

**ASIA EDUCATION FOUNDATION
LEADING 21ST CENTURY SCHOOLS: ENGAGE WITH ASIA FORUM
19 MAY 2008**

SPEECH NOTES FOR THE HON JULIA GILLARD MP

Thank you for that welcome.

I recognise the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the Kaurna People (pronounced 'GHANA') people.

I want to thank the Asia Education Foundation for promoting and supporting the studies of Asia in Australian schools since 1992, and extend the personal thank of the Prime Minister for the important submission that you made to the 2020 Summit last month. And I want to congratulate all of you, and the professional associations for your involvement in the Leading 21st century schools initiative.

I have to concede straight off that when it comes to making a speech about Asia, our Prime Minister has set the high jump bar incredibly high. I know it may seem a cop out, but... this one's going to be delivered in English!

So let me start by giving you, in plain English, some facts which I am sure many of you know but which zero in on one of the biggest challenges we face as we start the Education Revolution.

- According to a recent study, half of all Australian primary and secondary schools teach their students little or nothing about Asia.ⁱ
- Less than 14 percent of Australian year-12 students are studying a foreign language.
- Only 5.8 percent are studying Asian languages at Year 12.
- And at university the proportion studying Asian languages is even lower – at 3 percent.

Now I want you to compare that with what happens elsewhere.

- In the Netherlands 99 percent of secondary students study at least one foreign language.
- And in Finland it is compulsory for students to study 3 foreign languages throughout schooling.

Why is this? Why do countries like the Netherlands and Finland go to such extraordinary lengths to make their citizens bilingual, trilingual and more?

I think the answer is obvious: those countries worked out long ago that, because they stood at the juncture of other powerful empires and cultures...

...in the Dutch case between the French, the German and the English...

...and in the Finnish case between Soviet East and capitalist West...

...their ability to survive and prosper depended on their capacity to converse and trade with their neighbours.

In recent decades Australia too has woken up to the reality of its geography.

Of course, the awareness of Asia promoted by the Whitlam, Hawke and Keating Governments in the 1970s, 80s and 90s goes back much further to our landmark post-war trade agreements with Tokyo and to the Colombo Plan of the 1950s. Kevin Rudd has spoken of how watching the television coverage of Whitlam's visit to China, which of course preceded President Nixon's, first awakened his interest in foreign affairs.

Our current Prime Minister may have been particularly far-sighted, but in those days it was assumed that the problem of communicating with our neighbours would largely be solved by them making an effort to talk to us. The cultural dominance of the UK and the US and the supremacy of the English language was unchallenged.

That has now changed.

Australian culture will remain western and liberal and based on the English language. But there is no doubt that it is changing in profound and exciting ways. The old world that gave us the luxury of monolingualism is not coming back.

Like the Netherlands and Finland, Australia now lies at the juncture of other powerful cultures, economies and power blocs: Asia, Europe and the US.

You just have to look at current foreign policy debates. It seems just yesterday our foreign policy community was debating whether we should give emphasis in our diplomacy to Asia, Europe or the US. Today they're debating whether we should give more emphasis to China, Japan or Indonesia. Things are moving quickly.

It is not just that the balance of traditional power and influence is shifting. That change is occurring as part of the emergence of a new world.

A world where:

- digital technologies and the internet are transforming the operation of the global economy;
- energy resources and the state of the natural environmental are an enormous influence on our national security and international stability;
- young people grow up at home with instantaneous electronic communication and increasingly expect to spend significant periods of their lives working and travelling around the world;

- an individual's knowledge, skills and ability to learn are fundamental to their chances in life;
- education is widely acknowledged as essential to the reduction of global poverty and the prospects for international development; and
- domestic and global issues are increasingly intertwined -- where national politicians are held responsible for international problems and ordinary citizens can join global campaigning movements,

India is now producing 2.5 million graduates every year in science, computing and engineering.

Chinese investment in firms and industries around the world, including in Australia, is growing rapidly.

Last year, East Asia was the destination for 58 percent of all Australian exports.

I know that Tim Harcourt has laid out an overview this morning of how the global economy is being radically reshaped by these forces.

And of course our schooling systems are regularly compared against standards of excellence not just in Europe and North America, but in South Korea, Singapore and Hong Kong China.

