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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Prioritized but declining: an analysis of student participation in Asian languages courses in secondary school 2001–2021

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Abstract

The need for proficiency in Asian languages has been identified as vital for Australia's regional prosperity, but in the absence of a national language policy and national data collection, languages study has continued to deteriorate at alarming levels. This article analyses recent data for trends in participation in 'priority' Asian languages, Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian, and Korean NSW High School Certificate (HSC) courses from 2001–2021. In 1994, these languages were first identified by the government as "priority" Asian languages and of considerable importance for Australia's future prosperity. This study analyses disaggregated HSC data to examine trends in individual languages and courses. The overall finding in this study is that despite the considerable funding, there has been no significant improvement in Beginner, Continuers, In-context, or Literature courses: 2001 had 4.25% of HSC students studying one of the priority Asian languages, but in 2021 this figure dropped to 3.43%. This detailed analysis reveals possible reasons for this and explores the role of community language schools (CLS) in supporting the study of priority Asian languages. This study finds that disaggregated state-level and local data analysis is essential to inform national policy evaluation and future policy planning. Without consistent data collection, policy evaluation, and the development of evidence-based approaches to language education, Australian language education will continue to flounder.

Keywords Languages Education · Asian Languages · Asia-Literacy

Introduction

Languages education "shares legroom with politics" (Firdaus, 2013, p. 25), and has played an important role in Australia's evolving international identity, especially as the nation has increasingly situated itself within the Asia–Pacific region. However, Australia is a fiercely English-speaking nation and notions of English exceptionalism have shaped attitudes towards language learning, allowing it to become a dispensable part of students' education. Despite numerous policies, programs, and significant financial investment in "Asia literacy" and greater fluency in Asian languages; participation in the four "priority" Asian languages: Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian, and Korean continues to decline. The value of studying an Asian language is continually tied to its economic value, and the lip service paid to the value of Asian languages can be characterised as a "transactional economic embrace" (Davis, 2020, p. 280). Indeed the introduction of these languages stemmed from political and security reasons, rather than pedagogical ones (Baldwin, 2019). In the subsequent time, there has been little evaluation of government program outcomes and limited evidence-based policy to improve languages education (Slaughter, 2007a, b).

Asian languages were recognized in the 1987 National Policy on Languages, with Indonesian identified as a "priority language in all States and Territories" (Worsley, 1993, p. 99). This was followed by the National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools Strategy (NALSAS) in 1994 prioritizing four Asian languages: Japanese, Chinese, Korean and Indonesian as particularly important "to improve Australia's capacity and preparedness to interact internationally" (Erebus Consulting Partners, 2002, p. vi). A target was set of

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13% of Year 12 students attaining social proficiency in one of these languages by 2006 (National Asian Languages & Cultures Working Group, 1994, p. xi). This thinking was based on future projections for significant export markets (National Asian Languages & Cultures Working Group, 1994, p. iii) and forecasts were accurate. In 2021, China, Japan, and South Korea were among Australia's top 5 two-way trading partners (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2021b) and Indonesia was Australia's 13th largest trading partner (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2022).

Subsequent governments also recognized the importance of Asian languages education. The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young People (2008)[1] emphasized that students become "Asia literate" (Ministerial Council on Education, 2008), and 2008 also saw the introduction of the National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP) scheme, the last coordinated national plan for languages education (Halse, 2015). Targets similar to NALSAS were set: 12% of students completing Year 12 with fluency in one of the four target Asian languages by 2020 (Asia Education Foundation, 2010). To increase enrolments in Asian languages, New South Wales (NSW) introduced four different HSC syllabuses for different types of learners: Beginners (with no prior knowledge or experience of the target language), Continuers and Extension (non-background speakers[2] with prior elective study), In-context (heritage or some background in the language) and Literature (background speakers[3]).

The NALSAS program saw significant financial investment[4] and educational discourse has continued to emphasize the importance of Asian languages education in Australian schools. However, there has been little to no improvement in participation in Asian languages subjects or languages more broadly as a result of the program. O'neil and Watts (2015) state that "after more than a decade of opinion pieces, there are fewer students studying Asian languages in Australia today than there were in 2000" (p. 156). The NALSAS scheme, which was agreed upon as a joint Commonwealth and State program until 2006, was dismantled in 2002 by the Howard government,[5] despite findings that it improved the teaching and "uptake of NALSAS languages" (Australian Government, 2012; Erebus Consulting Partners, 2002, p. 85). The NALSSP strategy ran for four years providing national funding,[6] but failed to stem the deterioration of the priority Asian languages (NSW Board of Studies, 2013). From 2000 to 2008, the proportion of Australian Year 12 students studying an Asian language only increased by 1 percent (Asia Education Foundation, 2010, p. 4). In 2010 it was estimated that just 18.6% of the Australian student cohort K-12 were studying one of the four priority languages, a decrease from the 24% in the year 2000 (Asia Education Foundation, 2010).

The continued failures of programs and policies for Asian languages education raises the question of whether declines can be attributed to the absence of evidence-based policy and clear deliverables or rather to a broader malaise and lack of value attached to languages study. This study works with existing state level data in NSW schools to show the value of working with available data. Although lacking national comparability, useful analysis is still possible, as this study aims to provide an analysis of the current state of the priority Asian languages in NSW. The following section analyses research both into the 'rise' of Asian languages in policy and programs and the status of languages study.

Literature review

This section reviews the positioning of Asian languages within Australian education, issues related to student progression through 'the pipeline' and issues relating to teacher supply.

Monolingual mindset and ambivalent attitudes to Asian languages

Despite Australian multicultural policy, there is a "pervasive undervaluing of languages in education and in the wider Australian community" (Kleinhenz et al., 2007, p. 68). The low value placed on language learning has led to just 9.5% of Australian students completing a language as part of their senior certification (ACARA, 2020). This has been compounded with issues specific to the study of

[1] The Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young People is a document that was developed in 2008 by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). It outlines the education goals and priorities for Australia's education system and serves as a national policy framework for improving educational outcomes for young people in Australia.

[2] Non-background speaker (sometimes referred to as an L2 speaker) is a person who is acquiring or learning a language in addition to their first language.

[3] Background speaker (sometimes referred to as L1 speakers) refers to a person who is acquiring or learning a language that they already speak and may use at home.

[4] Approximately $337 million AUD (adjusted for inflation) has been invested nationally over Prince, L. (2022, April 7th, 2022). Investing in the future of Asian language literacy in Australia by learning from the past. https://asaa.asn.au/55224-2/

[5] The Howard Government was led by Prime Minister John Howard from 1996–2007. This government implemented significant economic and social reforms and is characterised by its conservative approach to governance with an emphasis on economic liberalisation and national security.

