



# 澳大利亚学汉语协会

Association for Learning Mandarin in Australia Inc.

Website: <http://alma.anu.edu.au>

## **Australia in the Asian Century: submission from the Association for Learning Mandarin in Australia Inc (ALMA)**

The Association for Learning Mandarin in Australia Inc. (ALMA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Australia in the Asian Century White Paper. ALMA is a community-based non-profit organisation established to promote the learning of Mandarin and the understanding of Chinese culture in Australia. Since 1985, ALMA has operated a Mandarin/English bilingual child care centre in the southern suburbs of Canberra.

ALMA notes that organisations making submissions were invited to focus on matters identified in the issues paper as relevant to the White Paper. Our submission focuses on a set of initiatives needed to strengthen substantially Australia's ability to engage with Asia in the long term. Australia will need many more people who can engage with business and governments from the powerful Asian countries of the future. This engagement is most effectively accomplished by being able to speak the languages of those countries, in much the same way that China has used English-speaking individuals to engage with Anglophone countries over the last four decades.

The conclusions of the submission are that Federal, State and Territory governments should provide:

- explicit funding support for bilingual child care and preschool programs in priority Asian languages;
- increased funding and investment in teachers and teaching resources for bilingual education programs in priority Asian languages at primary school level and beyond; and;
- support for initiatives which seek to capitalise on the cultural and language knowledge already within Australia – in our multicultural population and the large numbers of international students from Asia studying in our schools and tertiary institutions.

Asian economies have led global economic growth in the past decade, and this trend will continue and strengthen. Together, China and India accounted for less than a tenth of world gross domestic product (GDP) in 1990 and almost a fifth in 2010. In 2020 they are projected to account for more than a quarter of world GDP — which will be equivalent to the combined share of US, Japan and ASEAN-5. In 2030 they are projected to account for a third of world GDP.<sup>1</sup>

The Australian and Chinese economies are highly interdependent. China has been our largest trading partner since 2009<sup>2</sup>, it is our largest export market, our largest source of students and our largest source of tourism income. It could overtake the US to become

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Treasury, *"The Asian Century and the Changing Structure of Australia's Economy"*, Budget Paper No. 1, Statement 4, May 2011

<sup>2</sup> Smith, Stephen, *"Australia-China Relations: A Long-term View"*, address to the Australian National University Australia China Institute, 26 October 2009

the world's largest economy on purchasing power parity terms as early as 2016<sup>3</sup>. With its ongoing urbanisation process and growing middle class, China is likely to continue to play a central role in the Australian economy for some time into the future, and therefore have a significant impact on the well-being of Australia and its people.

Against this background, it is essential that Australia has its policy settings right, to ensure we are in a position to maximise the benefits from the complementarities in our relationship. This includes developing a workforce that has the cultural and linguistic skills to engage effectively with the economies of the future – something we currently lack (even in our diplomatic service as noted in the Lowy publication 'Diplomatic Disrepair'<sup>4</sup>).

ALMA considers that language education is a key to cultural understanding. While a degree of cultural understanding can be developed without learning the relevant language, it can never be as complete, not least because language (both oral and written) is a central feature of human culture, and is fundamental to the transmission of cultural traditions and norms within cultures as well as between cultures.

Mandarin is one of the four Asian languages identified by the Government as priority languages to be promoted in Australian schools<sup>5</sup>. In 2008, fewer than 4,600 students took Mandarin at Year 12 level, of whom the vast majority spoke Chinese as their first language<sup>6</sup>. This reflects the fact that Mandarin is a difficult language for native English speakers to acquire, and many students who study Mandarin earlier in their school career are making the calculation that continuing to Year 12, particularly in competition with native speakers, is not the best way to maximise their tertiary entrance scores.

Mandarin education in Australia also suffers from a lack of resources, in the form of qualified teachers (particularly at primary school level), and from a lack of time devoted to language teaching. The Foreign Service Institute in Washington DC estimates that highly motivated and well-educated US diplomats take around 2,200 hours to achieve professional level proficiency in Mandarin and around 600 hours to achieve the same level of proficiency in French. An Australian student who starts a foreign language in Year 7 and continues to Year 12 will receive a total of around 500 hours of instruction.<sup>7</sup>

This is one of the reasons ALMA believes that language education, particularly for Mandarin, should begin before children begin school. Children at the ALMA-run Chinese Australian Early Childhood Centre (CAECC), a facility for long day care for children aged from 6 weeks to 6 years, have intensive exposure to Mandarin from native-speaking carers during years when they are most strongly receptive to language learning, when language learning is fun, and when children are better able to mimic the sounds and body language that combine to produce communication at native or near-native levels. Indeed, research indicates that very young children actually grow the brain connections needed to learn a second language and that this phenomenon is no longer possible after the age of 12.<sup>8</sup> While we do not test the proficiency of children graduating

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<sup>3</sup> Swan, Wayne, "Building on our Strong Foundations in the Asian Century", address at Australian Labor Party National Conference, 3 December 2011

