

## **2011 LOUIS TRIEBEL LECTURE**

### **CREATING A LANGUAGES FUTURE:**

### **HOW AUSTRALIA CAN BE WORLD BEST PRACTICE**

### **IN LANGUAGES' EDUCATION ?**

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### **AUTOCTHONOUS IDIOSYNCRACY**

It is asserted that the Great Admiral of the Ming Dynasty Treasure Ships, Zheng He, travelled the Asia-Pacific seas in a fleet of 300 ships and even landed on the shores of Northern Australia in 1432.

Unfortunately he died one year later in 1433, and the Ming emperors who had grown concerned over the growing power of this navy and over barbarian contamination dismantled the Fleet.

This left the oceans uncontested for the bumptious Europeans and, duly after the American Revolution denied England the Virginias for convict settlement, led to a British Australia, just ahead of the French, Dutch, Portugese and Spanish interests.

Hence this Lecture is in English and not Chinese. Nor is it in any other European language or an indigenous language.

So here we are 22 million English speaking people occupying a whole continent in the Southern oceans, at the "arse end of the universe" as Paul Keating so colourfully described it – which I thought was terribly unkind to our New Zealand cousins. We are an autocthonous idiosyncracy, like the platypus – and hence seemingly unpropitious soil for a world leadership role in languages.

Or is it? Let me cite some contradictions to that. Four in fact.

## **THE AUSTRALIAN WAY**

**First, Australia can be a world-beater.** We all take pride from Sam Stosur winning the US Open on 9/11. It is just great for our screen elocution teacher Geoffrey Rush to win an Oscar. And in the business world an Australian business leader from Melbourne is appointed to be the global head of multinational company KPMG.

I was asked recently by a reporter who was looking for evidence of policy problems for the Employment and Education Minister, “what does Universities Australia think of Evans”. I replied that we thought it was great that he had won the Tour De France.

The fact is that Australia regularly vies with Finland for first place as the first ranked country under the United Nation’s Human Development Index, just as Melbourne invariably competes with Vancouver as the World’s Most liveable City – though as I sat in the airport traffic earlier, I did think, in a manner akin to Tony Abbott’s remark about Australian economists<sup>1</sup>, that it made me think about how awful the others must be.

Yet it was not all that long ago Lee Kwan Yew warned that Australia was becoming “The Poor White Trash of Asia”. Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, and John Howard and Peter Costello,

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<sup>1</sup> To the effect that the negative opinion of almost all Australian economists on his direct action carbon reduction policies made him reflect not on the policies but on the quality of Australian economists. Presumably Wayne Swan, basking in the glory of being named by Euro-Money as World’s Best Treasurer for 2011, has a more beneficent view.

took up that challenge, or its “banana republic” variant, and helped transform the nation to becoming the best performing OECD economy in recent times.

**Second, far from being an English colonial outpost we are the world’s most multicultural nation,** with 25% of our population overseas born and hailing from every country around the world.

It has not been ever thus. We have certainly long been a country of immigration. Even the indigenous Australians are recently definitively proven to have been migrants from Africa. But for a long period, British Isles migration dominated until post World War Two really, when there began a steady shift east as if by gravity to add Northern Europeans, then Southern Europeans, then Middle Easterners, and finally South-East Asians, East Asians and South Asians, and now Africans and South Americans are coming in larger numbers too.

According to the evidence in the World Values Survey a significant share of the Australian population is still uneasy over this transformation – but, that said, we are less uneasy than any other country! I was sadly bemused during the Indian student issues of recent times to have noted that in the World Values Survey Australia was the most accepting of diversity and India close to the least accepting of diversity of the countries sampled.

More Australians are happy to live, work and socialise with folk of different cultures, ethnicities, religions and birthplaces than most of the rest of the world. We have a long way to go, but we have also come a long way since the days of the White Australia Policy.

**Third, the need to improve things further for universities has hidden from us here the fact that we do have one of the world's best systems of higher education.** Now I would say that wouldn't I? But, no. If I say that too much, government will ease up on improving its settings and support when there is patently more to be done to the national benefit- and if I say that too much, most of my academic colleagues suffering under high student-staff ratios, casualised employment and heavy administration loads will think I have lost touch - perhaps even live in an ivory tower! I fully acknowledge the need for betterment, and not simply from a selfish sectoral view but putting on my policy analyst hat from a true national benefit view.

But, that said, the Lisbon Council in 2009 in the first systematic serious ranking of university systems did place us first. Likewise the British Council in its 2011 Index of International Education had us equal first. In the Times or SJT individual university rankings, the share of our universities in the top 100-500 is more than any other country, even if we struggle a little in the top ten to fifty or so amongst the world's 16,000 universities. There is little representation there of anything other than the US and the UK.