[6] The NALSSP strategy provided $62.15 million in total (NSW Board of Studies, 2013).

Asian languages, which are explored further in this literature review.

The monolingual mindset which is said to exist in Australia (Baldwin, 2019; Clyne, 2008; Scarino, 2014) is linked to the status of English as a global language and has allowed language learning to become an optional personal aspiration for individuals rather than a vital part of education (Lo Bianco, 2005). Herscovitch (2012) even argues that the growth of English means Australia's monolingualism is not an issue, with the large number of Australians who speak an Asian language at home and due to the high rates of English bilingualism within Asia.

There is a "perceived lack of value attached to the learning of Asian languages" (Dabrowski, 2015). This phenomenon has been attributed to the focus on economic value rather than social or cultural benefits (Baldwin, 2019; Davis, 2020; Lo Bianco, 2005). "Promotion of Asian languages as having economic and vocational value in the 1990s resulted in a growth in enrolments in those languages" (Kohler & Curnow, 2014, p. 8). However, this growth has not been sustained and studies have found that "this focus on economics at the expense of other benefits may also impact student subject choices, because studies have found that economic benefits play little role in students' decisions to continue with language study" (Mason & Hajek, 2020, p. 229). Additionally, this fails to convey to students the intrinsic value of studying an Asian language in an Australian context (Kohler, 2021).

The presence of 'background' and 'non-background' speakers in the same classes has also been identified as a key challenge for Asian languages: non-background students are often seen as being deterred "because of the fear in competing against native speakers" (Erebus Consulting Partners, 2002, p. 124). The high number of enrolments of background speakers[7] motivated NSW in developing different HSC courses in Japanese, Chinese, Indonesian and Korean. The aim was to increase the numbers of non-background learners in these languages.

However, there is evidence that the division of students by background and supposed proficiency has been problematic. Clyne (2008) characterizes Australian attitudes as "the 'others' (i.e. background speakers), 'the wrong kind of people' must not benefit because they cannot deserve it" (p. 359). This is a notion supported by Cruickshank et al., (2020) who go so far as to say that "attitudes to community languages[8] and background learners reflect societal prejudices" (p. 183). Indeed, there has been a marginalization of community languages from mainstream schools into the out-of-hours community languages programs (Cruickshank & Wright, 2016). Community language schools (CLS) in NSW are run outside of school hours and are open to any public or private school students. They are usually held in NSW public schools and more than 38,000 students attend every year. In exchange for a small fee,[9] students can attend classes to learn new or maintain home languages (NSW Government, 2021). The relegation of these languages to CLS has had a negative impact on community attitudes, as languages study "outside of mainstream schools devalues the study of these languages" (Slaughter, 2007b, p. 118). The disjunction between the valuing of the Asian languages and the 'othering' of background speakers has hindered the uptake of the priority Asian languages.

Pipeline issues

Another contributing issue is the lack of continuity and the optional nature of Asian languages study in NSW. Only 30–40% of students have access to languages in primary school and the quality of many language programs has been characterized as "little more than familiarization activities such as cooking, counting to 10, and drawing a few characters" (Asia Education Foundation, 2010, p. 12). After the NSW state requirement for 100 hours of languages study in Years 7 and 8, languages then compete as electives with a range of other new subjects such as "woodwork, commerce, and sport" (Cruickshank et al., 2020, p. 34). This is a stark contrast to Victoria, where all schools are required to provide languages and many primary schools are "expanding their existing programs" (Victoria State Government, 2020, p. 18). However, Victoria faces similar issues to NSW as they also face low demand at a secondary level, as fear of competing with native speakers remains a key issue (Heffernan, 2021). There are wide variations in provision of Asian languages across different levels of schooling (Kohler, 2021). Low enrolments in NSW Asian languages programs make it difficult to offer the languages "beyond the mandatory 100 hours" (Black et al., 2018, p. 359). There is therefore only a small pool of students to undertake Stage 6 languages in Year 11. At tertiary level, several major universities have terminated their Asian language programs (Kent, 2020).

[7] Background speakers are thought to make up around 70% of cohorts in Chinese language courses and near 100% of the cohort in Korean language courses. Asia Education Foundation (2014). Senior Secondary Languages Education Research Project. A. E. Foundation..

[8] The term "community languages" encompasses languages spoken by different cultural and linguistic groups within the community. They include languages like Chinese, Vietnamese, and Greek.

[9] Usually around $200-$500 per year.

This lack of continuity in languages study across primary, secondary, and university has impacted on the four priority Asian languages. Despite a strong emphasis on the importance of Asian languages, governments and planning have failed to match their Asia engagement rhetoric with long-term investment in Asia literacy at schools and universities (Kent, 2020).

Teacher shortage and training issues

The final issue is major language teacher shortages. The majority of teachers of Asian languages work in primary schools and this means many students who studied an Asian language in primary school are unable to continue their study into secondary school (Harrington, 2012; Kohler, 2021). Asian language teachers (like all language teachers) teach primarily in metropolitan schools and high SES (socio-economic status) schools (Harrington, 2012). Only 20 per cent of lower socio-economic schools offer Year 12 language courses, compared with 65 per cent of higher socio-economic schools which offer languages (Singhal, 2018).

The lack of Asian language teachers ultimately means a reduced pool of students opting to study language teaching after they graduate. To counter this, Morgan (2023) strongly recommends the allocation of long-term funding of scholarships for degrees in language teaching to rectify the shortage, as well as teacher-focused overseas exchanges and flexible policy frameworks to address these issues (p. 49). Additionally, initial teacher education faces several challenges. Early childhood and primary teachers are given only limited training in languages education, apart from generic core units in language and literacy and secondary pre-service language training "is not language-specific and teachers have to undertake further graduate or postgraduate studies in languages education to develop their expertise" (Asia Education Foundation, 2015, p. 46).

As shown in this literature review, there are a range of possible factors in the Asian languages decline, a trend which government policy and funding and curriculum change have failed to reverse. The lack of detailed analysis of the differences in trends between languages and between courses makes it difficult to identify the salience of different factors. The systematic failure to collect and analyse data has been a constant finding of all key studies of languages education in Australia (Liddicoat et al., 2007, p. xii). Lo Bianco and Slaughter (2009) lament the absence of "systematic, comprehensive and reliable documentation and reporting of participation rates, teacher qualifications, program types and other critically important information regarding languages study" (p. 48). This has led to a division of education between a national government developing policy and programs and state governments responsible for curriculum and provision which has led to a situation where there is only inconsistent local and state level data available to inform national level evaluation (Cruickshank et al., 2020).

