realistic considerations in defence of the increased investment of languages called for by the Asia Century White Paper.

2. ‘Australia in the Asian Century’ White Paper: Henry and languages

The then Prime Minister Julia Gillard commissioned Ken Henry to write a White Paper on ‘Australia in the Asian Century’ on 28 September 2011. Henry, assisted by three other panel members and a staff of government public servants, conducted extensive stakeholder consultations and received 250 written contributions. Belatedly in October 2012, after rumoured extensive editing by a newly-appointed internal team, the 300 pages were released to mixed fanfare (The Australian Government 2012).

The White Paper was broken into two halves. The first half built an evidence-based case showing the shift of economic, political and social power towards Asia in the coming century. The second half of the White Paper suggested policy responses individuals, institutions and the government should make in response to the shift. Few disagree with the first half of the argument. Most of the commentary was around the second half, disputing the details of what the response should be and questioning why the report was not exclusively focused on the government’s response.

In my reading of the White Paper, the culmination of the first half is best summarised in a map illustrating the movement of the ‘centre of global economic activity’ (The Australian Government 2012: 65, given here as Figure 1). Notably this graphic is not suggesting the centre of the world is in Asia, but only that the middle point is moving away from the Atlantic towards Asia ending up in Eastern Europe/Central Asia. Based on this graph alone the language we should all be learning is Russian, not Chinese, Japanese, or Indonesian. Less flippantly, the message I take from this is not that we should abandon studying of European languages but that increasing the exposure to and learning opportunities for Asian languages is important to Australia, particularly in light of its own geographical location.

It is important to note that at each point in time, the centre of world economic gravity was calculated by weighting the GDP for each civilisation or country and measuring its relative importance against the known world economic capacity at that point. The centre of economic gravity slowly shifted from East Asia to Europe, then
more quickly to the Atlantic and, in more recent decades, it has shifted quickly back towards Asia.

![Map showing historical shifts in economic activity](image)

**Figure 1: Asia to become the centre of global economic activity (Source: The Australian Government 2012: 65)**

The second half of White Paper is where language learning is explicitly handled as a policy response to the shifting gravity shown in the first half. Chapter 6 deals with ‘Building Capabilities’ of which language is one. Before specific language policy, however, the White Paper introduces the ‘capabilities pyramid’ (The Australian Government 2012: 169, given here as Figure 2). This pyramid provides a useful framework for prioritising limited resources on developing Australian capabilities for engagement—whether at a business, cultural or personal level—with Asia.

![Capabilities Pyramid](image)

**Figure 2: Building capabilities for the Asian Century (Source: The Australian Government 2012: 169)**
The base of the pyramid relates to those general areas of knowledge that we expect all Australians to have. For example, a general understanding of geography, to be able to identify India; of history, to know Japan was in the Axis in World War II; of culture, to know that Indonesia sits within the Islamic tradition; and of language, to know that Korean is different from Mandarin. This is the stuff we can assume every citizen knows and therefore has either picked it up at primary school or simply from common sense.

The middle level of the pyramid is broad capabilities, which require some effort for acquisition. In the language area, this is where I would place compulsory schools’ language programs. I advocate that all children should be exposed to a foreign language even if they do not pursue it to any level of fluency. That exposure at more than a token level happens within the middle years of the schooling system.

I think the broad capabilities might also extend to university language programs that students pursue for one or two free electives, or what I call ‘tourist courses’. Let me be clear that I strongly advocate this type of learning and think a failing of ours has been to not embrace these students who have very different objectives than your dedicated language majors. Indeed, I would argue that it is incumbent upon every university to provide for broad capabilities language training. This serves both a ‘liberal education’ argument in favour of languages, but also the idea of other professional training being enhanced by adding language competency. I do not like the term, but some colleagues refer to this role of languages in the university as ‘service teaching’.

Otherwise, much of universities’ role in languages and culture knowledge, research, and teaching is at the peak of the pyramid around specialised capabilities. Because the purpose at the peak is to provide deep understanding and true fluency it demands more specialisation, more options, and more in-depth exploration of the target languages and cultures. This is where our language majors,honours students and graduate students fit. Put in policy terms: the specialised capabilities role is smaller and more expensive, and necessarily involving a relatively small cohort of young experts.

