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Future depends on Asian languages

- Guy Healy
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AUSTRALIANS risk being marooned in the dated jobs and industries of the 20th century unless a \$11.3 billion mass Asian language literacy plan is acted on within a generation, according to Michael Wesley, a leading expert on international relations.

Ahead of today's Sydney launch of a report documenting "a precipitous decline" in the study of languages at universities, Professor Wesley said it was not enough to rely on a fluent elite to project Australia's interests in theregion.

"Simply relying on an elite means the rest of Australian society - as our economy internationalises and becomes more knowledge-intensive - will be trapped in 20th-century industries, while other countries will be moving ahead and taking part in the 21st-century knowledge economy," he said.

The report from Professor Wesley's Asia Institute at Griffith University, titled "Building an Asia-Literate Australia", says Mandarin, Japanese and Indonesian should be given priority sincethey are the languages of Australia's two largest trading partners and closest neighbour respectively.

Professor Wesley, incoming executive director of the Lowy Institute, said it was critical for the country's prosperity that half of all Australians became competent in a key Asian language over the next 30 years. "The world of the future is going to be an Asian-centred knowledge economy, and essential to getting ahead in the knowledge economy is getting our human infrastructure right, and essential to that is being able to speak to people in languages other than English," he said.

The Griffith report proposes an Australian strategy for Asian language proficiency, under which universities and schools would bid for funding from a new national Asian languages institute to ensure that the number of preparatory, primary and secondary school students taking Mandarin, Japanese or Indonesian is doubled within five years.

Successful bidders would have to commit to ensuring that all students up to year 10 received at least 150 minutes of instruction in the target language a week. After 15 years, the key languages group would be expanded to include Vietnamese, Thai, Farsi, Bengali, Cambodian, Lao and Burmese.

Professor Wesley pointed to World Bank forecasts showing the Asia-Pacific as a leader in the emerging knowledge economy, and contrasted this with the "alarming" finding that 75 per cent of Australians spoke no language other than English.

He said the new pools of talent opening up in the knowledge economy were not in the English-speaking world but in fast-developing Asian nations such as China, Korea, Taiwan and India.

"The majority of consumers of knowledge products - from web-based materials to films - will consume products

in languages other than English, and will develop knowledge products in indigenous languages, so it stands to reason that countries that can work with these indigenous capacities stand to gain," he said.

Asked why Australia should embark on such a monumental task in learning foreign languages when English already was the lingua franca of global business, Professor Wesley conceded this was the "key argument" against his proposal.

"(But) learning another language is the quickest way to understanding that the way you think about the world is not universal; it's shaped by your culture," he said.

Griffith's Asia Institute report calls for all years of schooling to be targeted for second-language provision in a major extension of the Rudd government plan that targets only certain years in high school. The Wesley plan, similar in some ways to Kevin Rudd's Asian language push, is at odds with the broader language strategy of experts such as Melbourne University's Joe Lo Bianco.

Professor Lo Bianco has argued that a balanced approach to language learning has to rest on both pragmatic (trade and security), and humanistic (curiosity, cultural insight, intellectual development) grounds: "The lesson Australia needs to learn is to make a distinction between what is appropriate for most schools and most learners on the one hand (mass policy), and providing for the specialist needs of targeted fields on the other (niche policy).

"Most students will never be involved in trade negotiations or national security policing.

"School language learning should be an apprenticeship in how to learn languages successfully, university languages learning should be intellectually rigorous and tied to disciplines, and specialist language provision in government departments and other fields should provide targeted specialised teaching building on successful language study in school and/or university."

Professor Wesley said Australia could no longer afford to depend on "an elite to negotiate with the rest of the world for us" but had to spread Asian language literacy more widely to underpin jobs of the future.

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