Against this backdrop of change, Australia must adapt and create new approaches and systems to capitalise on the opportunities Asia offers.

That is why, at the 2020 summit, it was the stream on Australia's security in the world which put Asia literacy at the top of its priorities.

It called for us to:

- Develop "a comprehensive, cross-agency, national strategic plan for a major reinvigoration of Asia literacy in Australia, to enhance our global engagement in trade, security and people to people exchanges;
- Commence a more focused effort to recruit foreign language teachers from local communities and overseas and to enhance Australia's foreign language teaching skills; and
- Link thousands of young Australians to Asian communities through support for school twinning, exchange programs, mentoring, in-country and community-based learning programs."

"Is that all?", I joked to myself, as I listened to the final summit reports being given on that Sunday afternoon last month

But there is no doubt that such engagement is a strategic necessity for us, as an economy and a society.

THE FOLLY OF ABOLISHING NALSAS

Given the scale of this challenge, it is even more troubling that in recent years participation in Asian language study has been going in the wrong direction.

In just four years between 2001 and 2005 – which coincided with the abolition of the National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools Program, or NALSAS in 2002 – the number of Government school students studying Indonesian and Japanese declined by about 60,000, while the number enrolled in Chinese languages increased only marginally.

We have some rebuilding to do and some lessons to learn.

The first lesson is that, as with any curriculum issue, the study of Asian society and languages requires strategic leadership from the Commonwealth and the States.

A NEW PROGRAM – NALSSP – THE NATIONAL ASIAN LANGUAGES AND STUDIES IN SCHOOLS PROGRAM

The Asia Education Foundation and the NALSAS were both initiatives by Paul Keating's Labor Government.

Obviously no Government led by someone as passionate about Asian languages as the current Prime Minister could put up with such a situation for long.

That's why prior to last November's election we announced a new National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program worth \$62.4 million over four years.

The Program will promote the study of Asian languages in high schools with emphasis on Japanese, Indonesian, Mandarin and Korean.

We know this won't be as simple as putting on classes and expecting students to come.

It will involve intense Commonwealth-State cooperation to bring about the creation of new human infrastructure and resources, especially the training of additional teachers and the development of specialist curriculum.

This process has already begun. Asian literacy was one of the lead items discussed at the Government's first COAG meeting on December 20 last year. And it is on the agenda of the Productivity Working Group I chair. Consultations with the states and territories and key stakeholders are now underway and information necessary for strategic planning is being collected.

The program will be overseen by the National Curriculum Board, of which Tony Mackay here is Deputy Chair.

Success will also mean building on the many excellent examples which already exist in Australian schools.

Examples like Byabarra Primary School in rural New South Wales, which I understand has developed a whole school focus on “China in the Bush”, including a Chinese artist-in residence, a dragon procession up the main street, an exhibition of the children’s work in the local art gallery and a visit to Canberra to investigate comparative religions.

Or like the Swan Education District in Western Australia which has forged a partnership with Kampung Speu Education District in Cambodia, which includes groups of teachers and principals in visiting their counterparts in Cambodia, sharing teaching materials and school resources and working together on effective approaches to teaching and learning.

We of course want the Asian Education Foundation to play a leading role in making this policy, and our broader educational engagement with Asia, a success.

Today I want to announce that the Australian Government will make a total of \$6.3 million available over the next four years to enable the Asia Education Foundation to further the objectives of the *National Statement for Engaging Young Australians with Asia in Australian Schools* and the *National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program*.

I will be asking them to work strategically with us, with all school systems and with many other stakeholders to help achieve the goals of our Asian Languages and Studies policy.

I will also be asking them to work on how we should develop the even more comprehensive, longer term approach to Asia literacy that was discussed at the 2020 summit, for reasons that I want to explain now.

PART OF THE WIDER EDUCATION AGENDA

It is impossible to conceive of a future Australian education system that does not take the study of Asia seriously. But the study of Asia is not a stand-alone change. It’s part of a major process of modernisation of Australian education that needs to take place if we are to equip our people to thrive in the 21st Century.

This is the other major point I want to make today – the education revolution we have begun to deliver is not just about increased resources.

It was about a whole new reform vision.

The times require us to change not just what we learn but also how we learn it.

