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Slavic language-and-culture disciplines in Australia’s universities: Less and less commonly taught

Abstract

We review the history of the provision of Slavic language-and-culture disciplines in Australian universities from post-Second World War beginnings, through an efflorescence in the 1980s, to a situation where only four (Croatian, Polish, Russian and Ukrainian) remain. We marshal and evaluate the arguments in favour of a university presence for a range of Slavic languages and consider institutional obstacles to their provision, as well as social and cultural factors limiting their take-up by students in the instances where they are or have been available. Finally, we assess the effectiveness of past strategies to overcome these obstacles, contemplate potential alternatives and argue for government-led national planning and co-ordination to ensure the availability at Australian universities of Slavic language-and-culture disciplines within a general policy and implementation framework for Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTLs).

1. Introduction

In February 2013, the regular biennial conference of the Australia and New Zealand Slavists’ Association (ANZSA) was held at Macquarie University. Of 52 papers listed in the program, 27 were by authors permanently resident or studying in Australia. The remainder were from 13 other countries, including two from New Zealand. There was a broad disciplinary spread: the expected mix of linguistics, literary and cultural studies and language pedagogy was leavened by contributions from anthropology, law, history, philosophy and translation studies. Territorially, too, the spread of subject matter was extensive: Russian Studies accounted for about 40% of the contributions, the remainder inquired into other East, South and West Slavic topics. Veterans of the conference series reported astonishment at the (relatively) strong attendance: never before had there been a need for three parallel sessions, nor had the program previously been so diverse.

Perhaps, however, they need not have been surprised. Slavic Studies is a world-wide academic discipline (the program included names not only from the Anglophone countries and Europe but also from China, Pakistan and Sri Lanka), research and higher education are becoming increasingly international and an ever-greater number of scholars are finding it possible to travel in order to disseminate and discuss their work. Furthermore, if the discipline had been perceived to decline
in strategic significance following the end of the Cold War, new geopolitical realities—the resurgent international assertiveness of the Russian Federation, especially in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, the importance of former republics of the USSR to the world’s energy supply as producers or transit countries and the role in the European Union of the newly-joined and yet-to-join states, for example—suggest that it continues to be in the Australian national interest to ensure a supply of locally-trained language and other experts concerning this area. It was troubling, therefore, that a mere six of the fifty-two participants of the ANZSA conference were continuing members of academic staff at Australian universities and, of the six, none were in the early stages of their career. On the contrary, most were within a decade of what until recently had been the retiring age. Globally, Slavic Studies is a vibrant academic discipline. In Australia, however, its very demographics give pause for worried thought.

In this study we sketch the history of Slavic language-and-culture disciplines in Australian universities, marshal the arguments in favour of continuing and strengthening them, reflect on some of the reported obstacles to their adequate provision and contemplate a structure for Slavic language-and-culture disciplines that is in keeping with our earlier general proposals for the offering of Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTLs) at Australian universities (see Dunne and Pavlyshyn 2012b: 14).

2. Historical sketch

Slavic Studies commenced in Australia, following the Second World War, with the introduction of Russian language and literature teaching and the establishment of Departments of Russian—first at the University of Melbourne in 1949 and within the next decade and a half at the Australian National University (ANU), Monash University, the University of Queensland and the University of New South Wales (UNSW) (Clarke 1988).

In the mid-1970s, in an Australian political climate favouring multiculturalism, lobbying by Slavic and Baltic communities, acting in cooperation with Monash University’s Professor of Russian, Jiří Marvan, led to the establishment of most of the Slavic and Baltic languages as matriculation subjects in New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. In 1981, the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission funded Macquarie University to establish a Slavonic Studies section within its School of Modern Languages, initially offering Croatian, Macedonian, Polish and Serbian. Ukrainian was subsequently added on the basis of separate community funding (Koscharsky and Pavković 2005; Budak 2013), and Russian later still. This broad palette of languages was made available both in the classroom and in the distance mode.