Purpose of this study

The aims of this study are to answer the following questions in relation to trends from 2001 to 2021:

1. What are the trends relating to the priority Asian Languages in the NSW HSC from 2001–2021?
2. What are the trends in participation in NSW Community Language Schools in the priority Asian Languages from 2004–2021?
3. How can an analysis of these trends contribute to an understanding of national and state level languages programs and policy?

Methodology

This project utilized existing data available from NSW Education Standard Authority archives and requested data relating to the CLS programs (NSW Board of Studies, 2013). NSW was chosen as it is the largest educational jurisdiction in Australia and the state accounts for nearly one-third of national population (30.1%). NSW HSC data is consistently collected and allows for comparable analysis in Australia's largest schooling system, providing an 'acid test' of national policy. However, it is evident that there is a need for a national data base that provides ongoing monitoring and evaluation of language policy.

CLS data is included for its significant enrolments in comparison to mainstream schooling and for the large presence of background speakers who maintain their language fluency through these programs. The data relating to NSW CLS enrolments was obtained through communications with the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation.

The data set of 2001–2021 NSW HSC is the primary focus of the analysis. The year 2001 saw a major revision in the NSW HSC program, thus allowing for review of 20 years of language study participation rates. The participation rates are calculated as a proportion of the HSC candidature. These datasets were chosen as the HSC is the end point of languages education in NSW schools and completion of HSC courses dictate which language courses students will be eligible to enroll in once they begin tertiary studies.

Data analysis

This study employs secondary data analysis, as it is a "further analysis of an existing dataset which presents interpretations, conclusions or knowledge additional to, or different from, those produced in the first report on the inquiry as a whole and its main results" (Hakim, 1982, p. 1). The study uses research question driven analysis to further analyze the existing dataset (Cheng & Phillips, 2014). This project relies heavily on the

visual representation of data as a means of identifying and displaying findings. Microsoft Excel was the primary tool used for data collation and analysis. Despite the public availability of this data, substantial effort and time was taken in extracting the data on priority Asian languages enrolments from larger datasets of enrolments in all HSC subjects across the 20 year period (NSW Education Standards Authority, 2023). Identified trends are presented in tables and graphs, this mode of analysis was chosen as it allows the focus to be on "the theoretical aims and substantive issues of the study rather than the practical and methodological problems of collecting new data" (Hakim, 1982, p. 16). In the tradition of the 'political arithmetic' approach, this study aims to influence policy through evidence-based research (Smith, 2008).

Limitations

The distinctive challenge facing this secondary data analysis project is the level of disaggregation of the data (Johnston, 2014). This has a major impact on the number of trends this study was able to identify and therefore affects its usefulness (Johnston, 2014). In this case the HSC data is aggregated only by total and by gender. The CLS data was extremely aggregated which limited the evaluation of trends. Data linking student participation to their school characteristics and language offerings was not available. This has a major impact on the insights the analysis can provide regarding the dynamics between school language course offerings and participation rates. Also due to lack of disaggregation of the data, there was no definitive way of determining true participation rates, as this would require the data of students' individual enrolment choices. To overcome these limitations, it is recommended that more disaggregated data is made available for future research in this area, particularly for CLS.

Findings and discussion

An examination of the state of the "priority" Asian languages in NSW over the last twenty years reveals that a very small proportion of the HSC cohort are leaving school with any level of proficiency in an Asian language. Stability and declines are seen across all four languages. The trends which are seen in Figs. 1, 2, 3, 4 are the continued falling trajectory following the growth which all languages saw in the 1990s (Lo Bianco & Slaughter, 2009).

The Findings are presented first with summary Table 1, which contrast participation rates between 2001 and 2021, followed by figures showing yearly participation trends for each language and a discussion focusing on each of the languages and CLS enrolments.

Japanese

Japanese was the most widely taught language across Australian educational institutions in 2000 due to an extended period of rapid growth from the 1980s (Lo Bianco & Slaughter, 2009). In 2021 the Japanese Continuers course remained the largest course of all HSC language courses but there have been declines in all except the Japanese beginners course. The Japanese continuers course fell from 1.60% (n = 918) in 2001 to 0.95% (n = 632) in 2021. The increase from 0.56% (n = 323) of the HSC cohort in 2001 to 0.82% (n = 545) in 2021 mirrors the national increase in students entering Japanese beginners' courses (Asia Education Foundation, 2010).

Japanese Beginners is the only HSC course examined here which has shown any growth. However, this growth is not considerable, considering that overall HSC participation grew 5.7% between 2001 and 2013, we would expect to see similar increases in the enrolments of these priority Asian languages (Wilson & Mack, 2014). One possible factor influencing the increase is the rise of Japanese popular culture such as anime, music, and manga. This media has become increasingly popular in recent years and there is a correlation between Australian students' interests in these areas and their desire to learn Japanese at school (Armour & Iida, 2016, p. 31).

Of the top 10 languages HSC courses in NSW in 2021, two were Japanese courses (Beginners and Continuers). However, apart from the Beginners course, all other Japanese HSC courses show decreases or immobility. The Japanese continuers course fell from 1.60% (n = 918) in 2001 to 0.95% (n = 632) in 2021. Figure 1 is an extended period of decline which began in the 1990s following the rapid growth in this language which occurred in the 1980s that was not sustained (Lo Bianco & Slaughter, 2009). This could be linked to the argument made by De Kretser and Spence-Brown (2010) that "strains imposed by over-rapid expansion without adequate planning, led to employment of underqualified teachers…and lack of attention to continuity and transition issues" (p. 11). The Japanese and Literature course, represented 0.08% (n = 48)

Table 1 Asian priority language enrolments and as a proportion of Year 12 cohorts (%), 2001 and 2021

Languages	2001	2021
Japanese (all courses excluding extension)	2.24% (1289 enrolments)	1.83% (1220 enrolments)
Chinese (all courses excluding extension)	1.35% (776 enrolments)	1.17% (779 enrolments)
Indonesian	0.46% (226 enrolments)	0.14% (94 enrolments)
Korean	0.21% (118 enrolments)	0.29% (196 enrolments)
"Priority" Asian Languages Total	**4.25% (2445 enrolments)**	**3.43% (2289 enrolments)**