I believe much of the confusion in the languages debate is the conflation of the three tiers of the pyramid. It is not the intention or expectation of primary school programs to deliver fluency. It is not pragmatically possible for high schools to deliver coherent systemic programs for unlimited number of languages. It is not desirable for specialist university programs to deliver cheap courses for huge volumes of students. There is also confusion because of the way each of the tiers bleeds into another. This is most evident at the university language level. University language programs tend to cater for both the future specialist and the tourist language learner. That helps with efficiencies but it can lead to confusion of expectations and deliverables. The expert university lecturer measures success by producing a small number of highly trained young experts, while the bureaucracy measures success by delivery of large numbers with broad capabilities at small cost. No wonder so many of the participants in the debate seems to be talking past each other. I realise much of the problem is all
language programs aspire to be the specialist program and do the broad capabilities
teaching to ‘pay the bills’, but perhaps greater clarity on the part of the institution
as to its intentions would alleviate some of the subsequent crisis over viability of
programs and disappointed lecturer expectations (cf Schmidt 2012).

The second half of the White Paper also has caused confusion as it is unlike other
White Papers that only direct what the government is going to do. Rather, this White
Paper seeks something bolder. It seeks to direct the whole of society into an orientation
shifting more eastwards. Thus, it speaks to not only Commonwealth agencies and
spending, but also the States and Territories, private business, institutions such as
education and sport, and grassroots organisations coordinating individual actions.
That bold approach—what might be called a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) in
public policy—opens the paper to the criticism by some that ‘we are already doing
this’ and by others that ‘but we have no interest in this’. Neither of these are the
audiences to which it seeks to speak. Rather, it aims for the middle of the spectrum
and those individuals and organisations that are uncommitted and seeking future
direction. It is modern policy making in that it does not use ‘command and control’
or its close cousin—financial incentives—but rather uses evidence based logic and
encouragement that admittedly will not change a significant minority’s orientation.

In the specifics the White Paper advocated making a commitment to school
children that they would be able to study a language at school, that the transition
from primary to secondary languages would be better coordinated, and that more
use would be made of technology in language learning, particularly to remote
communities. None of these suggestions were new. Indeed, most of them were
old and already accepted. The White Paper suggested a subtle shift of the priority
Asian languages, dropping Korean and adding Hindi to Japanese, Indonesian and
Mandarin.1 This was interesting and controversial to the individuals involved but not
radical national policy. For universities, the specifics provided no new language policy
and merely noted what universities were doing already, although more study abroad
was encouraged.

Much of the commentary following the paper’s release missed the important
broad points and somehow got bogged down in a specific debate about making
studying an Asian language compulsory at school—something not included in or
advocated by the White Paper. I suspect commentators’ fixation on a small detail
not even included in the White Paper was largely due to the failure of many to
read the 300-page report and due to how the politicians tried to translate a rather
sophisticated argument into a quickly digestible sound bite. Crass simplification of
the sophisticated argument about subtle compass adjustments by multiple actors
was disappointing, but the commentary was interesting nonetheless.

It began with the naysayers. Overwhelmingly this was parents who used the
anecdote of their own children not becoming fluent in a language studied at school,
bolstered by saying that they achieved their house in the suburbs and SUV speaking
only English and that they had even done a business trip to Hong Kong and vacation
to Bali with no problem. It was then followed by frustrated educational policy
people who used the opportunity to complain about their dire situation—crowded curriculum, too few teachers, lack of system coordination, poor pedagogy especially by migrant teachers, and failure of promised technological solutions. Because all of the parties agreed on the first part of the White Paper—the clear evidence of a shift towards Asia—the politicians’ rhetoric reinforced the small picture language ‘debate’ on which pet projects would or would not deliver better language learning.

There was a bit of defence put forward for the White Paper and its language policy, but for the most part everyone just let the steam fizzle out. Subsequently watching the then Prime Minister Julia Gillard and her party who called for the White Paper implode seemed more relevant than trying to defend something closely associated with the failing regime.

So is the Asian Century White Paper relevant to language policy going forward? I believe it is. The detailed argument based on the evidence in the first half of the paper showing the centre of global activity moving south-easterly, towards Asia and Australia, is undisputed. The ‘capabilities pyramid’ is a constructive framework to structure policy response both in language education and more generally. And, the off-the-mark debate on specific language policies is useful in preparing us to better address specific objections that must be overcome to deliver better language results for Australia.

Thus, in this paper I take as assumed the arguments for, and evidence of, the shift towards Asia. I use the ‘capabilities pyramid’ to structure and the micro-responses to hone my language policy proposals. The end result may not be a radically new approach to language policy, but hopefully the exercise will assist in creating a consistent and shared view on major points, and a sharpened and refined definition of specific proposals.