<sup>4</sup> Alex Oliver and Andrew Shearer, 'Diplomatic Disrepair: Rebuilding Australia's International Policy Infrastructure', 2011

<sup>5</sup> Gillard, Julia, "Rudd Government supports languages education in schools", media release, 20 October 2009

<sup>6</sup> Orton, Jane, Chinese Language Education in Australian Schools, October 2008, University of Melbourne, 2008

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

<sup>8</sup> Dumas, L. S., "Learning a Second Language: Exposing Your Child to a New World of Words Boosts Her Brainpower, Vocabulary, and Self-Esteem", Child, February 1999, pp72, 74, 76-77

from the Centre, anecdotal evidence suggests that many of them leave with at least a good basic grounding in Mandarin and a facility with pronunciation that assists their future acquisition of the language. ALMA has also worked closely over the years with Mawson Primary School, the government-run primary school in Canberra with which it is co-located, which has run a Mandarin intensive program since 2000.

In addition to the benefits of early exposure to Mandarin in terms of later acquisition of that language, research also suggests that significant early exposure to more than one language is of benefit to a child's general linguistic and broader cognitive development,<sup>9</sup> even where that child suffers learning disabilities.<sup>10</sup>

Australia's languages education policy is thus failing by not starting until school age, when nearly half of a child's prime language learning years are over. In ALMA's view, these factors combine to make a strong case for encouraging bilingual child care and preschool programs in priority languages and in promoting bilingual education, through support for immersion programs in primary schools and beyond. This encouragement on the part of the Federal and State and Territory governments should take the form of explicit funding support for bilingual child care centres and preschools, and increased funding and investment in teacher training and teaching resources for bilingual programs at the early childhood and primary school level.

The National Curriculum being developed for Mandarin should take into account the disincentives to non-native speaking students of taking Mandarin at Year 12 by ensuring that they are not disadvantaged through direct competition with native speakers. However, to maximise the level of language proficiency to be attained by non-native speaking students in Mandarin, early acquisition of Mandarin language skills through early childhood and preschool education, as well as bilingual programs in primary schools, should be encouraged and materially supported.

ALMA values and builds on the skills of Canberra residents with Chinese cultural literacy and skills in Mandarin. The majority of the educators at the childcare centre are of Chinese background, and ALMA regularly encourages its members, many of whom are non-Chinese parents of children at the centre, to capitalise on opportunities to hear Mandarin spoken and join Chinese cultural celebrations in the ACT. While less than 3% of the ACT population,<sup>11</sup> the Chinese represent the largest non-Anglo Celtic group in the local area. This would surely be the case in many other cities in Australia.

In addition to operating the early childhood centre, since 2001 ALMA has coordinated a community tutoring project which introduces fluent speakers of Mandarin to adults and families in the ACT interested in improving their knowledge of Mandarin and/or understanding of Chinese culture. In return the volunteer tutors get the satisfaction of contributing their knowledge to others, make more friends in the community, and improve their English. Over 70% of the 60 volunteer tutors in 2011 were international students from China.

Failure to utilise the language and cultural skills of our permanent and temporary residents with Asian backgrounds is a loss of opportunity for the monolingual majority.

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<sup>9</sup> Bialystok, Ellen, "Second-Language Acquisition and Bilingualism at an Early Age and the Impact on Early Cognitive Development", at [http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/BialystokANGxp\\_rev.pdf](http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/BialystokANGxp_rev.pdf), published online 9 February 2006

<sup>10</sup> Kremer-Sadlik, Tamar, "To Be or Not to Be Bilingual: Autistic Children from Multilingual Families", *ISB4: Proceedings of the 4th International Symposium on Bilingualism*, ed. James Cohen, Kara T. McAlister, Kellie Rolstad, and Jeff MacSwan, 1225-1234. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Press, 2005

<sup>11</sup> 2006 Census ABS

It is a waste of resources, and helps to promote the idea that the language and cultural skills of ethnic minorities are of no value. It also short changes our international students, many of whom can return to their own countries after several years without ever really making any meaningful social contacts with mainstream Australians.

In relation to schooling, ALMA has tried over the years to put our volunteer tutors in touch with local schools to help with Mandarin learning in the classroom. However, this has proved difficult to arrange. Even schools which recognize the value of such community input generally lack the necessary financial and human resources to ensure a successful program. A relatively small amount of funding for such activities – made available to individual schools, school clusters or community groups – could reap huge benefits for Australian education in terms of improving Asian cultural literacy.

The conclusions of the submission are that, in order to provide the level of Asia-literacy Australia will need in the coming century, Federal, State and Territory governments need to provide:

- explicit funding support for bilingual child care and preschool programs in priority Asian languages;
- increased funding and investment in teachers and teaching resources for bilingual education programs in priority Asian languages at primary school level and beyond; and;
- support for initiatives which seek to capitalise on the cultural and language knowledge already within Australia – in our multicultural population and the large numbers of international students from Asia studying in our schools and tertiary institutions.