And I would argue that a series of improvements have taken place not reflected in these successful measures, especially those emanating from the HEEF/EIF, Bradley Review, Cutler Review, Baird Review, Knight Review and, fingers crossed, the Lomax Smith Review. Unlike the West Report, the reviews have been acted on well to date. Many of the improvements have yet to make life one jot easier for the average academic but, this is better than getting

worse, and, more positively, there will be worthy benefits flowing through in my view.

**Fourth, within higher education, we are a world leader in international education.** We began in earnest with aid-funded international education in the 1950s to 1970s, which helped produce some of the current South-East Asian leadership cadre. We followed in the 1980s to the 2010s with massification and commercialisation of international education, to the point where 25% of university enrolments became international, the world's largest share.

The education world looked with wonder at this growth and the associated offshoots such as IDP, IELTS, Navitas, overseas campuses, pathway colleges, visa arrangements, ESOS and more. And the emergence of higher education as the third largest export focussed political minds in a way that all previous advocacy had not achieved, for all its narrow functionalism.

More recently though the loss of a proper education focus has become recognised and a broader and deeper international education experience is being sought: more disciplines, more research students, more internationalisation of curricula, more Australians studying overseas, and more research and staff and program linkages with overseas universities.

**To pull all this together,** I assert that Australia can be a world-beater when it so chooses and it has fantastic assets in its multicultural population, its higher education system and its international education achievements. The soil is fertile indeed.

So, what is needed to be world best practice in international language education?

### **POLICY PROGRESS.**

The natural inclination is to say give us more resources. And that is certainly part of the story. But there is a lot of competition there. It is often said never to get between a premier OR a vice chancellor and a bag of money. And yet both evince this behaviour for good reason: for the last twenty years fiscal arrangements have been reducing the state share of tax and the university share of public spending. In the case of universities, we were the only country for the fifteen years up until 2008, where the public funding of higher education as a share of GDP was falling, when the average was a 48% increase.

It may be that the Lomax Smith Base Funding Review which is due to report in October will assist. It is dealing both with the per student funding and the relative funding for different discipline areas. Work conducted by a Universities Australia finance group has established that domestic undergraduates are under-funded by 33% relative to the base costs of teaching and learning and scholarship and research not covered by competitive grants and the sustainable research excellence funding.

This is covered principally by transferring funds from international student and postgraduate coursework income. There are both good equity and economic reasons why this cross-subsidy is wrong, but every academic knows it is wrong too because the 33% is only the

deficiency for present standards of performance which we do know are unsustainable.

The present system is essentially milking the outgoing baby-boomers of their last drops of commitment with heavy work-loads and absence of effective staff sustainability provisions. This is especially the case in the humanities and social sciences and this in turn shows up in the lower ERA research performance in those disciplines. Hence a sensible Base Funding Review outcome will help address a range of ills that especially bedevil the HASS areas- and hence languages.

This will be a start, but more will be needed. Let us indeed begin to think beyond the power of the purse and even matters of dedicated language program funding issues, which have had the awful history of “on again off again” policy, to wider structural issues and think what might be needed. I would point to four areas that seem especially pertinent. These are: partnership, partnership, partnership and partnership.

**First, partnership with other universities.**

Within our universities a system of “co-opetition” has arisen, as the sector has grown and as government funding has not. Competition can be helpful: all scholars to an extent dance to the applause of their peers which is a contest of esteem. But one of the real and little heralded strengths of the Australian higher education scene is the plethora of sector-wide co-operative institutions.

More than most countries we have groupings ranging from ATEM to Unimutual, from CAUDIT to CAUL from FASTS to the Academy of

Sciences and more. At Universities Australia we convene regular meetings of the four DVC groups, Vice Chancellors and Chancellors.

My point is that the very initiative in forming the Languages and Cultures Network for Australian Universities (LCNAU), is firmly within this co-operative tradition and can advance a co-ordinated national approach to language education and scholarship in Australian universities. Academics and artists are the most articulate groups in our community, but they have been all too inarticulate in their own causes. LCNAU must itself be a strong and unrelenting vehicle for advocacy if change is to occur.

What sort of advocacy? Well, along with the obvious issues, I would urge wide embrace: for example, in my humble view<sup>2</sup>, one of the most effective vehicles for strengthening language diversity in Australia was the ability to persuade government in validly seeking English competence for skilled migration under the points system, to balance this by adding extra points for second languages, community or business. These bonus points must be protected and enhanced and who better to keep an eye on ensuring that and representing that than a body such as LCNAU.

### **Second, partnership with employers.**

There is a danger that university enjoyment of its important academic freedom, self-accreditation and institutional autonomy characteristics ultimately removes it too much from the wider society.

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<sup>2</sup> I once told a Malaysian official I was but a humble economist. She snapped back: “no you are not”. I didn’t have the gumption to ask which bit of the description she was rejecting.