3. The paper I was going to give: Three provocations

Originally my intention was to speak to the committed and try to provoke you with some pragmatic wisdom about how we can get greater traction with policymakers within the post-Henry setting. I now understand that is probably too nuanced of a message for a wider audience and I worry about it being misunderstood out of context. Nevertheless, very briefly here is what I would have said to ‘push your buttons’ and hopefully advance the traction of our message.

3.1 Provocation 1: English is good enough, for many things

In response to the White Paper’s calls for more language learning, a number of commentators again made the comment that they operate well in Asia as monolingual English speakers and the data shows that many people are learning English. We all roll our eyes when we hear this argument. That was my first response too.

I had two subsequent long discussions with two different vice chancellors of very large and successful Australian universities about the English-is-enough argument. They both asserted they could do business across Asia with only English and there
is no way they could learn the ten languages they would need to know to be able to communicate effectively in all of the places they operate. On reflection, I think they are right. There is a cadre of elite trans-Asian operators who perform perfectly well in English. I have always noted that if you were dealing with the President of Mittal Steel or the captain of the Sri Lankan cricket team, English would suffice. However, if you represented or wanted to deal with one of the millions of small and medium sized enterprises that make up the bulk of our and our Asian neighbours’ economies, you needed to have local language and knowledge.

What I am arguing is not that English is enough, but rather that our message will be more persuasive if it does not fly in the face of the lived experience of many Australians. As such, we should first acknowledge that there is indeed much one can do with only English and that the global language is largely English. The key to continuing the conversation beyond that point is to note that: (1) non-elite engagement—whether of business or tourism type—needs local language; (2) for every person learning English as a second language the monolingual English speaker is put at disadvantage by not being able to deal with that doubled market; (3) translation only provides filtered knowledge; and (4) Australia needs language and cultural experts or it will be vulnerable in relying on others for this insight.

3.2 Provocation 2: All languages are not equal, to the general public

My second provocation would have been to suggest that we need to prioritise languages. I know this is highly controversial among the language community, but I also know that at least since Lo Bianco’s National Policy on Languages in 1987 that prioritisation has been acknowledged. Lo Bianco and others have reasonably advocated a split between European and Asian. I support that but caution against the list of priority languages becoming too long and too rigid. If too long the pathways through schools are much more difficult to achieve. To accommodate later developments I have advocated that in addition to a limited number of priority languages we also allow for a ‘wild card’ determined by local interests which could support community and indigenous languages.

The Henry White Paper does not lead me to change my acceptance of Lo Bianco’s split between and support for European and Asian languages. Remember the centre of global activity remains right at the Eastern Europe-Central Asia area so spreading across both European and Asian languages continues to make sense. I would argue against the White Paper’s shifting of the priority Asian languages to drop Korean and add Hindi (and now effectively overridden by the re-inclusion of Korean). Effectively, that means five languages are prioritised and that spreads resources too thinly. Instead, my own focus would remain on three—Chinese, Japanese, and Indonesian—with allowance for Korean and Hindi as well as many others such as Tagalog, Thai, and Vietnamese as wild cards for schools that had a compelling reason for them.
3.3 Provocation 3: Early is not always better, with limited resources

My third provocation was to have been to advocate shifting much of our attention away from primary school language learning to put more focus on secondary and university learning. I know this flies in the face of applied linguistic research (see, for example, Bialystok 2001; Hyltenstam and Abrahamsson 2008) that suggests that earlier exposure is better for language learning. It is, however, a pragmatic response to the reality of the context in which we operate in Australia where we are dominated by monolinguals, quality language teachers are scarce, and the crowded curriculum means a student is unlikely to get sufficient exposure hours through the early years to have any impact whatsoever. Most significantly, it is a response to the plethora of parents who keep quoting the anecdote of their child learning Japanese for eight years at primary and early secondary school and not being able to say hello (though they are extremely good at origami and a few nursery rhymes).

This shift from primary to senior secondary spilling into universities would take Australia closer to what has been the approach of the United States. I am not advocating the US approach that leaves most of the funding and focus to the very tip of the pyramid by training a handful of deep experts at graduate school, but I do applaud the American notion that two years of language during the final four years of secondary is essentially required for admission to university, and language study at university is compulsory for all graduates as is the case at, inter alia, Harvard, Princeton and Stanford. It is worth remembering too that Australia’s high point of language learning (40% of Year 12 students enrolled in a language in the 1960s; see Lo Bianco 1987) was at the time when taking a language was required for admission to university.

4. The paper that needs to be given: Three myths

4.1 The context

As outlined above, based on the developed framework of the Henry Report, I was prepared to deliver a subtle and nuanced paper on how we might advance language policy in important ways for the coming century. The months following the belated release of the Henry Report strongly suggested that for all of the optimism and clarity that the White Paper presents, the public and even sophisticated actors such as universities are not ready for such subtlety and it is better to stick to the core message.