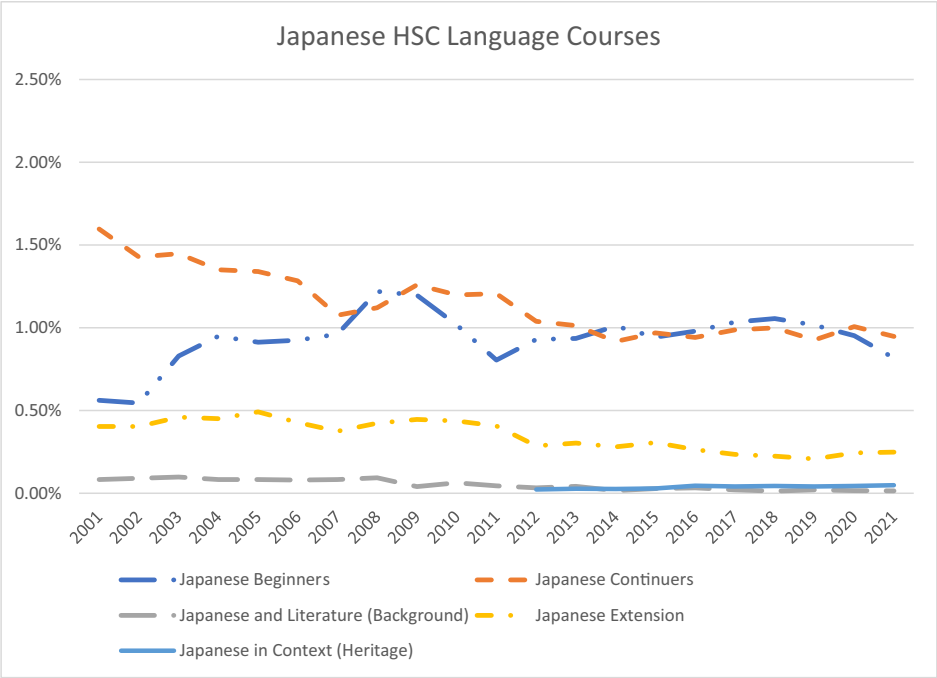

Fig. 1 Japanese HSC language course completion as a proportion of NSW Year 12 Cohort

of the 2001 HSC cohort, decreased to just 0.01% (n = 10) in 2021. This has led to the suspension of this course from 2020, meaning that students can no longer enroll it (NSW Education & Standards Authority, 2020). Japanese was the most widely taught language across Australian educational institutions in 2000, these declines represent a significant deterioration of the subject (Asia Education Foundation, 2010).

Chinese

Figure 2 shows us that apart from the Chinese and Literature course,[10] the Chinese language courses have remained relatively stable. In 2021, 0.56% (n = 373) of HSC students enrolled in the Chinese and Literature course, a decrease from 2001 when 1.23% (n = 709) of students enrolled. This course is the largest of the Chinese HSC offerings and saw two major peaks, in 2004 and 2009, when 2.29% (n = 1,385) and 2.19% (n = 1,393) of HSC students enrolled in it.

Examining Fig. 2, the increase in the Chinese and Literature course from 2007 could be attributed to the strong support the Rudd government[11] showed for Asia Literacy and Chinese in particular (Asia Education Foundation, 2010). The second peak can perhaps be explained by the large influx of Chinese migrants arriving in the period 2007–2011 (Department of Home Affairs, 2018a). However, considering NSW is home to the largest group of Chinese migrants, with 46% of the population settled in the state (Department of Home Affairs, 2018a) and Mandarin being the second most common language spoken at home in Australia, with 2.5% of the population speaking the language (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017), the decline in this language is difficult to understand.

The declines could be linked to strict eligibility for Chinese languages courses. Eligibility for different courses is specified by neat definitions of student background.[12] However, the reality is not so clear-cut (Kearney, 2020), "Students with the same cultural background often have a vastly different command of the language. Some will be fluent, others barely so, but they must compete in the same courses" (Fenely, 2016). Many students are placed in courses which are too difficult for them based on arbitrary definitions and opt instead to study something else (Kearney, 2020). This issue has even led to the re-naming of HSC courses,[13] as the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board asked the NSW Board of Studies to consider alternative names "so that students were not identified by race or ethnicity or descent" (Fenely, 2016). Overall, this is yet another hurdle to participation

[10] Formerly known as the Chinese Background Speakers HSC course,

[11] Led by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, from 2007 to 2010 and again in 2013 the Rudd Government was characterised by its progressive agenda. Rudd, a Mandarin speaker himself made a commitment to increase the number of Asian languages taught in Australian schools, in recognition of the growing importance of Asia to Australia's economic and strategic interests. In 2008, the government launched the National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP).

[12] Students who have three years or more of study overseas in their home language must enrol in the Chinese and Literature course and students with a parent or parents from China must enrol in the Chinese in Context course. These requirements are the same across all the Priority Asian Language HSC courses.

[13] The Background speakers course became Language and Literature, and the Heritage course became Language in Context.

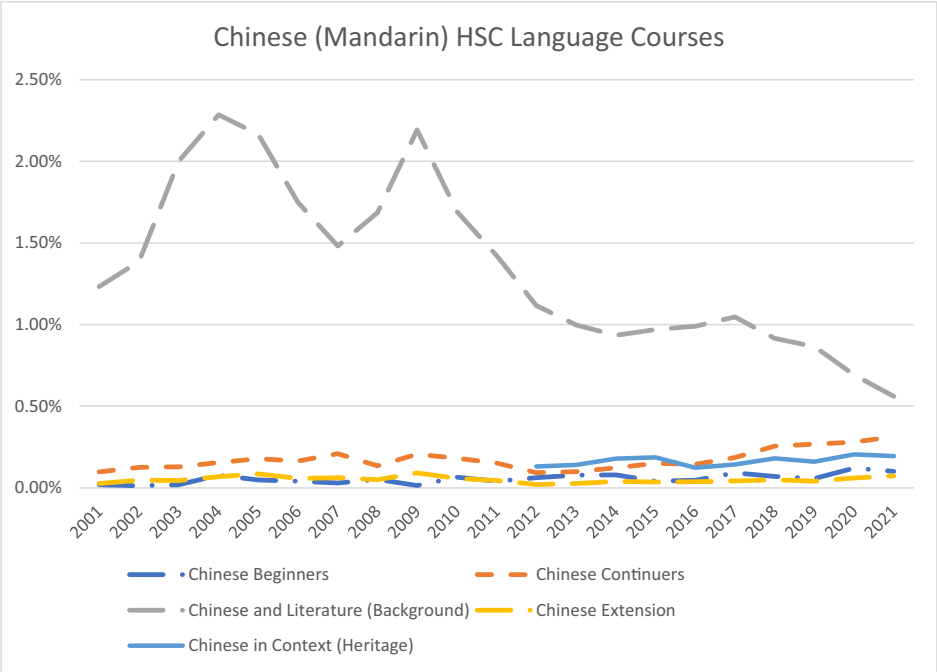

Fig. 2 Chinese HSC language course completion as a proportion of NSW Year 12 Cohort

in languages HSC courses, and is one more "reason for students to abandon their family languages" (Fenely, 2016).

