From whispers to a roar

Getting the hang of Chinese languages will be crucial in the Asian Century, writes David Wilson

Want to turbocharge your chances of making progress this century? Learn Chinese. That is the message from the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency.

In its report, which addresses Australia’s skills and workforce development needs to 2025, the agency also advises next-generation job seekers to gain skills in Asian culture and business in readiness for an Asian Century with a strong Chinese flavour.

Chinese languages are among the world’s most spoken. Learning them is said to be hard because of their tonal nature. But it is easier than you think, says health-tech guru Alison Hardacre, who speaks five Asian languages, including Cantonese, and has used them throughout her eclectic career. She says that in contrast with European languages such as French, Chinese is free from “complicated verb conjugations or tenses that trip you up”.

Once you get used to the tone of Chinese languages, which takes about three months of application, you can put together sentences and be understood, Hardacre says.

Then, to improve, you should speak Chinese as widely as possible. Speak with fellow students, Chinese international students, people at restaurants and more.

“When you speak with other people, you can learn more-complicated sentences and ideas and start to be yourself in Chinese, which is fun and very fulfilling,” Hardacre says.

A grasp of Chinese can boost your career, whatever path you take, she says. What’s more, learning it will reflect your commitment to an international career, which is always a positive, and expose you to a range of vocational possibilities.

Hardacre mentions another plus: learning a language pays broad cultural dividends, exposing you to new ways of thinking and expanding your horizons. “The more you learn the better,” she says, adding that because Chinese people are proud of their language, any grasp of it will stand you in good stead in business.

Hardacre learnt Chinese by living with a Chinese family in Melbourne. A mix of formal classroom study and absorbing the language in your everyday life works best, she says. She advocates doing a home-stay with an Australia-based Chinese family or travelling around China. However you tackle the language, attaining reasonable fluency takes about three years, she says.

According to TAFE Sydney Institute, 1.3 billion people – one-fifth of the world’s population – speak some form of Chinese as their native language. Mandarin Chinese is one of the United Nations’ six official languages and is the standard literary and official lingo of China. Based on the Beijing dialect, Mandarin is spoken by about 800 million people.

Mandarin’s counterpart, Cantonese, is comparatively niche – mainly limited to south-eastern China, including Macau and business beehive Hong Kong.

However, Hardacre says Mandarin’s popularity is growing in Hong Kong. Because, generally, Mandarin dominates, it is more useful than Cantonese, she says.

Sydney-based Chinese-to-English translator Elle Wu agrees.

“Mandarin Chinese should always be the first choice,” she says, noting that whereas Cantonese speakers normally understand Mandarin, the reverse does not apply, especially in mainland China.

Learn Mandarin by hiring a qualified tutor who speaks the standard version, Wu says. Or expose yourself to the environment where Mandarin is spoken. “Staying in China for a year or two would definitely be helpful.”

The hardest part of adapting to Chinese business culture is getting to grips with its greater intimacy, Wu says. Many Chinese prefer to do business over dinner or a bottle of wine. She adds that Chinese people are not keen on routine. “Instead, they are always trying to think out of the box and to take short cuts.”

For more information on Asian culture, see Asialink (asialink.unimelb.edu.au).
Future fluent ... Alison Hardacre is multilingual.
Gillard off to ASEM in Vientiane

JULIA GILLARD leaves this morning for the Asia-Europe summit in Laos. The ninth ASEM event, starting tomorrow (Monday) takes place in Vientiane, and serves as a forum for leaders of Asia and Europe to discuss regional and international issues.

Issues expected to be considered will be food and energy security, sustainable development, the financial and economic crisis, climate change, and natural disaster responses.

Meanwhile, Treasurer WAYNE SWAN is in Mexico City for this weekend's meeting of G20 Finance Ministers before heading to Washington.

Senator CHRIS EVAÑOS takes over as acting Prime Minister.

AAP RTV cb/wz/ohs
UTS hosts Indonesian delegation

In a sign of the increasingly close ties between Australian universities and those in the Asian region, the University of Technology Sydney will host a 100 strong senior delegation of Indonesian universities next week.