4.1.1 Cutting languages after Henry: Canberra, Curtin, UNSW, La Trobe, UWS

The first indicator of this context was the threatened closing of languages courses in the lead up to the White Paper’s release. First to act was La Trobe—one of only two places in Australia to offer Hindi for university students—who said as part of a
restructuring of Arts it would close Hindi and Indonesian. The University of Canberra (UC)—in the nation’s capital, so presumably linked into the informal network knowledgeable about what the White Paper would be positing and home to every nation’s diplomatic corps—said that it would close Japanese but spare Chinese and Spanish. The University of New South Wales (UNSW) followed threatening Indonesian,2 and the University of Western Sydney suggested it would close Arabic, Italian and Spanish. After the White Paper’s final release, Curtin University followed the trend arguing it would close Indonesian and Chinese (and Asian Studies).3

In each of these cases, an organised campaign of the relevant academics, impacted students, the effected community (for example, Indonesian studies academics, Indonesian expatriates, the Indonesian Embassy, and the relevant business people and Chamber of Commerce) and our languages community (effectively represented by LCNAU and particularly its President Professor John Hajek) was launched and the closure decision was overturned, delayed or significantly modified. The language programs survived, albeit in a slightly diminished form in some cases.

While this was occurring, the strength of other institutions’ language programs was consolidating as they recognised the coming support for languages in the Asian Century. At the Australian National University (ANU), University of Melbourne and University of Western Australia (UWA) curriculum changes and a good sense of the political winds related to a deepened commitment to language programs. Indeed, ANU increased the languages on offer, including some small languages such as Burmese, Mongolian, Cantonese, Portuguese, and Tetum, while UWA added Korean with support from the Korean Foundation. Also, changes to the undergraduate degree structure that increased flexibility and breadth requirements saw strong increases in students choosing languages as electives at Melbourne and UWA. This was preceded a bit by UNSW and Monash University seeing similarly strong elective enrolments albeit largely on the back of increased international student enrolments.

Sitting off to the side and not the subject necessarily of this talk is the Brisbane experiment of consolidation of Queensland University of Technology, Griffith University and University of Queensland language programs (Lane 2011). This arguably has the potential for increasing language offerings at all the universities and thereby increasing net enrolments of the languages. On the other hand, most similar consolidations to date have shown that moving languages off a campus has a negative impact on enrolment, even if choices increase by cooperation.

The culmination of the post-Henry languages crisis was the announcement by University of Canberra that it would be cancelling all of its languages—including Japanese, Chinese, and Spanish. Interestingly, while arguing this was a financially-driven decision in light of the 1% efficiency dividend required by Commonwealth funding, the University also claimed that a doubling or more of income from languages would not rescue these programs (Lane 2013b). This is despite the fact that all three programs have what would be considered healthy enrolments regardless of discipline and reasonable staffing levels. UC defends itself by asserting that students can pursue languages by cross-enrolment at ANU in a de facto Brisbane model.
4.1.2 Eurovision as the benchmark for our language policy

The Canberra situation, while totally incomprehensible, probably would not have solely motivated me to throw away my original paper. Individual universities can do strange things and as a university administrator I have deep empathy for the complexity of variables that might be at play but not necessarily in the public discourse. The event that pushed me over the edge, however, was the op-ed in The Age (Flitton 2013). The arguments the article raises are hackneyed for those of us in the field: namely English is enough, languages are hard which means students won’t select them, and languages are expensive to deliver in light of the low demand and high teaching costs. It culminates with the argument that if most acts in Eurovision are in English that is proof of the lack of need for investment in languages.

Thus, if knowledgeable actors such as university leaders—whether they be deans or vice-chancellors—and the popular public—as represented by the op-ed in the dailies and supporting commentary on the web pages—are evidence of the level of understanding of language policy in Australia, then this is not the time for subtle arguments that may be misinterpreted by un-informed watchers. It remains the time for blunt disproving of fallacious understandings. The following debunks three bits of received wisdom: (a) languages are expensive to teach; (b) there is limited student demand for languages; and (c) language studies are unnecessary because English is sufficient for all needs. I apologise at the outset for repeating these simple agreements, but I do so in the hope of empowering rhetorically and building consistency in our message to policymakers.

