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DIVERSE LANGUAGE SKILLS WILL OPEN THE WORLD TO AUSTRALIANS

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IN 2008, the International Year of Languages and the European Year of Inter-cultural Dialogue, many countries will be reflecting on their achievements in these areas and what can be done better.

On such occasions, Australia is often cited as a nation that has achieved a unique identity based on cultural diversity, successful integration, harmony, and inclusiveness.

Now that we can again feel "relaxed and comfortable" to talk about our cultural diversity, we too should take stock. We will have an opportunity to consider how we, as individuals and as a nation, make the most of our language resources and how we communicate with and about those of other cultural backgrounds.

About 400 languages (indigenous, community and sign languages) are spoken in Australian homes, and Australians have daily grassroots experience that makes them more aware of others' cultural values and communicative behaviour. It is these resources that could make us an important link between Asia and Europe.

Despite this, we are not encouraging enough younger Australians to maintain and develop their bilingualism or to acquire a second language. Half the children in compulsory education in Australia are not being taught a language other than English in a mainstream school. The majority of those taking another language are in programs with inadequate time allocation, often taught by teachers with insufficient training or language proficiency. Many schools discourage students from proceeding with a language beyond year 8, and the retention rate to year 12 is only about 13% nationally, but 22% in Victoria, largely thanks to a high retention rate in independent schools.

In the past decade, the number of languages offered in Australian universities has fallen from 66 to 29, and the situation of some of these is precarious.

The marginalisation of language teaching is often justified by the need to concentrate on English literacy. International and local evidence shows that bilingualism and appropriate early second language study actually enhance English literacy skills.

If allowed to develop in a balanced way, bilingualism brings many cognitive benefits and assists in the learning of additional languages. The impoverished "core curriculum" favoured by the previous government — comprising English literacy, mathematics, science and perhaps Australian history — would not equip future generations for their place in the world, or indeed this nation.