Poor ATARs[14] (both real and perceived) may be another reason students are turning away from the priority Asian language courses. All language courses were once scaled against French and German, the idea being that all languages were developed to equal levels of difficulty (Cruickshank et al., 2020). This changed in 1997 and all languages were scaled individually due to complaints that students with a community language background had an unfair advantage (Cruickshank et al., 2020). Community languages particularly are "disadvantaged in scaling procedures" (Cruickshank & Wright, 2016, p. 84), and all major community languages rank much lower than French and German (Cruickshank et al., 2020). "The impact of these policies was a collapse in languages study after 2000 in mid- to low-SES secondary schools, especially those with students from community languages backgrounds" (Cruickshank et al., 2020, p. 16). Students' perception that studying a background language course may lower their ATAR is a major disincentive to studying priority Asian language Literature and in Context courses and this is likely reflected in the declines seen in Figs. 1, 2, 3, 4.

Despite prevalent community ideas about Chinese as a language of trade, diplomacy, and valuable "cultural capital" (Cruickshank et al., 2020, p. 185), in reality 96% of learners of Chinese drop the subject before Year 12 (Cruickshank et al., 2020, p. 19). The economic benefits sought by politicians and planners with investment in Asian languages are yet to be seen. In 2019 MP Chris Bowen stated that out of a population of 25 million, there are only 130 people can who speak Mandarin at a level of fluency to conduct business, who are not of Chinese background (Midgley, 2019). Australian-Chinese relations are central to the Australian economy, China is Australia's largest two-way trading partner and significant efforts have been made to improve Australian-Chinese relations (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2021a). The stability and low numbers across the Chinese NSW HSC courses can be explained by the perceived and real difficulty in studying the language combined with lack of sufficient allocated study time and this same issue can be applied to all the other languages examined here (Asia Education Foundation, 2010). As evidenced by Fig. 2, the introduction of courses specifically aimed at background speakers have done little to attract non-background students to Chinese courses and the background courses have done little in the way of attracting enrolments.

Indonesian

Indonesian is one of the smaller languages offered in the HSC. In 2021, there were only 111 enrolments across all Indonesian HSC language courses in NSW. To display any kind of fluctuation, a scale of 0–0.25% was adopted for Fig. 3. Indonesian has seen small incremental decreases across the last fourteen years. Indonesian continuers, the largest of the 2021 courses had 0.20% (n = 115) of the HSC enrolments in 2001. However, in 2021, this number has dropped down to 0.09% (n = 62). The Indonesian

[14] An ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank) is a ranking system used in Australia to determine a student's eligibility for admission to tertiary education, such as universities or vocational education and training (VET) institutions. The ATAR is calculated based on a student's performance in their final year of secondary education, using a scale from 0 to 99.95.

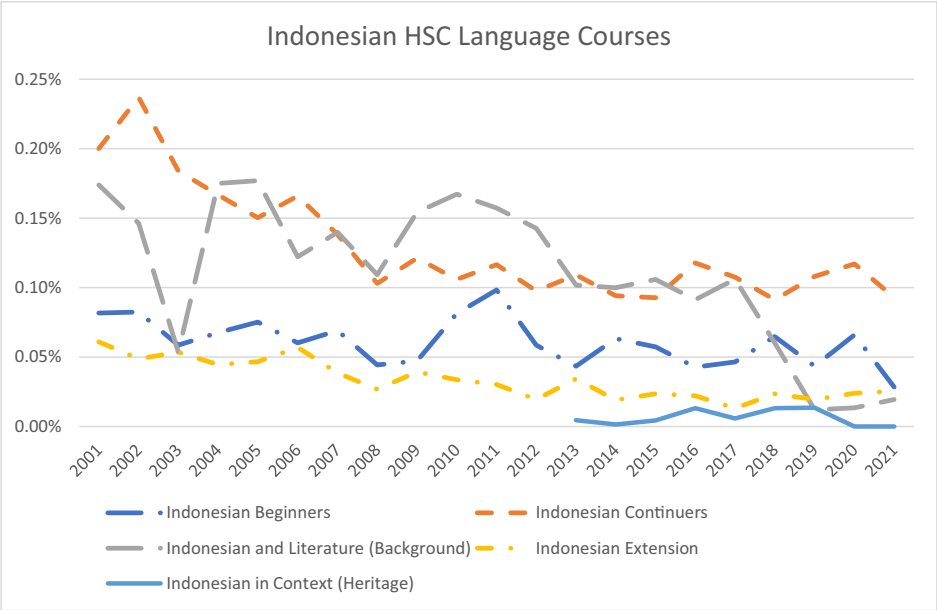

Fig. 3 Indonesian HSC language course completion as a proportion of NSW Year 12 Cohort

and Literature course has seen the largest decline in enrolments in NSW with a drop from 0.17% (n = 100) in 2001 to just 13 students (0.02%) in 2021. Like Japanese, the Indonesian and Literature course has been suspended as of 2020 due to low enrolments (NSW Education & Standards Authority, 2020). In contrast, migration from Indonesia increased by 29.8% between 2010 and 2020 (Department of Home Affairs, 2021). National participation in the language has shown similar overall declines, student enrolments have been declining annually by at least 10,000 students since 2005 (Asia Education Foundation, 2010, p. 14).

Attitudes to Indonesia could be key to its popularity, Hill (2020) cites the negative media images of Indonesia, such as Indonesian violence in East Timor in 1999, the Bali bombings of 2002 and 2005, and the high-profile detentions and trials of Australians as a key factor in students' decisions to study the language. Firdaus (2013) argues that these events have awakened historical negative attitudes towards Indonesia which have re-emerged and impact the popularity of Indonesian. In addition, government warnings against travel to Indonesia and the Covid-19 pandemic have affected the ability of schools to hold study tours and "removed the opportunity and incentive for students to experience immersion in the language and its culture" (Firdaus, 2013, p. 33). This lack of interest is reflected in participation of Indonesian HSC languages courses, and is reflected amongst university offerings of the language, 2019 saw just 14 Australian universities offer the language (Hill, 2020). Current trajectories predict the extinction of Indonesian from Australian universities by 2031 (Thomas, 2019).