The group, from the Indonesian Association of Private Higher Education (APTISI), represents more than 3000 universities and enrolls the majority of Indonesian higher education students.

Deputy vice-chancellor Patrick Woods said the delegation was believed to be the largest ever from Indonesian universities to come to Australia. It includes 55 rectors (university chiefs) and will visit UTS on November 12 to sign a memorandum of understanding for ongoing collaboration with UTS.

The MoU will open the way for more student exchanges between UTS and member universities of APTISI. It also envisages programs in which UTS will help develop teaching and research skills for academics and provide advice on university administration.

Members of the delegation will also travel to Canberra for meetings with federal government officials.

Meanwhile, new links between universities in India and Australia have been unveiled during a trade mission to India led by NSW Premier Barry O'Farrell last week.

Under a program called In Step, information technology company Infosys in Hyderabad will offer internships to five NSW university students, with the company covering students’ travel, visa and accommodation expenses.

Mr O'Farrell also presented scholarships to two Indian students who will undertake PhDs at Macquarie University. Macquarie has committed $11 million over three years to 55 scholarships under the Confederation of Indian Industry’s India@75 initiative.

The federal Minister for Tertiary Education, Chris Evans, told the Australia-India Institute annual conference in Melbourne yesterday that there are 380 active collaborations between 32 Australian universities and 250 Indian institutions. But Senator Evans noted that while there were more than 70,000 Indians studying at tertiary institutions in Australia, there were only 585 Australians studying at universities in India.

“This needs to change if we are to truly have a reciprocal partnership. The ratio will never be one-to-one given our population size, but we can do better,” he said.
Skills training left in the cold

With an excess of university graduates in Asia, VET providers say developing Australia’s role in vocational education is crucial, writes Joanna Mather.

Training chiefs from across the East Asian region are due to formalise ties during meetings in Melbourne this month, amid criticism that Australia’s role in skills development was neglected in the Asian Century white paper.

Workforce shortages in para-professional and technical areas represent a larger and more immediate threat to economic development than demand for university graduates in many Asian countries.

Australian vocational education and training (VET) providers have been building a strong presence in Asia for more than a decade, but claim the white paper is the latest example of policy bias towards universities.

“The white paper targeted universities to step up into higher international league tables for quality,” TAFE Directors Australia chief executive Martin Riordan said.

“But it ignored the quality platform equally required for VET as Australia takes its place within a global village of companies operating across markets, and with skills mobility a key requirement.”

Latest figures for public providers such as TAFEs show that in 2011 there were nearly 60,000 students studying for a VET qualification offshore, more than triple the number in 2003.

The majority of students are in China but the footprint extends to India, Kuwait and Mongolia. And although enrolment growth has slowed since a peak in 2009, offshore activity provides significant revenue for some TAFE institutes.

In recognition of its leadership role so far, TAFE Directors Australia (TDA) has been commissioned by the Australian and Korean governments to bring together training leaders from across the 18-member East Asia Summit in Melbourne this month.

The meetings will focus on developing a formal network of providers and lay the groundwork for mutual recognition of qualifications, which would be a boon for labour mobility in the region.

“The strategy by both universities and private VET colleges has remained pitched at recruitment for inbound students,” Mr Riordan said.

“Yet for Australia’s 61 TAFE institutes, our strategy has been a longer term approach. We have worked hard to develop bilateral partnerships across the strategic markets of China, India, Indonesia and more recently Mongolia, which has a resources-based economy similar to Australia’s.”

Chinese media outlets have been reporting an oversupply of university graduates while India needs to upskill an astounding 500 million people by 2022, many of whom will not go to university.

“India lags far behind in imparting skill training as compared with other countries,” according to an analysis by Ernst & Young published in September.

“Only 10 per cent of the total workforce in the country receive some kind of skill training, 2 per cent with formal training and 8 per cent with informal training.”

A key challenge is that university education has a much higher profile and status in both Asia and Australia.

