

Schools set Asian lingo challenge

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THE Federal Government has quietly launched a \$62 million Asian language plan with an ambitious goal to double within a decade the number of year 12 students fluent in Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian or Korean.

Education Minister Julia Gillard conceded that achieving the target would be a major challenge because participation in some Asian languages had troublingly 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 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," she said.

"The Rudd Government considers learning languages other than English, in particular Asian languages, important to Australia's future security and prosperity in an increasingly globalised world."

The money, to be spent over the next 2½ years, will fund extra Asian language classes in high schools, teacher training, and development of a specialist curriculum for students with language skills.

About \$44 million will be carved up among state and territory governments and non-government schools, with a further \$10 million handed out through a grants scheme open to organisations such as high-education providers, businesses and Asian communities. An additional \$6 million will be spent on a schools' grants program to be run by the Asia Education Foundation.

The recently formed National Curriculum Board has been told to oversee the scheme and boost the number of qualified Asian language teachers, monitor Asian language courses in schools for consistency, and offer incentives for students to become proficient in a language other than English.

Compared to other developed nations, Australia's education system has failed spectacularly to boost participation in foreign language studies, despite sporadic efforts by previous governments.

Figures from the Department of Education show less than 14 per cent of year 12 students are studying a foreign language and only 5.8 per cent are studying an Asian language.

At universities, the proportion studying Asian languages is even lower, at just 3 per cent.

To achieve the target, about 12 per cent of students leaving year 12 will need to be fluent in Mandarin, Japanese, Indonesian or Korean by 2020.

Business Council of Australia policy director Patrick Coleman said the funding boost, which started to flow at the start of this school year, was long overdue.

He said Australia had failed to invest sufficiently in Asian languages.

"An increasing amount of trade and investment is carried out in Asia and it's not just China and Japan," Mr Coleman said. "It's the wider number of countries in Asia and we need to give it a higher priority. It's not just the direct learning of languages, its interacting with people from those countries."

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/national/schools-set-asian-lingo-challenge-20090214-87pv.html>