The language of Australia's closest neighbor is the 9th most spoken language in the world with 270 million speakers internationally (Kent, 2020). It is the only language of these four which does not have a strong presence of background learners in HSC enrolments (Asia Education Foundation, 2010). Australia's bilateral relationship with Indonesia is a crucial foreign policy issue; Prime Minister Albanese[15] has made it clear that "nurturing the relationship with Indonesia is among the most important concerns of the new government" (Barton, 2022). Historically, Australia was a world leader in teaching Indonesian and a center of expertise on Indonesian politics, history, economics, and research (Asia Education Foundation, 2010). Studying Indonesian has been a mechanism of social mobility and the teaching of Indonesian in "diverse educational settings has the potential to reduce the cultural gentrification and stratification that typifies the public/private and metro/non-metropolitan school divide in Australia" (Morgan, 2023, p. 47).

Indonesian is a language "without a clearly articulated educational rationale that resonates with students, families and school communities" (Asia Education Foundation, 2010, p. 14). This is reflected in national participation rates, with less Year 12 students studying Indonesian in 2009 than in 1972 (Hill, 2012). While the declines in Indonesian study may appear incremental, it is important to note the vast number of students who study the language in primary and early secondary school, with approximately 200 000 students studying the language in primary and secondary school nationally, but only between 1,000 to 2,000 studying it as part of their senior certification (Slaughter, 2007a). It is also important to note the incremental declines seen in 2001–2021 do not capture the greater decline from the widespread study of Indonesian in the 1990s (Slaughter, 2007a).

The declines seen in Fig. 3 are a stark contrast to the rhetoric of successive Australian governments who have lauded Indonesia

[15] Prime Minister Anthony Albanese was elected to office in 2022 and has advocated for a range of policies across different areas, including climate change, economic inequality, social justice, and infrastructure development.

as Australia's most important neighbor. However, this recognition has not sustained interest among Australians in studying the language (Hill, 2020). The New Colombo Plan, introduced in 2014 invested $320 million into encouraging Australian undergraduate students to study abroad in the Indo-Pacific (Prince, 2022). "This is a significant investment of public funding in Australia's "Asia literacy" and, albeit indirectly, Asian language education" (Prince, 2022). This program has stimulated interest in Indonesian language and cultural studies (Hill, 2020). However, this program sends an inherent message that there is an absence of funding in conventional modes of teaching, it tells students "if you want to study an Asian language, we will pay you to go to that country and study it there" (Thomas, 2019, p. 220). These government policies demonstrate a commitment to improving fluency in Indonesian. However, addressing the issue at all stages is crucial, as language acquisition requires years of study, and investing solely in the later stages of the language learning pipeline is insufficient to solve the problem.

Strategies to stem the hemorrhaging enrolments in Indonesian HSC courses stress the importance of an intervention targeted at junior secondary Indonesian instruction and increased retention into the HSC (Asia Education Foundation, 2010). In addition, Australian attitudes toward Indonesia must be at the core of such a strategy, as current attitudes reveal "out-of-date, and needlessly negative views" (Barton, 2022). Morgan (2023) also stresses the importance of recruiting and upskilling Indonesian teachers as these issues are "the biggest threat to the continuation of Indonesian teaching" (p. 49).

Korean

Figure 4 shows that the Korean language courses are significantly smaller than the other three Asian languages examined here. It must be highlighted that to display the trends the scale had to be changed from 0–2.5% to 0–0.25%. It is evident that if this language continues on a similar trajectory, several of its courses will fall into extinction. There has been more than one instance when the Korean Continuers and Beginners' courses had zero enrolments. While it may appear that the language has had significant ups and downs, it is important to note the small scale needed to display any kind of fluctuation in the language. The Korean Beginners course showed some growth in 2017, with 0.14% (n = 95) of students enrolled in the subject. But in 2020, just 0.33% (n = 225) of HSC students enrolled in any Korean language course.

Despite the strong presence of a Korean community in NSW, it has had little impact on the uptake of Korean HSC language courses. Almost half of the South-Korean migrant population arrived in Australia from 2007–2016, but the Korean background speakers' HSC course has continued its rapid decline through this period (Department of Home Affairs, 2018b). The vast majority of students' studying Korean HSC courses are background learners (Asia Education Foundation, 2010). South Korea is Australia's 3rd largest two-way trade partner, but public discourse does not stress the importance of learning Korean in the same way as Chinese and Indonesian are emphasized (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2021b).

However, the spike in enrolments in the Korean Beginners course is notable. In 2001, 0.00% (n = 0) of the HSC cohort studied the Korean Beginners course, this continued and there were 0 enrolments in the course until 2017, except for 2003, 2005 and 2006; when the course had 1 enrolment. In 2017, enrolments spiked, with 0.14% (n = 95) of the HSC cohort participating in the course. This course has continued to grow, and in 2021 0.16% (n = 110) of the HSC cohort participated in the Beginners course. One explanation for the growth in

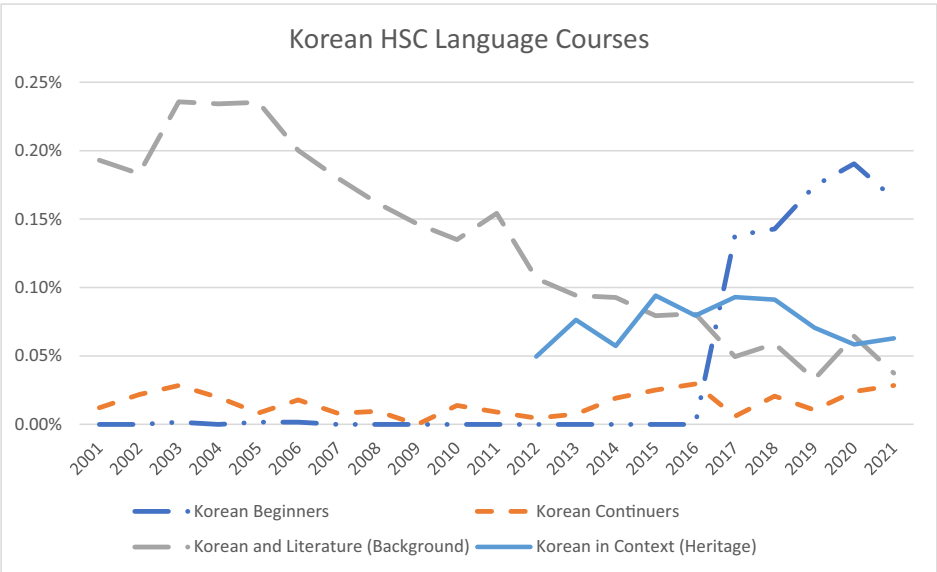

Fig. 4 Korean HSC language course completion as a proportion of NSW Year 12 Cohort

participation may be the advent of K-pop in Australia. K-Pop, short for Korean Popular Music is a genre which has become increasingly popular all over the world and in Australia in particular. K-pop has become one of the most successful and important cultural diplomacy tools for South Korea (Donoughue, 2019). The popularity of K-Pop in Australia is explained as Australia entering the flow of trans-Asian cultural traffic and an indication of the strong influence Australia's fluid Asian-Australian diaspora populations have on popular culture (Scott-Maxwell, 2020). The popularity of K-pop and the increase in Korean Beginners can perhaps be interpreted as Australia increasing situating itself within the Asia region, as Scott-Maxwell (2020) argues, "Asia is no longer just 'over there'; it is already 'here'" (p. 21). The influence of popular culture and its impact on student subject preferences is something which needs to be investigated further as an avenue for improving Asian languages uptake.