Universities Australia bends its knee to no-one on advancement of these aspects of university activity, as seen in the recent battles over TEQSA and, indeed, over inclusion of academic freedom objectives in the amendments to the Higher Education Spending Act.

That said, it is accepted that an appropriate balance must be struck between independence and engagement, and there are signs that government itself is returning to concern for impact, after having dropped that ball since the days when Jenny Macklin was in Opposition and waxed lyrical on the theme. There has not been much waxing of this kind for some years, but I think it's back- not least because it's back in the UK.

What might this mean here in the language arena? One example is working with employers. The biggest step forward in increasing enrolments and completions in languages, in my view, would be to work with employers to ensure that language education can be seen to be relevant to a wide variety of careers and employments beyond the self-reproduction that seems so common to academics as their *raison d'être*. How many academics are only interested in their top students who are interested in becoming university language teaching?

The great bulk of employers will need persuading, as the splendid research of Andrew Leigh, before he became the Federal Member for Fraser, has shown: many employers are prejudiced against non-Anglo recruitment. But lead employers show the way in seeking people who understand global languages and cultures as a competitive advantage in penetrating overseas markets around the world in trade and investment, including the rapid growth of services

trade where interpersonal skills are of the essence. This is where our lawyers, engineers, accountants and architects can build niches of excellence.

The example of the Go8/UA French–Australia internships program shows what can be done. The key step is for sufficient language academics to reach out from their comfort zones and work with leading edge businesses<sup>3</sup>.

### **Third, partnership with other disciplines.**

Universities have evolved from the personal moral development model of Oxbridge to the Humboldt research university based on specialised disciplines. It is the latter that still dominates today, as reflected in the reverence accorded the SJT Index as the pre–eminent ranking system for universities or the 4000 submissions made on the ERA as our local attempt to measure research “performance” by universities.

But arguably the biggest test for the future evolution of universities is how universities can, even better than they do, contribute to the “great moral challenges of our time” to quote a former Australian Prime Minister.

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<sup>3</sup> In the Financial Review September 17–18, Matt Wade reports, “Amid the shanty towns and flashy mansions of India’s mega–city Mumbai, there’s an unexpected Australian export: serviced offices for hire... It’s run by the Indian franchise of a Sydney firm Servcorp...Taine Moufarrige, the executive director of Servcorp, said.. We’ve learnt that we really have to understand the culture and business environment. There is such a massive opportunity for Australia in Asia but I think its going to be a really long process”

Judging by the environmental challenge, the answer may lie within interdisciplinarity. Known by many names, trans-disciplinarity, multi-disciplinarity, inter-disciplinarity, academics everywhere are being obliged to grapple with it. One reason is that the students want it: as reflected in the rise of double degrees and the demise of the honours degree. But it also opens up new frontiers of knowledge in research and in the impact of that research. The task is complex and problematic, but the very essence of universities is to grapple with the known unknowns.

The challenge for language education, and not totally new but certainly accelerated, is how to work with other disciplines not as a begrudging adjustment to rules on majors and pre-requisites, but to genuinely understand the approaches of others and derive synergy from the interaction. To take the obvious cases of regional and international studies, language and culture are of the essence. But what of international commerce, comparative sociology, public policy and others?

Do the language education areas have something to contribute and, if so, what, – says he an Andrew Metcalfe rhetorical spirit<sup>4</sup> ? Defining a constructive answer to this question may well determine whether language education descends into a declining gentility or becomes a key and distinctive part of our future in the knowledge century.

**Fourth, there is the need for partnership with politicians.**

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<sup>4</sup> For those who follow politics in Australia and saw or heard the Secretary of the Immigration Department at Estimates Committee recently.

Many politicians do not see votes in universities let alone language studies. But they and their party pollsters are all too often like the drunk who searches for his/her lost car keys at night under the street lamp because the light is better there. They presume questions and answers from their own predispositions. More interrogative research shows that aspiration in schooling AND in tertiary studies is an incredibly powerful voting motive that has yet to be properly tapped in Australian campaigning and policy.

For LCNAU to be able to show this from their own focussed research would be very useful indeed, as would the identification of champions amongst the political class who share their vision and commitment. Currently Premier Bailleau is showing in Victoria in the languages area just what such commitment can achieve. Even a small gesture such as talking to Allan Fels about commissioning an ANZSOG case study of how this transformation took place would provide the insight that other jurisdictions may need to repeat these important steps forward.

## **POSSIBILITIES**

**To sum up.** The foundations are strong for defining a positive and creative languages future for Australia. We can be a world leader. But it needs those who are committed to the cause to become designers of new ways and advocates of the importance of this and recruiters of partners for realising this vision.

It is my belief that realisation of a better languages education future is there for the grasping, and I wish those in the field well in the task.