In the interim, in 1983, community support had also enabled the introduction of Ukrainian at Monash, where the expertise of members of the department also made possible the offering of Macedonian, the literatures of the South Slav languages of Yugoslavia and, subsequently, Polish. The Department of Russian was renamed
the Department of Slavic Languages and at its peak in the mid-1980s it also offered upper-year electives in Czech and Old Church Slavonic. In those heady days even the Baltic languages had a presence at Australian universities: a Flinders University scholar travelled a circuit of East Coast universities teaching Latvian and, at Monash University, Lithuanian was studied in an elective subject on Balto-Slavic linguistics (Poole 2009). In the late 1980s, then, just as glasnost and perestroika made the USSR and Eastern Europe geopolitically even more interesting than they had been throughout the Cold War, six Australian universities—ANU, Macquarie, Melbourne, Monash, UNSW and Queensland—had full undergraduate programs and the capacity to supervise research degrees in the field of Russian Studies and of these, Macquarie and Monash offered a modest range of other Slavic languages.

Today, the number of universities offering full programs in Russian is down to three (Melbourne, Macquarie and Queensland), with a minor sequence in the language still available at a fourth, ANU, through a collaborative program with Macquarie. Macquarie also still offers Croatian and Polish and Ukrainian remains at Monash, where Slavic Studies generally continues to be a recognised and relatively well-subscribed area of graduate research supervision (Dunne and Pavlyshyn 2012a: 17–19). Significant recent private donations have recently been directed toward the support of research and teaching in Ukrainian Studies at Monash (Monash University 2014) and Russian (as well as Portuguese and Australian Indigenous languages) at ANU (Macdonald 2013).

3. The predicament

Interviews with representatives of each of the remaining units teaching Russian or Slavic Studies at Australian universities confirm that the internal processes leading to this shrunken state of affairs have differed in detail from institution to institution but all have in common models of distribution of budget that disadvantage units and programs of small enrolment. In a number of instances, decisions to close programs or not to fill vacant positions (making already stretched programs even more difficult to deliver) have been driven, not so much by declining student numbers as by increased ‘ideal’ class sizes and by declining tolerance of infra-institutional cross-subsidy.2

This is not to say that some universities have not made efforts to retain disciplines that the strict and merciless application of their own rules would have annihilated. Nevertheless, it is now without exception the case that, wherever a Slavic language- and-culture discipline is taught at an Australian university, there is no more than one full-time continuing academic carrying the program. Even with casual assistance (which, in all instances, has been forthcoming to a lesser or greater extent), this leads to administrative overload (in one especially egregious case one academic is co-ordinator of 17 different units) and makes finding time for research difficult—although, despite an inauspicious environment, the Australian Slavic Studies community remains research-active, as evidenced by the bibliography of members of ANZSA that is published in each issue of the ANZSA Newsletter. Furthermore, unlike in the 1960s and 1970s, where Australian universities recruited Masters and PhD
students in Russian or Slavic Studies from among their own graduates, students today continuing to Honours have become a rarity and, while a number of international students are candidates for PhDs in the discipline, to our knowledge at the time of writing (November 2013) only two students who commenced as undergraduates in any branch of Slavic Studies at an Australian university are currently enrolled in Australia for a PhD in that discipline.

4. Desiderata

It is our conviction that, like all other branches of scholarship, including language-and-culture disciplines other than those enjoying relative popularity within the student body, Slavic Studies should be efficiently represented at Australian universities. By ‘efficiently’ we mean in such a way as to ensure: (a) the capacity of Australian academe to contribute to internationally respectable research in the field; and (b) the opportunity for students in any part of Australia to receive within Slavic Studies valid linguistic competences, cultural knowledge and research skills appropriate to undergraduate and graduate levels of education.

The main foundation of this confessedly ideological conviction is that there exist internationally acknowledged fields of intellectual inquiry in which any developed country must as a matter of course participate. In 2013, the Ulrichs database listed 203 scholarly journals in the humanities and social sciences in disciplines corresponding to Slavic Studies—compared, for example, to 467 for English Studies, 255 for French Studies, 156 for German Studies, 199 for Chinese Studies and 86 for Japanese Studies (Ulrichsweb 2013). The MLA International Bibliography under the year 2013 lists 2336 journal articles for the search term ‘French’, 1342 for ‘German’, and a total of 1026 for Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, Czech and Serbian taken together. While the measure is indicative only, it is reasonable to conclude that the amounts of scholarly activity in each of the named fields are comparable. Slavic Studies is one of the major European philologies and, as such, has a natural place in any developed system of higher education and scholarship. In addition to its autonomous significance, Slavic Studies fosters language competences that are essential for the successful pursuit of historical and social sciences research relevant to Central and Eastern Europe, as well as the successor countries of the USSR.