The Asian Century white paper continued page 26
Skills training left in the cold

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recognised the importance of skills and training linkages with Asian neighbours, as well as the need for complementary skills assessment and recognition in the region.

But it did not go far enough, Australian Council for Private Education and Training chief executive Claire Field said.

"The [white paper's] rhetoric and the ideas are good but the government in September last year made a commitment to accept all of the Knight recommendations," she said.

The Knight Review of the student visa program included recommendations that VET providers be supported to expand their offshore operations with access to business intelligence and export grants.

"Knight had three recommendations which went to helping good quality VET providers expand their presence offshore, none of which have been fulfilled," Ms Field said.

The first scan of offshore VET activity by both Australian public and private providers in 2009 revealed significant growth over the previous six years to reach 73,000 students in 68 countries. Concerns were raised about unchecked growth in the absence of formal quality assurance monitoring.

Although it is believed few TAFE colleges make big money through offshore provision, among those that have been successful is the Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE, which has been delivering diplomas in IT, business and hospitality with Chinese partners for 15 years.

The institute has 12,000 students in China and is expanding to Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Korea.

"It makes a significant difference to our bottom line," said Marcus Scott, the manager of the institute's international office.

"I wouldn't want to tell you exactly how it affects us but it definitely increases the opportunities in Australia based on what we're doing offshore."

However, the hope that students who complete diplomas offshore would come to Australia to complete the institute's bachelor degree programs has not occurred.

State government budget cuts in Australia could jeopardise Asian engagement, according to TDA.

Victorian TAFEs were stripped of $300 million in the May state budget. In NSW, course fees will rise by 10 per cent and 300 jobs will be shed while the Queensland government is considering recommendations to reduce TAFE campuses statewide.

"What really concerns us is this threat to the capacity of our institutes to continue this [international] work," said Peter Holden, the director of international engagement and business development at TDA.

TDA's next focus is pushing for VET students to spend time in countries such as China, an ambition that will be assisted by last week's announcement by the government of 500 places allocated to vocational students under the $37 million Asia Bound scholarship scheme.

But ACPET's Ms Field said she was "deeply disappointed" that VET students studying in private colleges would not have the same opportunity.

"There is no commitment to support the one in 10 Australian higher education students studying at a private higher education institution to access the same opportunities," she said.
October was a month of mixed messages for higher education. There was the mini budget, which was bad news, and there was the Asian Century white paper, which was good news.

The mini budget (Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook, or MYEFO) was bad news because it trimmed more than a billion dollars off previous higher education provisions. University budget planners therefore have to go back to the drawing board and find savings accordingly. For savings, read reduced skilled employment growth in the knowledge sector.

The savings especially targeted the sustainable research excellence (SRE) scheme, which funds indirect costs of research grants. This was a program sought by universities for decades and for which Labor implementation was applauded thoroughly. To now defer full implementation of this scheme for savings is a very bad sign. The obvious question is: what commitment will be next?

Universities mostly took this on the chin. Expressing more concern, not only on their own behalf, but for the cost to the economy and society, might be helpful, however, as this MYEFO approach is also bad news for the public interest.

This particular decision by government displays a basic lack of understanding of good budget principles and of proper prioritisation of outlays for the public benefit.

It is a golden rule of public budgeting that governments should distinguish consumption from investment. SRE fits squarely into the investment category. Surveys of returns to public investment in research reveal a conservative 20 per cent average real rate of return, even ahead of university education itself, which is an average 15 per cent.

Both investments, and not some artificial choice between them, pay off so far ahead of hurdle rates for good investment that obsessing about course entry cut-offs is close to irrelevant. Both more research and higher enrolments warrant funding as investment. Such investment is how we can pay for defence, hospitals and pensions into the future.

Fortunately the Asian Century white paper is a more positive development for Australia and for the universities. It is welcome as good public policy because it provides a sense of vision that is otherwise rather lacking in recent Australian politics. Its focus on productivity and people is exactly right. These are the keys to our future national prosperity.

