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## The diversity of German Studies students in Australian universities

### Abstract

*This article analyses to what extent the cohort of German Studies students in Australian universities has changed since the late 1980s. It will be argued that the large number of beginners' students, the increasing number of non-Arts students, and the growing number of international students can be linked to changes to higher education policies. The analysis includes data from a large-scale national survey of German Studies students and will show that despite their different backgrounds the majority of German Studies students have similar motives and expectations with regard to learning German at university. The article concludes with a discussion of how language programs should respond to the new student profile.*

# 1. Introduction

In the late 1980s and early 1990s a number of publications emerged that dealt with the situation of languages in Australia in general, but also specifically with the situation of German. It is noteworthy that the first group includes the National Policy on Languages (Lo Bianco 1987) and the Leal Report (Leal, Bettoni and Malcolm 1991a and 1991b), the second, Ammon's (1991) study on the motives of Australian students learning German at university and the profile of the German language in Australia by Fernandez, Pauwels and Clyne (1994). The multitude of publications with a focus on languages and language policy at this time reflects a new multicultural Australia that began in the 1970s under the Whitlam Government. However, the euphoria did not last for long.

Already in 1991 the National Policy on Languages (NPL) was modified and changed to the Australian Language and Literacy Policy, also known as the White Paper (DEET 1991). As Martin (2005: 66-67) points out, this new policy focused more on the economic value of language and literacy and the NPL's objective of one foreign language for all was dropped. While the White Paper recommended that 25% of Year 12 students should study a language by 2000, three years later a new report on Asian Languages and Australia's Economic Future (COAG 1994) refined the 25% goal that at least 15% should study an Asian language (Japanese, Indonesian, Chinese/Mandarin, Korean) which left only 10% for other modern languages. Current figures support Martin's (2005: 68) analysis that the overall target of 25% of Year 12 students learning a language has still not been reached. According to Liddicoat et al. (2007: 38) only 14.1% of Year 12 students learnt a language in 2005.

The second half of the 1990s saw no major studies exploring language education in universities. Kretzenbacher (2006: 24) wonders whether this lack of research can be seen as a result of the changes to language policy and to higher education introduced by the Howard Government in the late 1990s which resulted in many language departments being too occupied with their own survival to even think about the future.

The first decade of the twenty-first century, however, has seen a number of important discussion papers, reports and studies on languages in Australian higher education again. This article will first, analyse how the new discussion has unfolded and shifted; second, explore how changes in higher education can be linked to the current profile of German Studies students; and third, discuss some of the challenges with regard to curriculum development.

## 2. Languages in higher education at the beginning of the twenty-first century

In 2002, the Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (DASSH) held a national workshop on 'Teaching and research in university language programs: successful practices, creative strategies'. The workshop can be considered as a turning point in response to the developments of the late 1990s, when government funding cuts in higher education were justified by the misperception that university language programs were only teaching skills and lacking in academic merit (for more details of this discussion see Liddicoat et al. 1997: 20). The workshop's report rectifies this misperception by acknowledging the many contributions language study makes to individuals and society. Furthermore, it argues that universities are the place where languages are learnt "in a systematic way in order to produce graduates who are interculturally competent" and where "research into languages and cultures can take place" (DASSH 2002: 2). The report mentions the increasing number of beginner students and the emergence of students from non-traditional degrees and concludes by advocating the need to formulate "a clear and comprehensive statement of the goals of language teaching at tertiary level" (DASSH 2002: 6).

