



## Chinese language competency in Australia

1. The *Australia in the Asian Century White Paper* recognizes the need for an increased linguistic capacity within the Australian population: “Relying on the language capabilities of Asian-Australians for all of Australia’s relationships and engagement will not be adequate. Proficiency in more than one language is a basic skill of the 21st century.”<sup>1</sup>

2. In 2015 3,694,101 students attend school in Australia.<sup>2</sup> Of those:

4.5 per cent (168,382) are learning Chinese;  
0.1 per cent (4,149) are taking Year 12 Chinese;

No more than 400 of those students taking Chinese in Year 12 are from non-Chinese backgrounds.<sup>3</sup>

3. Emeritus Professor Daniel Kane estimates that:

There are no more than 130 proficient, non-background adult Chinese speakers in Australia;

Half of this group is over 55 years of age.<sup>4</sup>

4. Australia has shown bipartisan support for more students becoming fluent in an Asian language.<sup>5,6</sup>

Yet six times as many non-background students in Year 12 are learning Japanese as a second language than Chinese.<sup>7</sup>

5. Though they are ranked equally difficult to learn, in NSW 630 non-background students completed secondary Japanese language studies in Year 12 compared with 84 who completed Chinese as a second language.<sup>8</sup>

6. Between 2007 and 2014 the number of non-background speakers taking Year 12 Chinese as a second language (L2) dropped by an estimated 20 per cent.<sup>9</sup>

7. Almost all students who speak Chinese at home study the language in Year 12. Students undertaking Chinese as a second language cannot compete.

In 2015, Western Australia successfully separated Chinese-speaking students and L2 learners, thus removing one of the major disincentives for the L2 study of Chinese in Year 12.<sup>10</sup>

8. In China school students learn 500 characters per year for 12 years, graduating from secondary school with 6000 characters. Current Year 12 Australian L2 Chinese students graduate with 500 characters. This is Grade 1 level in mainland China and Hong Kong.

The growing number of primary programs using immersion Chinese teaching (using no English) combined with the study of a school subject in Chinese (CLIL) can significantly increase language proficiency.<sup>11</sup>

9. Stephen FitzGerald asserts that Australia also needs to be “training more Sinologists who think strategically, think about Australia-China relations [and] China’s relations with the world ... [in order to provide government and business with] a ready supply of China specialists with the mix of qualities and qualifications they require”.<sup>12</sup>

10. This group needs Chinese immersion programs that start at the beginning of primary school and continue to Year 10. The US has begun 198 such programs supported by the Department of Defense.

**Australia has only four such programs and they have difficulty sustaining themselves.**<sup>13</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Commonwealth of Australia 2012, *Australia in the Asian Century White Paper*, p.170.

<sup>2</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015, Schools Data 2014, released May 2 2015 <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4221.0>

<sup>3</sup> Data provided by all sectors in all States and Territories for this report

<sup>4</sup> Data provided to the author by Professor Kane

<sup>5</sup> S Gerathy 2015, New NSW Labor MP Chris Minns calls for party reform, Mandarin in schools, ABC, May 12 <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-05-12/nsw-labor-mp-chris-minns-mandatory-chinese-lessons-in-schools/6464718>

<sup>6</sup> Minister for Education Chris Pyne, 2014, Opening address at the Adelaide Language Festival, May 16 2014, <http://ministers.education.gov.au/pyne/opening-address-adelaide-language-festival>

<sup>7</sup> Asia Education Foundation, 2010, The Current State of Asian Languages Education Summary

<sup>8</sup> Board of Studies NSW, 2014, HSC Course Enrolments, <http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/news-media/media-guide-2014/stats/enrolments-course.html#languages>

<sup>9</sup> Data provided by Board of Study/Assessment Authorities for this report

<sup>10</sup> B Hiatt 2015, Language course shake-up to end Asian discrimination, *The West Australian*, August 14 2015

<https://au.news.yahoo.com/thewest/wa/a/29258250/language-courses-in-shake-up-to-end-asian-discrimination/>

<sup>11</sup> Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority 2007, Victorian Certificate of Education Study Chinese Second Language Study Design,

<http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/vce/chinese2nd/chineses2nd/chineses2nd.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Stephen FitzGerald, 2014, *Australia and China at Forty*, p. 28

<sup>13</sup> Data collected from Asia Society Chinese Early Language and Immersion Network