4.2. Three language myths that are making for bad policy

4.2.1 Myth 1: Languages are expensive

The first myth is that languages are expensive to teach, or more precisely, more expensive than other areas of knowledge. This is half of the economic rationale for threatening languages, the cost side. Because academic wages are set by enterprise bargaining and consistent across all disciplines, and because languages academics’ demographic profile tends to be comparatively on the junior end of the academic scale, language staffing costs are no greater than any other discipline. Moreover, the cost of lecturers in languages is predominately at the base rate, in contrast to the common ‘salary loadings’ drawn in other disciplines such as Business, Medicine and the high citation Sciences. Thus, for the largest cost of any humanities program—staffing—languages are less expensive than many higher profile disciplines.

The second cost argument might be that languages demand more contact hours or higher staff to student ratios than other disciplines. I know many would agree with that, but I want to challenge it and I encourage all of us to challenge it when working with university administrators. The first issue is what is needed for ‘mastery’ of a subject. A certain amount of time on any subject is demanded to become ‘fluent’ in it. Malcolm Gladwell (2008) in the popular research literature has put the number of
hours needed to excel regardless of discipline at 10,000 (this subsequently has been popularised even further by a rap song by Macklemore). One major difference with the discipline of languages is that it is hard to show the mastery without a certain base level. With something like history a limited knowledge is not as noticeable as with a limited knowledge of languages. On the other hand, a mastery of a language gives a person a much more concrete outcome than, for example, a mastery of English literature which might require the same amount of study time.

I also want to challenge the pedagogy that dictates we need more contact hours for languages than other disciplines, particularly in the early years. I am not suggesting that students do not need a large base of hours dedicated to language learning at the initiation, but rather that those hours must be done in the classroom with an attending academic. For example, the old language laboratory model of class hours grew out of the US Department of Defence learning mode where individual tutorials were no longer feasible so mass tutorials were implemented through using the cutting edge technology of the day, tape recorders and large language labs. The cutting edge technology of the 21st Century, however, is mobile computing and as many have shown, the iPod and self-directed or peer-directed learning can make the hours previously dedicated to language laboratory obsolete. I use the language lab only as an example, not as my concrete point, that self-direction of learning by students and modern technology mean that contact hours do not have to be more than other disciplines. I do think, however, that how the limited contact hours are used does change when the lecturer is expecting that the students have done much of what used to happen in the classroom before class. Others have written on the ‘flipped classroom’ and other techniques used in this new mode of teaching (Gibeau and Imaki, this volume; Lage et al. 2000). I also want to make clear that I am not suggesting any ‘dumbing down’ of language learning, only that the locus of the time students need to spend on the exercise is shifted from the supervised classroom to a more independent personal or peer setting. Language learning remains as difficult and time consuming as always and no technology or flash pedagogy will miraculously replace that.

Looking at the other side of the cost versus income balance sheet as well, languages are in a very viable space. The bulk of the income for local units of a university comes from teaching load or ‘bums on seats’. There are three elements to determining the amount that flows to the local area for student load: number of students, amount of central and faculty ‘tax’, and funding per student. I’ll take those in reverse order and leave the number of students for my second myth.

The vast majority of students at our universities are domestic undergraduate students paying through the Higher Education Loan Program (HELP) / Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS). The government’s funding model for these students does not treat all students alike but differs the funding depending upon public policy priority of different areas—so called ‘cluster funding’.4 In this regard, the policymakers hold languages in high esteem and fund them at $11,681 per full time student load (Equivalent Full Time Student Load (EFTSL), 2013 figures) which
places them on par with allied health, and ahead of social sciences, humanities, law and business. On top of that Commonwealth funding, language students get a break in only paying $5,868 per EFTSL, the lowest rate and in contrast to the medicos, lawyers, business students and scientists who have to pay nearly double that amount. Thus, in total there is funding of $17,549 per language student or roughly $2,200 per language student in a class, in contrast to roughly $1,400 per humanities student and $1,900 per social science student.

A key point with the differentiating cluster funding is whether that funding flows through to where it is meant to benefit. Put differently, the government and students are doing their part committing more funding to languages but whether that commitment results in more funding coming into the local area is dependent on individual university policy. Many universities use a basket figure calculation to pass on the priority language funding to faculties, but many faculties are not very sophisticated in their distribution and calculation. Thus, at the coal face the financial income of the history student is the same as the language student, which is contrary to policy intent and effectively means languages subsidise humanities and social science areas that arguably might be less expensive to deliver based on classic pedagogies. The key to ensuring this funding flows to where it is intended is to ask the faculty finance officers whether the cluster funding differentiations are flowing to the local areas.