Within the rather copious Australian literature defending Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTLs) at Australian Universities (for a discussion of several of the significant contributions, see Dunne and Pavlyshyn, 2012b: 9-11), there exists a sub-genre of efforts to argue the necessity of Slavic language-and-culture disciplines within the same context. Generally, such works have appealed to a notion of ‘national interest’ conceptualised in a foreign-affairs-and-trade framework (Wheatcroft, Mathew and Phillips 1991: 21–25; Holmes 2005). Their effect has been negligible, in part, no doubt, because the economic and geopolitical significance of Eastern Europe and the countries of the former Soviet Union for Australian politicians, officials and business people has been perceived as minor. This, in turn, may be connected to the low volume of economic connections between Australia and the relevant countries.
An important argument, though one that had real consequences only during the period of efflorescence of Australian multiculturalism in the late 1970s and 1980s (Liddicoat 1996), is the one that we have recently articulated anew in relation to LCTLs in general: “Ethnic communities, whether established or relatively new in Australia, can reasonably expect to be able to maintain their cultural heritage as an integral part of their embodiment of being Australian” (Dunne and Pavlyshyn 2012b: 7). The connection between the experience of being a respected part of a community, and the formal recognition of important identity markers, such as language and culture, by prestige-conferring institutions has been noted by scholarship (Baldauf 2010 as well as being obvious to common sense. If one credits ‘national interest’ justifications for the study of Slavic language-and-culture disciplines, then one must acknowledge that failure to develop the linguistic and cultural knowledge of native and semi-native speakers is also a failure rationally to invest in the upgrading of a valuable resource whose future importance to the country cannot be predicted. Recent censuses confirm that, while there are significant numbers of speakers of some of the Slavic languages in Australia and at least some speakers of all of them, the number of people who claim to be of the corresponding linguistic and cultural backgrounds in all cases is much greater (Table 1). As has been argued in relation to languages spoken in Australia more generally (Clyne 2005), the country is losing a store of potential linguistic expertise—an invaluable strategic resource—which could instead be nurtured and enriched.

Table 1: Australia, 2011 Census of Population and Housing: Persons claiming Slavic ancestries; Persons claiming to speak Slavic languages at home.4 (Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ancestry / Language</th>
<th>Persons claiming this ancestry (1st response)</th>
<th>Persons claiming this ancestry (2nd response)</th>
<th>Persons claiming this ancestry (1st and 2nd responses)</th>
<th>Persons claiming to speak this language at home</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belarusian</td>
<td>1,047</td>
<td>616</td>
<td>1,663</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bosnian</td>
<td>18,035</td>
<td>2,217</td>
<td>20,252</td>
<td>16,270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgarian</td>
<td>3,633</td>
<td>1,800</td>
<td>5,433</td>
<td>2,317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croatian</td>
<td>91,841</td>
<td>34,427</td>
<td>126,268</td>
<td>61,548</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech</td>
<td>13,581</td>
<td>9,194</td>
<td>22,775</td>
<td>7,264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macedonian</td>
<td>80,891</td>
<td>12,678</td>
<td>93,569</td>
<td>68,849</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polish</td>
<td>103,501</td>
<td>66,854</td>
<td>170,355</td>
<td>50,695</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>47,676</td>
<td>26,640</td>
<td>74,316</td>
<td>44,058</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serbian</td>
<td>58,489</td>
<td>11,055</td>
<td>69,544</td>
<td>55,114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovak</td>
<td>7,262</td>
<td>2,793</td>
<td>10,055</td>
<td>4,991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenian</td>
<td>10,569</td>
<td>6,585</td>
<td>17,154</td>
<td>4,184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukrainian</td>
<td>23,366</td>
<td>15,426</td>
<td>38,792</td>
<td>7,761</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Impediments

The decline in the study of languages within the Australian education system is the theme of much concerned commentary, both scholarly (e.g. Martin 2005; Baldauf and White 2010) and journalistic (Hare 2012; Lane 2012a, 2012b). In the instance of the study of Slavic language-and-culture-disciplines at Australian universities we sought to identify the factors, institutional on the one hand, cultural on the other, that stand in the way of students taking up the study of these subject areas in numbers sufficient to render their continued university presence unproblematic. The following observations are based on conversations conducted in the first half of 2013 with each of the academic staff members who have responsibility for the Russian language-and-culture programs at Macquarie University, the University of Melbourne and the University of Queensland and for Polish and Croatian at Macquarie. One of the co-authors of this paper has charge of Ukrainian at Monash University.

