

Kerry Taylor-Leech
University of Southern Queensland

Perceptions of diversity in Australian language policy since the 1990s

Australian language policy has been characterised by pendulum swings that reflect changing attitudes towards linguistic and cultural diversity and the ideologies that accompany them. These changes reflect shifting international orientations and local political debate about what constitutes Australian identity.

In this presentation I outline some key national policy trends since the heyday of the National Language Policy (1987). As others have argued, these trends indicate a restrictive focus on the study of languages and reflect the climate of economic rationalism that has dominated the Australian political scene since the 1990s. By the end of the 1990s, economic arguments for language learning had become paramount and Australian language policy had swung from valuing linguistic and cultural diversity to an emphasis on English literacy and on educational planning driven by outcomes-based assessment.

Dramatic reductions in the number of students opting to study languages other than English (LOTE) in schools have sparked media debate about language learning in which the argument that Asian languages should be studied for economic reasons still carries weight. The state of language learning in Australia and Queensland in particular remains precarious. By way of illustration, I discuss recent policy swings in Queensland which indicate indecision as to the status of LOTE in the curriculum and what are considered to be valid reasons for studying them. I reflect on two recent policy documents to come from Queensland as well as the potential of the new national curriculum to promote language learning.