Also, atypically, the white paper draws well on the whole of government and it also links well to the mutual responsibilities of other social partners. But it is light on new policies for implementing the vision.

For universities, the white paper positions them as making a central contribution for Australia’s international engagement. It pulls together existing policies for this. It adds some new targets and talks up some selected new initiatives. It is good to see more far-sighted business leaders applauding this emphasis on education.

The white paper does reiterate for universities existing explicit numerical goals regarding 40 per cent of young Australians having a degree by 2025 and 20 per cent of enrolments being from less advantaged backgrounds by 2020. It adds a new numerical target for 10 Australian universities in the top 100 by 2025. Other targets are there, too, but they are vague while worthy or, in some cases, already met.

Foremost in the proclaimed new initiatives area is a scheme of awards for overseas study. In fact, this is no new initiative but a rebadged one. This is a little too slick. It is like the rebadging of the Coalition’s higher education endowment fund as the education investment fund, and then claiming all the credit for spending the money but without acknowledgement or adequate replenishment.

This capital spend of Coalition largesse has actually been the true source of Labor’s past major additional financial support of universities. It was intended to be increasingly complemented by a phasing in of indexation and indirect cost improvement as genuine and worthy Labor contributions, but now the SRE pause on indirect cost support raises a new question mark over this.
The Treasurer, in his own press release accompanying the white paper launch, stated: “We will deliver $5.3 billion in additional funding for universities for the period 2012-2015.” Surprisingly, this has been little remarked upon or interrogated. This sum could ensure that the aspiration for higher education to constitute a “core pillar” for Australia’s future could indeed be meaningful. Five new top 100 research universities could be created using exactly the same formula that delivers ANU’s solid positioning. New block grants totalling $1 billion annually could do the job. This is quite modest compared with the higher numbers being bandied about for “lifting up all boats”. One worry is that Treasurer Swan’s $5.3 billion could again simply be recycled spin. It looks suspiciously like a $5.3 billion figure in the MYEFO for additional outlays for 2010-15 for demand-driven enrolments, even though the white paper press release talks about $5.3 billion in additional monies for 2012-15. Whatever interpretation is the correct one, the core fact is that it is time to begin genuine white paper implementation. A rollout of detailed schedules for reform and resourcing plans for Asian Century strategy action would be a real transformative factor in Australian politics. It can start with higher education.

Glenn Withers is a professor of economics at Australian National University. He was founding chief executive of Universities Australia.

The core fact is, it is time to begin genuine white paper implementation.
Battle lines drawn to build empires of the mind

Churchill was right when he predicted that the empires of the future would be empires of the mind. Universities with international ambitions are engaged in a furious scramble for resources, alliances and manpower that evokes the imperial conflicts of the 19th century in the era of the Great Game.

In this environment, Australia has enjoyed an enviable run of success. Our higher education system is among the world's best and we have a great track record in attracting international students.

Education has turned into a knowledge business that brings in more than $18 billion a year, and that's before the long-term partnering and cultural benefits are taken into account.

International education is big business and makes for enduring diplomacy. But increasing globalisation brings challenges. Students, staff and researchers have unprecedented mobility, but they also have high expectations and demand value for money from their international hosts and partners.

For Australia, the lesson is that international competition is accelerating and complacency can kill. I have just returned from a month-long marathon of strategic higher education meetings in Africa and Europe, during which common themes emerged: the increased influence of student power as fees increase; the rise of universities in Asia, bringing the benefits and risks of competition; the movement of talent and the maintenance of quality; and the enhanced role of international knowledge partnerships and networks in building sustainable success.

But the most persistent message was a trumpet call for radical change in the way universities operate. University leaders have come to recognise that fundamental reform is necessary to remain competitive, self-sufficient and sustainable. A major factor in building quality and performance is the development of clear strategies that prioritise strengths, diminish or eliminate weaknesses, and retain the basics in delivering education, research and internationalisation.

The pressure to keep up with the pack has brought varying responses. Some advanced economies are struggling to meet the cost, while others are putting education and discovery as firm national priorities. Institutions in some developing countries are walking in the footprints of the developed stars but risk losing their cultural souls.

