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INITIATIVES IN LANGUAGE AND CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION FOR
BUSINESS AND THE COMMUNITY:
THE CASE OF ARABIC AT DEAKIN UNIVERSITY

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Government Rhetoric, Reports and Responses

There has been a great deal of discussion in the last decade or so about the relationship between Australia's international trade and the possession of language and cultural skills by the country's business people (for example, Lo Bianco 1987; Ingleson 1989; Marshall, W. 1990; Marshall, K. 1986; Leal 1991; Stanley 1990; Campbell 1994). Commonwealth and State politicians have acknowledged the importance of teaching the languages of Australia's major trading partners in schools and universities in order to give the country a competitive edge in future dealings with difficult and different global markets.

Initially, most Government attention was given to the Asian languages of East and Southeast Asia – mainly Japanese, Chinese and Indonesian. However, in the current globalised business world, with countries competing to establish trade relationships with other countries that will earn their nation a greater income, regions such as the Middle East have become increasingly important. Only recently has the Australian Government acknowledged the significance of the Arabic-speaking world to its national interests. This
world region has now been identified by Austrade as Australia's fourth most important trading bloc. The Middle East presents a rapidly growing market for Australian goods. In the space of eight years (1992-2000) the amount of Australian exports have doubled to A$4.7 billion. In 1999/00, the volume of Australia's two-way trade with the Arab world was $4.707 billion, with a balance of trade of nearly A$2.233,312 billion. Victoria's share in this rapid growth has been significant. In the same period, Victoria's exports to the Middle East more than doubled to A$1.3 billion, representing more than a quarter of total Australian exports.

While Australian exports to the Middle East have traditionally consisted of primary products, knowledge-based industries such as multi-media, software development, pharmaceuticals and biotechnology also offer immense opportunities in the region. The growing importance of telecommunication, for instance, is keenly appreciated by Middle Eastern governments, which seek foreign expertise and know-how to update their infrastructure and integrate their systems with the global network. Victoria, with its highly acclaimed tertiary institutions, is uniquely placed to meet these needs. For example, 40% of all Australian information technology graduates complete their studies in Victorian universities. In primary industries-related areas opportunities now exist for the export of grain storage technology, solar electric irrigation and stock control technology, dry-land agriculture expertise and veterinary services.

The changing nature of Australian exports to the Middle East, therefore, reflects a welcome trend away from an exclusive dependency on primary products and raw materials towards the supply of increasingly sophisticated services. As is now generally recognised in political and economic circles, Australia's traditional export commodities are of declining
value on world markets, and while they will undoubtedly remain important, economic diversification into service industries such as "high technology", education, finance and tourism is the direction that the Australian economy must take. These service industries are language-intensive, and require high level, specialist language skills and a sophisticated understanding of other cultures.

The commercial and political rationale for teaching Arabic language and culture in Australia, however, has scarcely been voiced. While the Commonwealth Government created the Asian Studies Council to promote the learning of Asian languages and culture in the 1990s, the Government chose to exclude Arabic and the Middle East from its purview. While Feletti (1991) considered the "vocal support from eminent Australian diplomats, scholars and corporate representatives" for Japanese and Korean language studies as a significant development, he described the lack of similar support for Arabic and other Middle Eastern languages such as Persian as "a national disgrace". Furthermore, Wilson 1991 recognised that Arabic had a "very limited profile in schools" and needed to be "developed as an international language"). While Lo Bianco's National Policy on Languages (1987) designated Arabic as one of nine Languages of Wider Teaching, on the basis of both its domestic community importance and its international economic and political significance, it was not until Leal et al.'s 1991 report on the discipline review of modern languages in Australian universities that a call was specifically made for government support for education programs to be developed in Arabic. Leal et al. indicated that only six institutions in Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra at the time offered Arabic and none through distance education.
Arabic is also taught as both a community LOTE and as a second language in nine independent schools in Victoria, where it forms an integral part of the curriculum for all students at both primary and secondary levels. In 1998, a total 2682 primary and secondary students were enrolled in Arabic programs in independent schools in comparison with 1301 students in government primary and secondary schools (excluding VSL). The largest of the nine independent schools currently operating in Victoria is King Khalid Islamic College with total enrolments of 839 students followed by Islamic School of Victoria – Werribee followed by St Anthony’s Coptic Orthodox College with total enrolment of 510 students. These schools began offering Year 12 Arabic for the first time in 1995 and 1997 respectively and the number of VCE Arabic students in these schools have been steadily growing.

CONCLUSION

Deakin University has developed innovative Arabic language programs serving the needs of both the Arab-Australian community and wider Australian national interests. The programs’ emphasis on the use of Arabic as a modern international language of diplomacy, trade and culture has distinguished them from other courses and made them popular with non-Arabic-speaking students. Deakin has clearly been able to design its programs as per the recommendations for such students suggested by Campbell (1993) (Recommendation 9). With Deakin having now set a number of positive and promising precedents in the drive to open up Australia’s Arabic language potential at the tertiary level, Victorian and other Australian secondary educators must now recognise the importance of Arabic as both a community and international language. To this end they need to ensure that adequate
provision is made for its study to Year 12 level in all mainstream schools that have sufficient numbers of student candidates. Failure to do so will not only undermine the success of future language programs at institutions such as Deakin, but will deny educational equity to Australian students of Arabic background and undermine Australia's long-term national interests.

REFERENCES


