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## Lost in translation: the geopolitical risks of declining foreign language learning in Australia and NZ

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As the 2024 academic year begins in Australia and New Zealand, optimism over the state of foreign language learning at universities is in short supply.

Languages have taken a post-pandemic battering. In 2023 alone, New Zealand's Victoria University of Wellington decided to shut down its Greek, Latin and Italian programmes, while the University of Otago in Dunedin opted to discontinue German.

In Australia, Sydney's Macquarie University has proposed cutting five languages altogether – including German, Italian and Russian. Chinese, Croatian, Hindi, Indonesian and Japanese are just some of the other languages that have faced funding scrutiny at institutions across Australia and New Zealand since 2020.

The cuts are coming despite the outbreak of new wars and soaring geopolitical tensions. As Australia and New Zealand both look to spend billions more on military capabilities, it's equally vital to support foreign language learning.

Languages are an essential component of the diplomatic and intelligence toolkits. A decline in their teaching and learning has repercussions beyond university campuses.

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### **No strategy for strategic languages**

Disappointingly, scant attention was paid to languages in the recent Australian Universities Accord review of the higher education system.

A rare exception was an observation that promoting Indonesian skills would help Australia to “engage better with our region” – a hint to policymakers about why languages are more than just a “nice to have”.

In New Zealand, unfortunately, the previous Labour government ultimately did not pursue the idea of a national languages strategy. But both Canberra and Wellington should consider conducting dedicated stocktakes of language learning within the wider diplomatic and societal contexts.

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***Read more: Fewer U.S. college students are studying a foreign language – and that spells trouble for national security***

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This would be timely, given the apparent wane in learning strategic languages such as Arabic, Russian and Chinese throughout the English-speaking world, even as geopolitical tensions build. All three are official languages of the United Nations.

Despite wars in Ukraine and Gaza, Russian and Arabic both failed to feature in the top ten most popular languages studied on one of the biggest language learning apps, Duolingo. Portuguese has overtaken Russian in popularity.

A 2021 census by the Modern Language Association showed US university enrolments in Arabic fell by 27.4% compared with 2016 levels. Over the same period, Chinese declined by 14.3% and Russian fell by 13.5%.

In the United Kingdom, enrolments in Chinese studies reduced by 31% between 2012 and 2021, according to figures cited by The Economist.

At Australian and New Zealand institutions, Russian and Arabic are in particularly short supply. No New Zealand university teaches Arabic.

 View of the Kremlin in Moscow

The Kremlin in Moscow: despite war in Ukraine and political tensions, the learning of Russian is declining in the West. Getty Images

## **Some languages on the rise**

For all the pessimism, some green shoots may be pushing through in 2024. Preliminary enrolment data from the University of New England (UNE) in New South Wales suggest German, Italian, Japanese and Spanish student numbers have increased for the first time since 2021.

Some positives can also be found in a US survey of university language enrolments. Learners of Korean at US universities soared by 38.3% from 2016 to 2021. The increase seems to parallel the rise of Korean popular culture in the West.

For universities, the challenge is to integrate near-limitless online resources with language instruction. The learning experience should be as realistic as possible. But it also needs to meet and embrace the diverse needs of learners.

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At UNE, for example, German learners now apply their language skills to create videos and games in German – and design their own grammar worksheets to teach others. The Australian Awards for University Teaching recently recognised the success of this “portfolio assessment” approach.

Grassroots initiatives also offer inspiration. Informal language exchanges are taking advantage of the healthy post-COVID recovery in international student numbers in both Australia and New Zealand.

These gatherings in cafés and pubs, including in Canberra and Wellington, allow participants to practise their chosen languages in an informal setting outside the classroom. The events help learners build confidence and competence.

In a multicultural society, these community events also perform an important social function. They connect local learners with native speakers who are often immigrants or international students.

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***Read more: 3 barriers that stop students choosing to learn a language in high school***

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## **AI is no substitute**

Studying a language inevitably involves gaining insight into another culture and history. The cultural and political dimensions should not be seen as entirely separate.

Across the West, Russian was widely taught during the Cold War, while the popularity of Arabic surged after 9/11 and the Iraq War.

But the opposite phenomenon now seems to be happening. Following a further decline in Russian learner numbers, a US survey reported in 2022 that students appeared keen to “distance themselves from anything Russia related”.

Finding solutions to these challenges will not be easy – but they must be found. While AI technology is improving in leaps and bounds, machine translation will never substitute for the crucial human role foreign language learning plays in understanding other worldviews.

In stormy geopolitical times, this ability is more valuable than ever.