Most of our interlocutors reported uncertainty about the future of their disciplines at their universities, despite stability and, in some instances, increases in student numbers. Several colleagues actively promoted their programs to the public at large and to the relevant communities, successfully in some instances. Across the board, however, there has been a decline in the number of students commencing at levels other than introductory, even though—especially in the case of Polish and Croatian—a not insignificant proportion of students taking up the study of a Slavic language have some background in the corresponding culture. Retention to second and third year levels was generally regarded as satisfactory (and sometimes better than in comparable language disciplines) but all programs reported difficulties in recruiting students into honours and higher degree candidature. Some colleagues attributed this to the fact that reduction in the number of discipline-specific electives (and their replacement by generic electives with limited Slavic content) left many students with a sense of being inadequately prepared to proceed to study involving research.

On the other hand, some internal structural changes had favoured enrolment, especially in Russian. At the University of Melbourne a recent doubling of first-year enrolments was linked by our interlocutor to the introduction of a reformed degree structure, the ‘Melbourne Model’ (University of Melbourne 2006), and, as part of it, a requirement that students undertake ‘breadth’ studies outside their home discipline. Melbourne and Macquarie also reported that some students were encouraged to continue by diploma structures that enabled them to take languages in parallel to other studies. At Macquarie, its $2500 scholarships, which assisted students to undertake in-country programs at Moscow State University and St Petersburg University, were praised as both good recruitment tools and language skill boosters.

Measures to pool language teaching resources across universities did not impress colleagues as realistic enrolment boosters: the establishment of a languages ‘hub’ for Brisbane’s universities, for example, had a minimal effect on the University
of Queensland’s Russian enrolments. In 1999-2001, the temporary administrative union of Russian at Melbourne and Monash was accompanied by a decline in enrolments at Melbourne, possibly because of a perception that the university’s commitment to Russian Studies had diminished. Indeed, in general, few students took up opportunities for cross-institutional study where these were available. The difficulties involved in navigating the administrative labyrinth of cross-institutional enrolment are considerable, especially where a student wishes to undertake the study in question in the distance mode. Only Macquarie, with its long tradition of distance education, had a significant proportion of off-campus students in each of the three languages currently offered. On the whole, there was little confidence that benefit would flow from consolidating Slavic languages-and-cultures education across a number of universities: the administrative effort required, our respondents believed, would outweigh the value of additional enrolments. There was universal agreement that existing pathways through higher education made it difficult for many students enrolled in non-humanities disciplines to complete a major or even a minor in Slavic (or, indeed, any) languages and cultures. Even the University of Melbourne’s ‘breadth’ requirements, introduced under the Melbourne Model, did not necessarily create room for a language major in non-Arts Bachelor degrees. Most of the colleagues interviewed, however, accepted such limitations as inevitable. What many of them regretted, however, was the decline in the availability of Commonwealth-supported postgraduate diplomas in languages, which closed off a valuable avenue for specialised language study by people already qualified in another field and motivated by a special interest in the relevant language.