We need to educate students for the global age. Asian literacy is but a part of that.

The generation at kindergarten, school, TAFE and university today face that new world. And the skills and knowledge they need will be evolving incredibly fast.

They are going to need to:

- have a strong base of core knowledge and the ability to build on it throughout their lives;
- be creative;
- be adaptable and able to learn new skills as needed;
- communicate effectively using rapidly evolving hardware and software;
- write clearly and well;
- have high level numerical skills;
- solve problems;
- be self-organised and self-motivated;
- be more entrepreneurial in outlook;
- understand the principles of environmental sustainability; and
- move easily between different cultures, and confident participating in diverse forms of community life.

As our education reform agenda develops, we will need to strengthen the acquisition of these things by Australia's young people.

We can do that in a number of ways.

For a start we need to improve performance in the core disciplines because the fundamentals of literacy and numeracy are the foundations upon which all else is built.

This is why we have allocated \$577.4 million over four years to deliver a National Plan on Literacy and Numeracy, including rigorous testing in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 and plain English reporting.

The new National Curriculum, to be completed in 2010, will focus on the core disciplines of English, maths, science, and history, to be followed by geography and languages.

These traditional disciplines will have to be complemented by new ones. It's not a question of choosing between old and new, it's a question of combining them in rigorous ways so that our students are able to participate successfully and shape the world around them.

Improved vocational education will be needed to give students the sorts of immediate job-related skills they and employers need in technical, commercial and other fields. And to do this we're providing \$2.5 billion to schools for Trade Training Centres to teach skills like carpentry and hairdressing as well as newer ones like electrotechnology and gas industry operations.

But equipping students for the global age will require more.

Not everything a child needs to learn at school can be written into the curriculum or even measured through testing.

Australia needs new ways of teaching and learning that promote creativity, flexibility, self reliance and the other abilities students will need for the 21st Century.

So not only do we want to attract and retain the best teachers – through initiatives like better pay and HECS scholarships and discounts for graduates in key disciplines – we’re going to need to have a debate about how best to train and re-train our teachers for the global age.

As the recent McKinsey Report – *How the World’s Best Performing School Systems Come Out On Top* – says, “the quality of an education system simply cannot exceed the quality of its teachers”.

ICT is bound to increase in importance and sophistication every year – something we are addressing with our \$1.2 billion Digital Education Revolution, giving every student in years 9 to 12 access to computers and assisting all schools to have high-speed broadband connectivity.

Education for the global age will also have to take into account new understandings about how and when children learn and what prevents them from learning.

The Heckman curve, which some of you will be familiar with, demonstrates that the earlier we start investing in children, the better their learning capacities develop and the less we have to spend on remedial education, unemployment, welfare and justice services in later years.

So creating well-educated global citizens means beginning the process of re-orienting education investment from early adulthood to early childhood. Last week’s budget and our work with States and Territories through COAG are beginning to deliver on that long term agenda and there is much more work to do as it progresses.

One measure in last week’s budget – establishing the \$11 billion Education Investment Fund - is an indication of the long term perspective we are adopting.

But for the investment to pay off, we need to create new capacity for teaching and learning, new methods for engaging whole communities in the pursuit of learning, and systems of delivery that work across our school systems, communities, and economy.

We need partners on this journey to build the Education Revolution. People and organisations such as yourselves.

I started off mentioning the Prime Minister and the impact he’s made through the simple act of speaking an Asian language.

He’s shown that the simple act of speaking an Asian language signifies so much more – engagement, respect and equality.

But the individual leadership that he has shown needs to be complemented and taken further by a much wider group of leaders; people like you who are committed to developing the practice, and turning the potential of this area into a widespread reality.

That wider revolution is about giving young Australians 21st century literacy to become global citizens – right across their educational experience, from language proficiency to ICT capability to artistic creativity.

This Leading 21st century schools initiative is a major step in reinvigorating a national approach to Asian literacy through education. One which ranges from grassroots and school level work to strategic national and international partnership.

I encourage you to keep it up and partner us in the Education Revolution.

Thank you.

¹ The recent study of the place of Asian languages and studies in schools was an evaluation of the NALSAS program 1995-2002 undertaken by Erebus consulting. The other statistics come from recent DEEWR research on the teaching of languages.