Priority Asian languages in Community Language Schools (CLS)

Figure 5 demonstrates the stability and incremental growth of enrolments of students aged 5–18 in a CLS course in one of the priority Asian languages. Data for these enrolments was only available as early as 2004 and are by age and not year group, making comparisons of CLS enrolments at the HSC level impossible. However, these figures have been included to demonstrate that the priority Asian languages, Chinese particularly, have a strong presence in CLS. Chinese has the most enrolments of any of the priority Asian languages and of any language offered by the CLS (Cruickshank et al., 2019).[16] In 2021 there were 10 645 students enrolled in a Chinese CLS program. This is a figure which has grown from 9379 in 2004. While this figure refers to the number of students enrolled in the language across all age groups, it is a figure which is larger than the number of enrolments across all HSC languages courses in 2021. Overall CLS enrolments are concentrated in primary schools, with 74% of students aged 5–11 (Cruickshank et al., 2019, p. 9). However, there has "been a marked increase in enrolments of secondary-aged students" (Cruickshank et al., 2019, p. 11), which is a contrast from the trends we have seen in the priority Asian HSC courses.

Korean, the smallest of the priority Asian languages in the NSW school system, has a significant presence in the community language schools. 2001 saw 1761 students enrolled in a Korean community language program. This figure has remained stable with 1959 students participating in a Korean program in 2021. In contrast to the priority Asian languages HSC enrolments, CLS enrolments have seen incremental growth over the last 20 years, with a combined percentage increase of 16.5% of total students studying a priority Asian language from 2004 to 2021.

CLS play an important role in providing languages education in the priority Asian languages. CLS receive some government funding, however "currently, work done in CLS programs isn't recognized towards NSW graduation requirements" (Baldauf, 2005, p. 141). Baldauf (2005) makes the argument that these programs should be given greater recognition within the NSW education system which would allow greater collaboration with schools and could let these schools "take on a bigger role in the provision of languages" (p. 141). This argument corroborates Lo Bianco and Slaughter's (2009) conclusion that community bilingualism has remained a largely untapped resource (p. 4).

CLS also now include substantial numbers of non-background students in their student enrolment (Cruickshank et al., 2020, p. 184). This highlights the failure of Australian schools to provide quality and continuous languages education to students when they are at school. These figures also indicate a shift in background speakers from languages study in mainstream schools to the out-of-hours CLS. This is a trend seen across all CLS languages, where enrolments have "increased by 20% since 2004" (Cruickshank et al., 2019, p. 6).

The existence of CLS programs and their continued stability represent a notion that Asian languages have been pushed to the periphery of schooling and that maintenance of heritage languages does not happen at school. CLS have a tradition of providing education for heritage learners, and incorporating CLS in a strategy for provision of priority Asian languages could be seen as removing it from mainstream schooling. However, they represent an unexplored avenue to improve Asian languages provision and delivery. Cruickshank et al. (2019) calls for the "alignment of CLS with other sectors and articulation of cross-sectoral language learning pathways, something which would lead to the strengthening of languages provision in NSW" (p.21).

Conclusion

The main finding from this analysis of priority Asian languages in the NSW HSC, is that the attempts to address the presence of students with some background in a language through separate curriculum courses has not been successful, with highly evident declines and even suspension of some background speaker language courses. The continuer courses remain stable except for declines in Japanese and Indonesian. Beginner Japanese and Korean courses are the two areas of growth across all priority Asian language courses; however, they do not come close to achieving modest policy targets of 13% of students leaving school with social proficiency in one of these languages. These trends suggest that differentiation of courses has disincentivized generations of multicultural students from learning a language they have some background in and done little to attract non-background students. The current system of dividing students into courses

[16] Many students who attend a Chinese CLS may be enrolled in a HSC course in the language through their school, however, explicit data on this overlap is unavailable. The data seen in Fig. 5 is for students who attend a CLS, however CLS do not provide HSC courses for students.

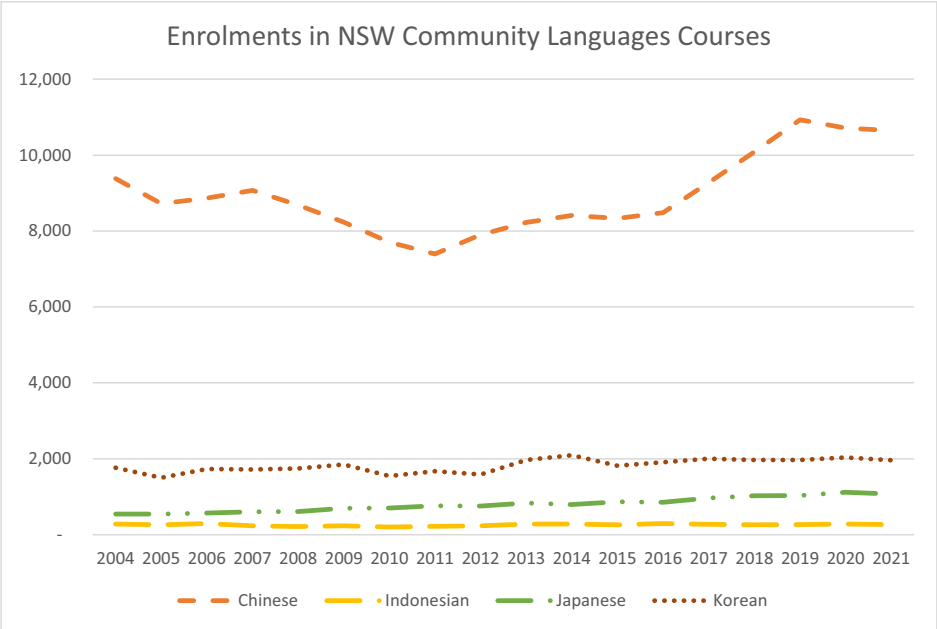

Fig. 5 Community language school enrolments in each of the priority Asian languages

needs to be reviewed nationally. The removal of differentiated courses will not magically fix participation issues, but an analytical review of the complex factors which impact languages is needed to construct evidence informed policy strategies.