Our observations on cultural factors affecting students’ choices to take up (or, more to the point, not to take up) Slavic language-and-culture courses of study are indirect, tentative and in some respects inconclusive. They are based, in the main, on the views of the program leaders which, though drawn from extensive experience, remain impressionistic. We hope to be in a position to use focus groups to provide a clearer picture of factors motivating and demotivating potential students of the languages and cultures in question. In the interim, it is necessary to point out that the observations of teachers are not always supported by less mediated reflections of students’ views. A number of colleagues, for example, connected the relatively low take-up of Slavic languages to a supposed belief by students that such competences have low employment value. One of our informants held the complementary view that, of those students who do take up Russian, a significant proportion is motivated by pragmatic considerations. An internal University of Melbourne survey of students of Russian, which inquired into such issues, however, revealed that most of the respondents reported “personal enrichment,” closely followed by “interest in the culture of this language” and “the opportunity to try something new” as the main factors influencing their decision to study Russian (University of Melbourne 2012: 6). Career considerations did not figure highly at all. It may be that students are less mercenary and more intellectually adventurous than in our moments of pessimism that we fear.
The main non-structural factor discouraging students, having enrolled in first year, from continuing to second year (or, in some instances, to second semester of first year) was identified by a number of colleagues as the difficulty experienced by students of learning a Slavic language: most Slavic languages have relatively complex systems of morphology. Our interlocutors connected this phenomenon to students’ general lack of experience of second language learning, a predicament they believed to be on the increase as the number of students taking languages in Australian schools declined.

Finally—and this demotivating factor relates in particular to students with some semi-native proficiency in the Slavic languages—our informants referred to what might be called the “why bother” factor, which one of our interviewees saw as a consequence of the low social prestige of many community languages even among their carriers and potential carriers and, more generally, of the ‘monolingual mindset’ that Michael Clyne deplored as widespread in Australian society at large (Clyne 2008).

6. Conclusions

From the late 1980s to 2014 the number of Australian universities engaged in research and teaching in Slavic language-and-culture disciplines declined from six to three, while the number of such Slavic Studies disciplines in which undergraduate majors were available likewise fell from six to three. A number of institutional and cultural factors were commonly identified by leading practitioners active in these disciplines as contributing to this state of affairs: financial pressure on the Australian higher education system in general, combined with internal budgetary priorities of individual universities unfavourable to small-enrolment subjects; degree structures poorly adjusted to the needs of students who wish to augment a non-humanities specialisation with the study of a language; and societal attitudes, including the belief that Slavic languages are ‘difficult’ and scepticism as to the value of proficiency in more than one language.

We conclude with a list of what we regard as essential for the minimal health of Slavic language-and-culture disciplines at Australian universities:

1. That the Slavic language-and-culture disciplines currently taught not be further reduced but maintained and adequately resourced to provide a program leading to competence both for ab initio and for ‘some previous-competence’ students (i.e. majors);
2. That the Slavic programs other than Russian that are currently taught at one institution only be resourced to provide both face-to-face teaching and flexible delivery;
3. That the resourcing of these programs be sufficient to enable participating staff to meet normal research expectations, enabling them to pursue normal academic careers;
4. That provision be made for the potential introduction at Australian universities of Slavic language-and-culture disciplines that are not currently taught, especially where a university may already be interested in developing a relevant area study, or where community, business, or foreign government interest or support is in evidence.

None of these objectives can be met, nor can the continuance of existing programs be guaranteed, under a funding regime where universities, acting autonomously to administer tight budgets, frown upon small and ‘uneconomic’ programs of research and education. Hence, what is needed is:

5. government-led national planning and co-ordination, ensuring the availability at Australian universities of Slavic language-and-culture disciplines within a general policy and implementation framework for Less Commonly Taught Languages.

Notes
1. We thank the following colleagues, who through interview or by other means provided information used in this paper: Dr Robert Lagerberg (University of Melbourne), Dr John McNair (University of Queensland), Associate Professor Kevin Windle (Australian National University) and, from Macquarie University, Dr Luka Budak, Dr Marika Kalyuga and Mr Andrew Siedlecki.

2. Similar circumstances have led to the loss from Australian universities of several other less commonly taught languages (see Dunne and Pavlyshyn 2012b: 12).

3. The search combined any of the keywords “Slavic Slavonic Slav Belarusian Bosnian Bulgarian Croatian Czech Macedonian Polish Russian Serbian Slovak Slovenian Ukrainian” with the limiting terms “journal,” “academic /scholarly” and “social sciences and humanities.”

4. In the 2011 Census, 6,689 persons gave Serbo-Croatian or Yugoslav as the name of the language that they spoke at home and 184 similarly reported Czechoslovakian. The Census gives no figures for people claiming corresponding ancestries. Likewise, 1,555 persons reported Montenegrin ancestry and 199 reported Sorbian or Wendish ancestry but the Census provides no data on the number of people claiming to speak the corresponding languages (ABS 2013).

References


