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Response to Australian Universities Accord: Discussion Paper February 2023

The Languages and Cultures Network for Australian Universities (LCNAU) represents languages and cultures academics, researchers and educators in Australia's tertiary sector and is the only Australian organization with a direct focus on advocating for and supporting languages education and research in our universities.

We note the increasing proportion, as captured in national censuses over time, of Australians who are born overseas, as well as of those who speak a language other than English. Australia is increasingly multilingual as a result of long-term migration, yet the proportion of domestic students undertaking language studies at tertiary shows significant decline in recent years – largely as the result of institutional inaction. This means that fewer young Australians complete university study with the knowledge and linguistic and cultural skills needed to meet the many challenges of Australian society and of the world in the twenty-first century. It is within the worrying context that LCNAU has prepared this submission.

LCNAU takes a keen interest in the state and future of Australian universities, and has long emphasised the important benefits to them and to their students and to Australian society more generally of ensuring comprehensive access to language education. This is certainly not the case at the moment and has not been so for many years – whether through simple lack of provision to ingrained institutional roadblocks that severely limit or deny the access students have to study a language. Such access would enable them to develop their knowledge of the world as well as the skills needed to make them global citizens and workers able to operate more fully in it. Through this significant omission in higher education, Australia is concerningly less prepared for the changing world it finds itself in.

Curriculum reforms instituted, for instance, at the Universities of Melbourne and of Western Australia in which students across faculties were guaranteed, amongst other things, access to language studies led to substantial increases in enrolments – proof that students are keen to develop and deepen their knowledge of the world and to better prepare themselves for future careers – if they are able to do so in practical terms and feel they are supported to do so.

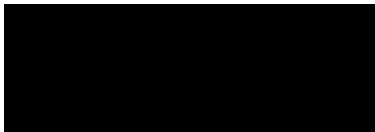
Sadly, it remains the case that access to language studies is too often hampered, in many cases severely so, with tertiary institutions having little or poor understanding of the value of language studies for their students' learning, development and future careers – across all disciplines. The benefits of language study at university (supported by small group learning and the development of intercultural awareness and skills that language study provides). extend from the improved quality of the student's learning experience overall to communicative and analytical skills essential for successful careers in an evolving economy.

All universities, working with government, need to make a strong and visible commitment to support language study for all students. It needs to be strongly embedded in undergraduate degree structures,

fully accessible, and vigorously promoted and incentivised by universities, with unnecessary restrictions removed.

An important element is of course the funding model supported by the Commonwealth in which it has long been recognised that language teaching is more resource intensive requiring more time and smaller classes. This has resulted quite justifiably in greater financial support from the Commonwealth, while also recognising the strategic value for Australia of language study by reducing the financial burden on students. This aligned approach needs to continue into the future. A failure to do otherwise would only undermine the ability of Australia's universities to provide their students with the multilingual skills needed for the country's future success.

With best wishes,



Prof John Hajek,
President, LCNAU