China is investing hugely in its universities. Sweden is set to educate 60 per cent of its population to university graduation on the public purse. Britain is doubling its university fees but also its student loans — and debts!

At the recent Australian higher education meetings in Melbourne, vice-chancellors and government were told by Steven Smith of Exeter University that Australian higher education enjoyed robust support from government in comparison with the UK.

Australia’s investment in higher education and research is holding steady around the OECD average. But Ken Henry’s Australia in the Asian Century white paper has the potential to be a defining moment, a chance to place higher education and research in the front line of our international strategy and to compel our universities to engage more fully with regional neighbours. It marks a major, perhaps overdue attitudinal shift for Australia.

For research-intensive universities, the greatest challenge is to maintain quality and competitiveness amid rising costs and declining resources following the global financial crisis.

In teaching and learning, new methods and technologies are increasingly costly. There is also a shortage of talent and availability of senior, experienced academics and research leaders, while conversely there is unemployment among new graduates as the generational transition is postponed along with retirement.

Universities also need to factor in the role and influence of university rankings systems. These at best are imperfect international benchmarks for research and education. At worst they are a destructive influence on cultural identity and diversity among universities that dumb down creativity and evolution.

In Shanghai last year, the presidents of the 18-member Worldwide Universities Network (WUN) met to discuss the principal drivers for higher education and university reforms to 2020. They identified the war for talent, accelerating privatisation, truly interdisciplinary research, novel learning and teaching along with curriculum and the student experience, and an international
dimension in everything that we do. Highly rated also were integration with national and international communities, translation and commercialisation of knowledge, and the shaping of future society.

Organisations such as WUN are vital if higher education wants to move away from the Great Game model to a more sophisticated form of international engagement. Over the past 10 years, more than 100 networks have developed, each with strategic goals in aspects of research and education, mobility and resources. Some networks have local or regional ambition, while others are truly global.

Such networks enable peers to meet, gain intelligence of shared opportunities and challenges, benchmark in essential indicators for innovation and implementation of their strategic plans, and co-operate on the division of labour and teamwork to attract resources.

Co-operation has long been happening at the level of the individual researcher or educator, but the larger critical mass afforded through institutional engagement and endorsement brings infinitely more power and impact to the results that can be achieved.

John Hearn is the chief executive of the Worldwide Universities Network, chairman of the Australia-Africa Universities Network, and deputy vice-chancellor international of the University of Sydney. The opinions presented are his own.

For Australia, the lesson is that international competition is accelerating and complacency can kill.

There is a war for talent in the education business. Photo: JAMES DAVIES
Universities unsung heroes of growth

Vicki Thomson

There is nothing new in stating that Australia’s future economic growth and prosperity is closely aligned with how well Australian businesses can meet the demands of Asia’s burgeoning middle class. Anyone who didn’t get that message some years ago has long missed the economic boat.

But what seems to be still ignored is the absolutely critical part that Australian universities play in driving this outcome. It would not be an exaggeration to say that universities are in fact the key.

The Business Council of Australia’s chief executive, Jennifer Westacott, has correctly identified that the success of Australian companies in Asia is largely dependent on the productivity gains brought about by innovation, new ideas, and on having educated, capable business leaders managing a skilled workforce.

Absolutely — but it is universities that business and the government rely on to facilitate such productivity gains. As hubs of innovation, and as educators, Australian universities are often the unacknowledged partner of the business community. And it does need mentioning in this context that 60 per cent of Australia’s researchers work in universities — the highest percentage of any modern economy.

We are the nation’s research, innovation and productivity foundation. It is well past time we received the deserved recognition.

Consider this: in 2011 university education exports — $9.4 billion — were worth more to the nation than its wheat exports. We are the top providers of education for Asia’s international students, and as such we can absolutely claim credit for assisting the emerging Asian powerhouses.

It is our excellent standard of higher education that is driving their successes. The Australian Technology Network (ATN) alone educates some 25 per cent of Australia’s international university students and is the largest provider of offshore education.