A review of CLS enrolments reveals that growth of enrolments in these languages demonstrate community desire to maintain languages and represent an emerging group of non-background learners turning towards CLS. Strategies to improve Asian languages provision should investigate incorporating CLS (Cruickshank et al., 2019). To do this, improved data collection and evaluation is needed, as the data in relation to CLS is extremely limited. The absence of a national policy and differential funding of CLS by state governments also has a major impact on this sector.

Detailed analysis of consistently collected data can lead to much needed basic monitoring of language education, and evaluation of the effectiveness policy, including on priority Asian languages. It is evident that languages are in a unique position as a subject where enrolments are influenced by external geopolitical factors. Take for example the growth of Korean Beginners and its correlation with the global K-Pop boom, or the negative images of Indonesia in the media and their probable impact on students' decision to study Indonesian. The salience of these factors needs to be examined further for individual languages as a means of adding to our understanding of state and national policy (Baldwin, 2019). This aligns with Cairns and Weinmann (2023) argument, that to be effective, Asia-related learning needs to be better aligned with students' lived experiences. There is an imperative to move beyond generalized complaints about the 'decline' and to focus on evidence-based approaches to identifying factors and differences to develop more nuanced policy approaches (Morgan, 2023, p. 45). This speaks to the difficulty of consistently defining the concept of "Asia literacy" (Tangen & Henderson, 2023), as Salter (2015) argues, this concept "often struggles for purchase in Australian education due to ambiguity in its articulation" (p. 781). Without clearly defined objectives and sustained community support, any policy initiative is doomed to failure (Weinmann, 2015).

Policy, as well as data collection is left to individual states and territories and it is clear, particularly when examining the uptake of languages subjects, that state government policy can play a big role in how these subjects are perceived and studied by students and the community. Consistent and accessible national data collection and investment in language education research is recommended, allowing the declines in languages education to be addressed from a well-informed perspective. This argument is supported by Cairns and Weinmann (2023) who found that "the last fifty years have proved consistently stagnant in bridging the distinct delineation of curriculum-as-planned and curriculum- as-lived that students experience in their learning" (p. 446). This study adds to the mounting pile of evidence that current approaches are inadequate, and even damaging. The logic of system monitoring, and accountability is built into all Australian education policy frameworks, yet despite promotional rhetoric and significant investment, it fails to materialize in languages education. That can and should change.

Appendix: Data tables

NSW HSC priority Asian languages enrolments

Japanese

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Japanese Beginners	323	324	496	575	547	568	598	770	760	663	532	619	625	687	642	665	712	718	677	635	545
Japanese Continuers	918	850	866	818	803	789	669	708	800	781	798	692	677	624	659	640	679	679	617	671	632
Japanese Background Speakers/and Literature	48	54	59	50	50	49	52	59	26	41	30	22	28	11	19	22	14	9	14	11	10
Japanese Heritage Speakers/ In context												15	18	18	20	31	28	30	27	30	33
Japanese Extension	232	240	275	273	295	263	233	267	283	285	269	191	203	191	208	179	162	153	138	163	166
Total (excluding extension)	1289	1228	1421	1443	1400	1406	1319	1537	1586	1485	1360	1348	1348	1340	1340	1358	1433	1436	1335	1347	1220

Chinese

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Chinese Beginners	11	7	11	47	29	25	18	32	9	42	27	41	52	54	27	32	63	47	38	80	67
Chinese Continuers	56	75	77	94	107	101	130	85	131	118	100	62	66	83	102	98	128	173	178	187	209
Chinese Background Speakers/ and Literature	709	825	1197	1385	1297	1075	922	1064	1393	1102	941	744	667	635	660	672	721	622	576	461	373
Chinese Heritage Speakers/ In context												87	94	121	127	84	98	122	107	137	130
Chinese Extension	15	28	27	41	51	35	39	31	58	37	30	13	18	26	24	25	29	34	27	40	49
Total (excluding extension)	776	907	1285	1526	1433	1201	1070	1181	1533	1262	1068	934	879	893	916	886	1010	964	899	865	779

Indonesian

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Indonesian Beginners	47	49	35	41	45	37	43	28	30	53	65	39	29	43	39	29	32	44	29	44	19
Indonesian Continuers	115	141	110	101	90	102	86	65	77	69	77	65	73	64	63	80	74	62	72	78	62
Indonesian Background Speakers/ and literature	100	87	32	106	106	75	87	69	98	109	104	95	68	68	72	62	73	41	8	9	13
Indonesian Heritage Speakers/ In context													3	1	3	9	4	9	9	0	0
Indonesian Extension	35	29	32	27	28	35	24	17	25	22	20	13	23	13	16	15	9	16	13	16	17
Total (excluding extension)	262	277	177	248	241	214	216	162	205	231	246	199	173	176	177	180	183	156	118	131	94

Korean

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Korean Beginners	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	95	97	116	127	110
Korean Continuers	7	13	17	12	5	11	5	6	0	9	6	3	5	13	17	20	4	14	7	16	19
Korean Background Speakers / and literature	111	109	141	142	141	123	112	102	93	88	102	71	63	63	54	55	34	40	22	43	25
Korean Heritage Speakers/ In context												33	51	39	64	54	64	62	47	39	42
Total	118	122	159	154	147	135	117	108	93	97	108	107	119	115	135	129	197	213	192	225	196

NSW HSC Cohorts 2001–2021

Year	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
HSC Cohort	57500	59500	59800	60600	59900	61445	62222	63119	63521	65146	66125	66590	66841	68004	68015	67924	68816	67972	66627	66660	66709

NSW Community Language Schools Priority Asian Languages Enrolments 2004–2021

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Chinese	9379	8720	8868	9071	8682	8235	7708	7396	7906	8224	8409	8335	8482	9272	10085	10932	10715	10645
Indonesian	280	259	290	232	210	230	203	220	234	280	276	261	292	269	256	263	277	267
Japanese	544	541	568	605	606	692	700	763	752	832	795	866	851	966	1022	1031	1115	1073
Korean	1761	1499	1727	1718	1744	1849	1544	1670	1586	1967	2093	1815	1910	2003	1968	1965	2036	1959

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Declarations

Competing interests The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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