The discussion so far focuses only on domestic undergraduate fees, but as Monash and UNSW have shown, languages are very popular electives for international and fee paying graduate students. In this area language teaching is even more lucrative with average international fees being closer to $25,000 per EFTSL ($3,125 per student in a class) and some universities charging a lower levy on this income. Again the question, however, is whether the full benefit of that income is flowing to the local area or being quietly spread across all disciplines.

The second element in the income calculation is the amount of ‘taxes’ or ‘cut’ that the central university and faculty are taking. I do not begrudge this—universities and faculties must operate and much of that operation makes fiscal efficiency and consistent policy sense to happen at shared levels. Most universities and faculties tend to take a flat tax rate not differentiating across disciplines. They do not have to, however. Just as government policymakers have prioritised languages and medicine, effectively cross subsidising these from business and law income, universities could do the same (and a few do, albeit in a variety of ways). While I argue above that languages can and should lower their cost of delivery based on new pedagogies, I still believe that some disciplines rightfully are more expensive to deliver than others and the rough cut that Commonwealth funding makes at accommodating this might not pick up the full subtlety of local teaching costs and priorities. Thus, if for the same learning outcomes an art student can be taught at a lower rate than a Mandarin student, a university could accommodate this by differentiating the taxation regime, or through a variety of other more explicit ways. In short, university leaders who
respond that they cannot do anything within government funding restraints to support languages are disingenuous.

All of the recent threats to university language programs have been at least partially based on the argument that they are expensive to deliver. That is a myth. Language teaching is well-funded, modern pedagogies and technologies can lower the cost of effective language learning, and universities and faculties can make decisions to support languages without compromising university finances or discipline equity. This is a challenge to the language academic to learn more cost-effective techniques and to be good university citizens. There is also a challenge to university leaders to pass on the government support to where it was intended and earned.

4.2.2 Myth 2: Students are not interested

The other half of the funding explanation for threatening languages is that there are few students interested, so income is limited. The evidence does not support this. Rather, what is seen is that rigid academic structures restrict students from pursuing languages, and we language academics have done poorly in accommodating the transient language learner.

Our enrolment woes begin in the state-based Year 11 and 12 senior secondary systems where excessive concentration on a few subjects, non-incentivised Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) calculation schemes, and poor communication strategies have set back those students who pursue languages to Year 12 from 40% in the 1960s to around 10% today. The decreasing of compulsory subjects for senior secondary, such as South Australia’s move from five subjects to four, has squeezed out the elective of a language. The calculation of ATARs that do not fully benefit language results such as in New South Wales add to the woe. This problem is exacerbated by the failure of the systems to fully accommodate the differences between native, heritage, continuing and ab initio learners which means many early learners are scared of negative impacts to their comparative results. Even in those states where the ATAR calculation effectively gives bonuses for languages and valiant attempts are being made to navigate the tricky issues around background ability such as Victoria, the rumour mill and received wisdom are killing interest in languages among parents, students and Year 10 counsellors. In other words, the language community’s communications of the facts has been deficient.

We do not have to accept this situation, however. University representatives sit on all of the senior secondary boards and indeed academics chair many of them. We can also contribute to the reform debate as our opinions as experts in university preparation is regularly sought and highly valued, making this perhaps the venue where we carry the most political clout. For a large part, however, we have not affirmatively engaged with these boards, looking down our collective noses a bit at what they do at schools and sending junior academics or un-briefed senior academics into these forums. If we are serious about addressing language education at the university level, we must commit to participating actively at the senior secondary level.
The International Baccalaureate (IB) is a wonderful counter-example to the disappointing situation we have let unfold in the state senior secondary. Languages are a compulsory subject among the six subjects in the Year 11-12 IB diploma. Languages are fully valued in the calculation of the final IB mark. Importantly, because of the multiplicity of subjects and the compulsion to include all six subjects, the IB mark calculation does not disadvantage those who comparatively do not excel at languages. Finally, in contrast to the decrease in the number of students pursuing languages within the state senior secondary system, the IB with its compulsory language requirement has increased markedly over the recent period. There is much for universities to learn from the market success of the IB including the somewhat counterintuitive lessons of setting the bar high, compulsion of breadth, and not penalising weaker language learners.

Turning to universities to show there is no lack of students wanting to learn languages, I first offer the well-known examples of the University of Melbourne and the University of Western Australia. Both of the universities saw significant increases in language students when rigid curriculum rules were relaxed. Japanese and French shot through the roof at Melbourne, likely building on the strength of those two languages nationally up until the Year 10 level. UWA was able to add Korean with the assistance of Korean soft diplomacy money (also available from Germany, France, China, Japan, and to a lesser extent other countries), but the enrolment number exceeded lecture theatre and lecturer capacity resulting in caps. Other universities have noticed, and are introducing so-called breadth requirements—facilitating general access to all areas of study—to all undergraduate degrees.