Given all the above, it is hard to understand why the university sector has to constantly remind Australia of its worth.

We continue to state that the roads and bridges we drive on, the houses we live in, our children’s teachers, the paramedic who assists you — none would be there without our universities; and that is before we consider what universities deliver for our resources and energy sectors, banking and legal sectors.

How many ways can it be said that what we deliver for Australia everyday, we also deliver for our future in Asia? It’s time to treat us as equal partners in Australia’s economic future.

There have been some stirrings. The Australian Workplace Productivity Agency in its discussion paper Australia’s skills and workforce development needs did highlight that investment in tertiary education is critical in providing professional skills to the mining, manufacturing and service centres. Excellent. But that hasn’t resulted in the sector being recognised as it should be.

As a sector we do, always, take that future very seriously. We have noted, for example, the Asian Century white paper has recommended incentives and opportunities for more university students to study in Asia to gain a greater understanding of the region.

That is a welcome initiative. But it requires being introduced in the context of students also having the opportunity to gain a greater understanding of the workings of industry. Such industry internships, as they are known, are the norm in the US, Canada and the UK — less so in Australia.

The ATN agrees with the BCA that the government should provide more incentives to business to innovate and lift productivity. In any range of incentives to be considered, the provision of a tax incentive to employers for taking university students on industry placements, such as that provided to business in Canada, is essential.

This would help improve productivity because it results in more work-ready graduates who have already gained a range of the soft skills that mean they can quickly contribute to an organisation’s productivity when offered paid employment.

As always, Australia’s universities continue to seek out ways to assist the nation’s future here and in Asia.

Vicki Thomson is executive director of the Australian Technology Network of Universities.
Tax incentives are needed to foster industry placements for students.

In 2011, university education exports – worth more than $9.4 billion – were worth more than our wheat exports.
Research Council plants the seed

French-born Maud Bernoux will be given a helping hand towards achieving a breakthrough in discovering how plants fight diseases today.

Dr Bernoux is one of Canberra's researchers who will receive almost $40 million in grants through the Australian Research Council. Nationwide, universities will receive almost $360 million from the federal government for a range of research programs including personal safety, resources, astronomy and health.

The projects span a variety of issues – mapping the universe, reducing indigenous incarceration, gravitational waves, energy efficient lighting, the role of mentoring, diseases and parasites.

The grants come just weeks after universities complained the mid-year budget update contained deep cuts to research.

Dr Bernoux's pioneering work at the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation will influence the development of new strategies to protect Australian crops from destructive disease and reduce the use of pesticides.

"I am trying to understand how plants defend themselves against disease just like the human body defends itself," she said.

She works at the molecular level studying plant immune receptors that confer resistance to infectious disease.

"Plant immunity is not very well understood yet so there is a lot of work to do," she said.

"Basically we know that plants are able to recognise some components of the disease agents and are able to trigger a response.

"They are able to recognise specifically different types of disease and then trigger different responses, so I am looking at the step after that, the step after recognition.

"Even the recognition is not really well understood."

Dr Bernoux will be awarded a three-year, $375,000 grant to continue her work.

The Australian Research Council's 1014 major grants will be announced by Science and Research Minister, Chris Evans.

"From 2012 to 2015, we will invest $58.9 billion in core university funding – that's $30.1 billion in additional funding for universities – more than double the level of funding on the previous four years under John Howard," he said.

Other ACT projects to receive funding are:

- Reducing indigenous incarceration by exploring the conditions, governance and cultural appropriateness of reinvesting resources otherwise spent on incarceration, into services to enhance juvenile offenders' ability to remain in their community to reduce further criminal behaviours and health costs associated with incarceration; $490,000; Australian National University (ANU).

- Developing reliable and effective sensing technology and evaluating it as an objective measure of depressive disorders, a leading cause of disability worldwide; $360,000; University of Canberra.

- Australian partnership in advanced Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory which will be the first observatory capable of frequent observation of known sources of gravitational waves leading to the birth of gravitational wave astronomy; $990,000; ANU.