

*NATIONAL ASIAN LANGUAGES AND STUDIES IN
AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS (NALSAS) TASKFORCE*



Partnership for Change

The NALSAS Strategy

**Interim progress report of the first quadrennium of the NALSAS Strategy
1995-1998**

Foreword

The basic task of the National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools (NALSAS) initiative has been to resource and to promote the teaching and learning of Asian languages and the studies of Asia in Australian schools.

I believe very strongly that this is of the highest national importance for two interrelated reasons. The first is because Australia's geographic and strategic position in the world, makes it obligatory that our people develop some knowledge and understanding of Asia and its languages in order to be able to engage with it and communicate with its people. The second is related to the imperative for national cohesion in an Australia which is proudly multicultural and multilingual. The teaching of the languages and the cultures of Australians from Asian backgrounds is vital in equipping young Australians with the skills and attitudes necessary to fully participate in the life of an harmonious, tolerant and outward looking multicultural Australia.

The work and co-operation of all partners (the Commonwealth Government, state government and non-government educational authorities) in the NALSAS strategy in enhancing the Asia literacy¹ of Australians, was originally conceived as a long-term arrangement. It has to remain so, because attitudinal change of the kind we are concerned with here occurs over time. We are talking not only of the next few years, but of the coming decades and the new century. After all, if there is one thing clear about Australia, it is that it will always be in the Asia-Pacific region, and that has implications for our policy and attitude towards Asian countries. So, the changes we are seeking through the NALSAS strategy must be sustainable. There is no use undertaking important tasks, if the effects will dwindle as soon as the impetus withers.

Although I believe the strategy has produced an effect, it is not so great an influence that we can afford to slacken our efforts for we are still in the early stages of this process of long-term social and economic change. With the establishment of the NALSAS Strategy in 1994, and the formation of the NALSAS Taskforce, we were asked to focus our main attention on four Asian languages Chinese (Mandarin), Indonesian, Japanese and Korean. The studies of Asia focus has been significantly broader than this, and includes countries outside the four where those languages are national. However, the Taskforce and all partners have allocated preponderant effort to the languages and studies of China, Indonesia, Japan and Korea.

At the inception of the initiative the impetus for the choice of the four languages was primarily economic. With the passage of time this has begun to change, with greater emphasis allocated to cultural and educational reasons. The downturn in the economies of most of the countries of Eastern Asia from mid-1997 does not diminish the need for Australia to engage with them. A civilised country tries to understand its neighbours, even while not necessarily agreeing with all their attitudes. Moreover, the economic downturn is likely to be no more than highly temporary given the long-term view for which NALSAS strives.

I believe that the partners in this initiative have carried out their mandate extremely well. This report documents the distance Australia has come, in a comparatively short time and with a

¹ Definition of Asian literacy from AEF publication

comparatively small budgetary outlay, in its attempt to provide the educational prerequisites for engagement with Asia. That achievement is reflected in:

- the impact that the NALSAS strategy has had on the policy of several of the jurisdictions;
- the impact that the NALSAS strategy has had on the implementation of policy in virtually all jurisdictions;
- the increase in student participation in Asian languages. (*The number at government primary and secondary level who learned the four NALSAS languages in 1994 was 323,769, but had risen to 517,730 in 1997, an increase of more than 50% in just three years.*);
- the increase in the number of schools offering the target Asian languages (*from 2573² government schools in 1994 to 3693 in 1997*);
- the increase in the number of schools participating in the Access Asia program (*more than 1000 in 1998*); and
- an increase of more than 50% in student participation rates in the three Catholic commissions where data has been collected since 1994.

Looking around the world, it is evident that no other country among those with which Australia normally compares itself has made an even remotely comparable effort to equip itself to learn about the countries of Eastern Asia and thereby engage and communicate with those Asian peoples. This is manifest in the following examples:

- Japanese is now the most widely taught language other than English in Australian schools, (Australia has far more young people learning Japanese, per head of population, than any other country in the world except Japan itself.)
- Australia is a front-runner in the learning of Chinese in school.
- Indonesian has advanced very rapidly indeed in the few years leading up to 1998 and the signs are that the rise will continue. (In no country, other than Indonesia, is Indonesian taught so widely in school as in Australia.)
- There has been a significant effort to enable teachers across a number of key learning areas of the curriculum to access professional development in the studies of Asia.

An outstanding feature of the implementation of the NALSAS strategy is that it has been a productive partnership for change between all Australian educational authorities. As the NALSAS Taskforce Chair, I have observed a great deal of cooperation among the members of the Taskforce and among the various jurisdictions with which I have been working. Work groups have been set up to fulfil particular collaborative functions for which a proportion of national funding has been set aside. Each of the work groups has been led by a member from one part of the country; the chairs shared out among the various jurisdictions. This has given the partners a sense of ownership of the strategy, creating not only a sense of collective endeavour but also increasing productivity. has been extremely productive.

This endeavour - a partnership for change - deserves the support of all sectors of the Australian community.

There are three main points in this foreword that t infuse the whole of this report:

- NALSAS is important for Australia and its future, because in this region we must engage with Asia.
- The NALSAS structure is a cooperative arrangement between the various jurisdictions, in other words a partnership.

² Data for Tasmania and secondary school figures for Queensland were unavailable.

- The aim of the partnership is to bring about change in Australia, in the direction of knowledge of Asian languages and studies, facilitating the way towards better engagement with Asia.

The report highlights the significant activities and achievements that have occurred during the first four years of the NALSAS strategy.

It outlines the outcomes to date, especially in terms of:

- increased student participation nationally;
- increased number of schools offering the four priority NALSAS languages and studies of Asia; and
- increased numbers of teachers trained or retrained in the 4 priority NALSAS languages, and undergoing significant professional development in both languages and studies of Asia.

The report also notes the main activities the partners are engaging in as a result of NALSAS funding and the collaborative achievements of the strategy. Despite working in diverse contexts it is clear that there has been a concerted national effort by all partners in the five key areas of:

- teacher training;
- teacher professional development;
- program delivery;
- curriculum resources; and
- international and co-operative partnerships.

The report concludes by viewing the progression towards the year 2006 in terms of stated targets.

Although the achievements are already substantial, this is but the first step in a process of significant national cultural and educational change, that relies heavily for its success on the partnership for change that has been the hallmark of the first four years of the implementation of this program.

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NALSAS Taskforce Chair

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