It is important to note that most of these breadth learners, and the international students that preceded them particularly at places like Monash and UNSW, are not the paradigmatic language student of earlier times. These students are not language majors who are interested or able to make the commitment that those traditional students do. Many of us have bemoaned these students’ unwillingness to throw themselves on the altar of dedicated language learning, but I think that is unfair and unrealistic. Going back to the White Paper, these learners are the ones occupying the middle slice of the pyramid. Language is not the end point unto itself, but rather it is an add-on or extra to their other love or discipline. While sometimes this teaching is derogatorily referred to as ‘service teaching’ and these learners as ‘tourists’, I argue strongly that we as the language community should welcome and accommodate them and their motives even if they differ from our own (see also Nettelbeck et al 2007, 2009).

We should do this because such ‘service teaching’ makes our programs not only financially viable but downright lucrative. Moreover, some of these ‘tourist learners’ will convert and commit to being the experts at the top of the White Paper pyramid. Indeed, I confess to being one of those. I failed French and German in high school, and was a purely tourist learner taking Japanese as an elective to my political science and economics degree until I finally broke through as a learner on a year in Japan
on exchange. If I had to commit to a full major in Japanese going into or during my undergraduate years, I would never have learned the language.

Once we accept that these types of learners are welcomed, I think a natural progression is to tailor programs so that they can accommodate both the committed and the casual learner. Much of the Ivy League and Stanford University, which have a compulsory breadth language requirement, do this (Stanford University 2013). There are ways to teach the two streams in some classes, but for the full satisfaction of both cohorts it is important to understand and cater for their different learning needs and objectives. This arguably may have an impact on pedagogy, for example oral skills and colloquial vocabulary might be stressed with elective learners whereas major learners’ courses might emphasise written texts, grammatical structures, complex honorific language, and classical origins. Taking this further to perhaps a controversial level, I could even see some university programs such as University of Canberra dedicated primarily to the elective learner while ANU down the road might accommodate both receiving Canberra’s specialist major learners for their advanced courses.

The myth that students in Australia do not want to study languages is fundamentally false. Numerous examples show that given the option, students will elect to pursue both senior secondary and elective university language programs. Added to that, savvy international students realise that knowing their first language and English alone is not enough in an Asian Century where intra-Asia trade dominates and a global workplace is a practical reality for many; thus, they are flocking to pick up an elective third language. To realise the full potential of this inherent student demand, however, university leaders need to challenge disciplinary preciousness that creates excessively rigid and crowded curriculum, and language academics need to adjust for the increased demand and diverging learner objectives by understanding and accommodating the more casual students both conceptually and pedagogically.

4.2.3 Myth 3: English is good enough, for most things

I close off the three myths discussion exactly where I began the three provocations discussion: English is good enough. The most recurring argument from monolingual sceptics of language learning is that it is not necessary because English is sufficient to operate in Australia and globally. This is a very old chestnut and has likely driven much of the monolingual British stance for the past few hundred years. As I outline above concerning the provocations, I very much understand, accept and agree that English is an important and powerful language and that Australians as predominately native speakers are better positioned at the turn of the 20th century than those who have no English ability. English by itself, however, leaves an individual, and more importantly a country, extremely vulnerable.

Again with apologies, I have argued this before, with Joseph Lo Bianco, so I assert nothing new.

We know that there is a cognitive advantage in studying a second language—learning a foreign language makes you or your children smarter. Probably most
importantly, we know that learning a second language makes you more globally engaged and empathetic—you meet more people and you have more fun. Moreover, these humanistic reasons for learning a language tend to be the most effective long term motivation for learners.

Even from a utilitarian perspective, as noted above, the bilingual English learner has a distinct advantage economically over the native English monolingual. This point is most clearly shown in small and medium sized enterprises where for all economies the overwhelming bulk of trade and employment takes place. For the Chinese small business owner who learns English, she can now compete globally in English but also out-compete the monolingual English business owner for Chinese customers. This is enormously important in the Asian Century as intra-Asia trade is a vastly larger market than Australian export. Thus, the supply chain between Korea and Taiwan might equally be negotiated in Japanese or Mandarin, instead of English. While international education to Australia, as well as US and UK, assists the monolingual, it is important not to forget that the same student mobility is happening within Asia so that Japan, Korea and Far East Russia’s very large international student populations are dominated by Chinese and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) students.

