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Shaping Australia's Future

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"... Australia requires an export culture which is "Asia literate" i.e. ... one which possesses the range of linguistic and cultural competencies required by Australians to operate effectively at different levels in their various dealings with the region – as individuals, organisations and as a nation." Rudd 1994: 2.

The establishment of the NALSAS Task force to oversee the process of implementing a national Asian languages and cultures strategy, based on the recommendations of the report *Asian Languages and Australia's Economic Future* (1994), marked a significant phase in the journey for Australians to become Asia literate. It is timely to recall its importance as the first strategy for Asia literacy to receive bipartisan support at State, Territory and Commonwealth government levels for national implementation, and to consider the journey ahead.

The story of how the NALSAS strategy was devised, accepted and implemented is a complex one. Many dedicated to the study of Asia in Australia will know that for more than four decades Australian scholars of Asia argued that the study of Asia and its languages was in the national interest. Yet despite a range of cogent arguments, government interest in prioritising Asian languages and studies in the Australian education system only gathered momentum in the late 1980s and heightened in 1992, when the nation's current and future economic and strategic interests were seen to be linked to the Asian region. Such economic and utilitarian factors were significant in finally harnessing the political will to develop and implement a national strategy for the study of Asian languages and cultures.

Given the longstanding efforts of scholars, teachers and organisations to promote Asia in the Australian education system, it is ironic but most significant, that the impetus for the NALSAS strategy was largely political. As part of the lead up to the state election in Queensland, Labor opposition leader Wayne Goss pledged that, if elected in December 1989, his government would implement a statewide program of foreign language study in primary schools. Significantly, the study of Asia languages and cultures was a key feature of the program. This Languages Other Than English (LOTE) pledge was developed into a policy prescription and successfully implemented by Paul Braddy, the first Minister for Education in the Goss Government. By 1992, Goss and his principal policy advisor, the Director General of the Cabinet Office in the Queensland government, Kevin Rudd, were confident that Queensland's LOTE initiative could form the basis for a national Asian languages and studies program.

Prior to the first meeting of the Coalition of Australian Governments (COAG), Goss met with Prime Minister Keating in November 1992 to argue that while the Commonwealth government was pursuing Asian engagement, it did not have a national education policy to support current and future links with the region. Keating responded positively. He accepted that the capacity to speak an Asian language and to understand the cultures of the region was significant in opening new trade and investment opportunities, and, he secured Federal Cabinet's support for this proposal. Such high level political support was essential as the commitment to fund a national strategy had to be secured across all levels of government.

In December 1992, the first COAG meeting unanimously accepted Queensland's proposal that an Asian languages and cultures program be developed for national implementation in the education system. Accordingly, COAG commissioned a high level Working Group, chaired by Kevin Rudd, to draft a strategy for this program. The Working Group's report, *Asian Languages and Australia's Economic Future* (1994), emphasised that a national Asian Languages and cultures strategy should be developed in the context of second language development. To this end, it recommended that four priority Asian languages, selected for their economic significance to Australia, and studied through a school-based program, form the thrust of the Asian languages/cultures initiative. The report envisaged the creation of an 'export culture' based on the skills of Asia literacy and assumed that this would enhance Australia's economic interests in East Asia.

Asian Languages and Australia's Economic Future (1994) was accepted and endorsed, with one exception, at the COAG meeting in Hobart on 24 February 1994. In the light of previous efforts to establish a strategy for Asian languages and studies, this was significant. Two features crucial to this achievement must be noted. First, the securing of bipartisan support at federal and state level was unprecedented. As one observer remarked 'no doubt others are as puzzled as they are envious to see the Liberal and Labor constituents of the Council of Australian Governments apparently agree to support the funding of the \$200 million for the initial implementation of this proposal' (Singh 1996). Second, the Strategy was promoted as a co-operative initiative in the partnership between the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments and non-government education authorities.

Yet despite the highest levels of political endorsement and a cooperative approach to policy making, one issue threatened the Strategy's implementation. And this stumbling block concerned funding. Although the Commonwealth government had accepted the Report, it reserved its position on Recommendation 7A, the suggested funding commitment of 50% from the Commonwealth and 50% from the States and Territories. The Chair and Executive Officer of the Taskforce responsible for overseeing implementation, Professor Colin Mackerras and Allan Langdon, commenced a series of high-level negotiations to ensure that the required funding arrangement was secured. Indeed, the NALSAS strategy almost collapsed at this stage as stakeholders from the Commonwealth, States and Territories debated the funding model. Despite delays caused by the funding dispute, consensus was reached and the NALSAS Strategy's implementation commenced its first quadrennium in 1995.

Although the NALSAS Strategy initially emphasised second language provision over Asian studies, the implementation period from 1995 revealed a broadening focus on cultures. In the ten years since the Asia Education Foundation (AEF) was established to promote the study of Asia across the curriculum in Australian schools, it has worked with the NALSAS Taskforce on various national collaborative strategies and played a crucial role in this process. Indeed, the journey so far indicates that much has been achieved.

Yet much remains to be done. The NALSAS Strategy was conceived as a long term process supported by adequate funding from all levels of government. The shift required to further our conceptual framework about Asia and to promote Asia literacy across the curriculum depends upon this funding. In the light of what has been achieved so far, and the May announcement that Commonwealth funding for the NALSAS Strategy would cease at the end of 2002, we must lobby for funding to continue. As the Asian Studies Council put it 'the study of Asia should not be an elective for Australia' (Asian Studies Council 1988: 2).

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