Speaking to the world
By Marnie Hughes-Warrington

Ken Henry’s Asian Century panel has it right: we need to be ready to take advantage of the economic, social and strategic changes that are already reshaping our world.

Much of the discussion on Australia in the Asian Century has focused on the need for early intervention programs in Asian languages and cultural literacy, as well as for intensive upskilling for those in business. But universities have their part to play too, particularly in languages education. The question is whether we are ready to do so.

Nearly every Australian university offers students the chance to study languages other than English. The widest provision nationally is in French and Spanish, as well as in Chinese and Japanese. These all provide a strong basis for global engagement. Over the thousands of years that goods, ideas and people have moved, languages have also circulated. Asian languages are not only spoken in Asia, and European languages are not only spoken in Europe. There are over two million Turkish speakers in Germany, Mandarin and Cantonese are the third most commonly spoken languages in Canada, and French remains a common language across Africa. English is a global language, but learning a second or even third language—Asian or European—makes it possible to navigate the world with even more ease.

But there are also some major gaps in language education provision at university, with some only available at a small number of institutions, or even only at one. ANU students are extremely fortunate: the University is a languages powerhouse. 27 languages are available, including 11 that are rarely seen by students at other universities. The list of 11 includes some sobering inclusions: Cantonese, Javanese, Tetum, Turkish and Vietnamese. Three more are offered by only one other university: Hindi, Thai and Urdu.

Students at universities other than ANU often have to rely on inter-university agreements to gain access to other languages. Typically, though, these agreements open up opportunities to study only one or two more additional languages.

Four years ago, the University of Queensland, Queensland University of Technology and Griffith University signed an agreement to make 10 languages available to their students. Building on that example—and taking advantage of online learning technologies—the time has come to extend the cooperative provision of languages to a national level.

By this, I do not mean that only one university will be able to teach any one language. Students should be able to choose locally or the best wherever possible. My point is that sometimes languages are not available locally, and that means that students—and Australia—miss out on the chance to build much needed cultural literacy.

Nor does it make sense to offer parallel on campus classes across the language spectrum: lack of local teacher expertise and small student enrolments would not make this a viable option. But teaching languages nationally via online technologies does. ANU has rejuvenated its Sanskrit program via online provision, and it is now taken by students across Australia, and the world.

2013 marks the introduction of a Diploma of Languages at ANU, and the move towards greater online provision of its outstanding languages program. Students who are currently studying a bachelor degree at ANU or at any other university in Australia—or who have a bachelor degree—will be able to complete a major in one of 14 ancient or modern Asian or European languages. Commonwealth Supported Places in the Diploma are available, or up to two subjects can be studied on a full fee, non-award basis.
All levels of education have a part to play in realising the benefits of not only an Asian Century, but a Global Century as well. Being ready means being coordinated, and ensuring that students across Australia have the opportunity to develop the skills needed to navigate the world with confidence.

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