Finally, some would have us rely solely on our migrant communities for our utilitarian language needs. All will agree these communities are an enormous asset of Australia and should be celebrated and leveraged. Some will argue that these are not true ‘dinky di’ Australians because they lack blue eyes and broad accents, so we should be worried when our senior secondary enrolments are dominated by them. I disagree, and strongly support all language learning without devaluing someone who comes better-prepared or inclined to a language by birth or environment. What I worry more about, however, is that Australia’s attitude towards languages means that whatever advantage these recent migrants bring, this asset is largely squandered within a generation. Migrants to Australia are under enormous pressure to assimilate, including becoming monolingual English speakers. Thus, many second generation migrants while they have oral skills are functionally illiterate and by the third generation they have fully assimilated to be good monolingual broad ‘Strine-speaking Australians. Our resolute defence of English-as-enough means that Australia’s language policy does not leverage the linguistic assets of our migrants but squanders the resource within a few years.

5. Conclusion

I set out to give a subtle and provocative talk to some like-minded language travellers. Using the Asian Century White Paper’s ‘centre of global activity’ and ‘capabilities pyramid’, I wanted to encourage us as the languages community to adopt a more persuasive political message to policymakers that recognised the importance of English and allowed for pragmatic prioritisation of target languages and learner levels.
I still remain committed to strengthening our unified political voice with university, public service and political policymakers. However, the developments since the release of the White Paper with a number of university language programs coming under threat and culminating in the large circulation of the silliest defence of monolingualism I have ever seen (see above), caused me to reassess if the broader community beyond my Languages colleagues would be able to understand my more nuanced message. Thus, this paper presents three well-rehearsed and simple debunkings of pervasive myths about the state of languages.

First, languages are not costly to deliver. Modern pedagogies make it possible to deliver excellent learner outcomes at a rate comparable to many other disciplines. Moreover, government policymakers already generously fund and support languages. The essential element is to ensure that universities and faculties equally support and pass through the priority funding.

Second, students are interested in studying languages. Senior secondary systems and strict disciplinary academics have constructed overly rigid structures that disincentivise or make it impossible to study languages. It is incumbent upon language academics to engage with the senior secondary sector and university leaders to support the deconstruction of the outmoded highly rigid curriculum structures at universities. Freed from these constraints, experience shows that students will select languages, albeit these students are more typical of the mid-level of the White Paper ‘capabilities pyramid’ than the traditional learners who sit at the experts’ apex. As such, the quid pro quo in negotiating with your colleagues from other disciplines for greater curricular breadth and flexibility is willingness on the part of language colleagues to respectfully accommodate this more casual learner.

Third, I both respect but also challenge the sentiment that in the Asian Century fluency in English is sufficient. I encourage my language colleagues to accept the objective truth that English is the dominant language of the globalised world and that for many of those operating on a multilateral basis at the elite level—many of whom only have language skills at the bottom of the Henry pyramid—English is functionally the only language able to transcend multiple language divides. At the same time, I remind the monolingual community that the empirical research is indisputable that learners of another language have enhanced cognitive ability and global understanding. Moreover, as the world becomes English-fluent through second language acquisition, native monolingual English speakers are increasingly at a disadvantage. To not know English is a disadvantage, but to only know English equally sets back an individual or country. Thus, just as we must invest in numeracy and English literacy, to fail to also invest in the study of languages will leave our children and nation vulnerable and uncultured.

Hopefully I have left you both nodding in firm assent and shaking your head in disagreement. I am not seeking to resolve our debate through the force of my personal arguments, rather I use this paper as an opportunity for us to begin a dialog through LCNAU that can seek greater clarity on our simple ‘take home messages’ and agreed areas where more research and evidence are needed. If we fail to do this and
we continue to give conflicting advice to policymakers, both internally and externally, on both the big points and the areas where evidence will resolve dispute, then we will continue to marginalise languages, and the monolinguals with their anecdotes and assumptions will continue to set policy. My hope is that through LCNAU, informed by our research and moderating between pragmatism and humanistic ideals, we can maturely solidify a message to strength the place of languages in our universities, schools and society.

Notes
1. The subsequent Prime Minister Kevin Rudd reversed the dropping of Korean in August 2013 (Marszelak and Blake 2013). See also below.
2. UNSW has since closed its Indonesian program (Lane 2013c).
3. For more information on these attempts at closing languages programs, see Lane (2011, 2012a-d, 2013a-c).
4. Specific statistics mentioned in this paragraph are given in The Australian Government Department of Industry (2013).

References
Lane, B. 2013b. Doubling language students not enough, says University of Canberra. *The Australian*, 4 June.