A second priority that was set by the DASSH workshop, was the development of collaborative arrangements. This focus on institutional collaboration appears to have been established in order to provide solutions for low enrolment languages (cf. Baldauf 1995; AAH 2000) as well as to prevent further decline in language offerings as caused by the funding cuts introduced in the late 1990s. Three major reports have so far been published with regard to collaborative arrangements (White and Baldauf 2006 and its modified version Baldauf and White 2010; Winter 2009; Lo Bianco and Gvozdenko 2006). White and Baldauf's (2006: 34–35) report raises two issues in its respondents' comments that are relevant in the context of this article. Firstly, they also report on the misperception that "language departments are unfortunately identified as language acquisition departments". Secondly, the issue of "language tasters" (Pauwels cited in Lane 2010) is raised by asking whether the increasing number of beginner students, who only learn a language for one or two semesters but who are important for many language programs from a financial point of view, contribute to a negative image of university language programs with their low retention rates, thereby creating a vicious circle.

While DASSH focussed its studies on collaborative arrangements and investigated how university language teaching and learning could be supported at the institutional level, two studies conducted on behalf of the Australian Academy of the Humanities (Nettelbeck et al. 2007, 2009) have created a great deal of interest among language professionals due to their focus on two issues that nearly every Australian university language department is only too familiar with. The first study (2007) analyses 'Beginners' LOTE (Languages Other Than English) in Australian Universities' and provides valuable figures and background information in relation to

the increasing number of beginners' students in many languages, including German. The second study on "Retention strategies", published in 2009, can be considered as a follow-up analysis since it investigates, with new data from a student survey, the low retention rates of beginners' students.

The following section will analyse to what extent the phenomenon of beginners' students and their low retention rate, identified by Nettelbeck et al. (2007, 2009) and others, can also be found among German Studies students in Australian universities and which changes in education policies have influenced them.

### 3. The changing profile of German Studies students

Data from a large-scale national questionnaire survey conducted in 2005 shows how two major developments can be linked to the current profile of German Studies students: firstly, the abolition of most language requirements at secondary and tertiary level; and secondly, the changes to university funding introduced in the late 1990s. The data includes responses from 520 German Studies students from ten of the thirteen universities offering German Studies in Australia. Table 1 provides an overview of the participating universities and respective student numbers (see Schmidt 2011 for the full study).

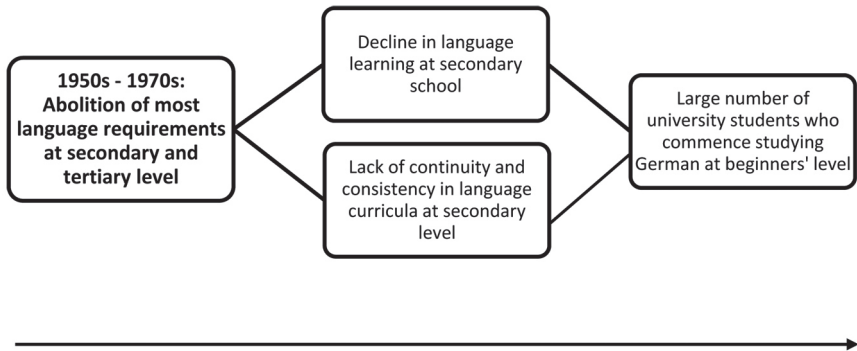
*Table 1: Distribution of students among universities in the 2005 survey*

Universities	Students	Percent
Adelaide	57	11.0%
ANU	65	12.5%
Macquarie	60	11.5%
UNSW	57	11.0%
UQ	85	16.3%
USQ	33	6.3%
Sydney	84	16.2%
UTAS	17	3.3%
UTS	31	6.0%
UWA	31	6.0%
Total	520	100.0%

In order to explore how the profile had changed over time by 2005, the data was compared with data collected in 1987 as part of a similar survey of German Studies students in Australia (Ammon 1991).

### 3.1 The abolition of most language requirements at secondary and tertiary level

The survey's results have confirmed that a large number of Australian university students begin their tertiary study of German at beginners' level. 86% of respondents who were in their first year of university German were enrolled in beginners' level courses. This figure is in line with the first study by Nettelbeck et al. (2007: 12) which reports an 11.9% increase of beginners' students of German for the time period 2005 to 2007.



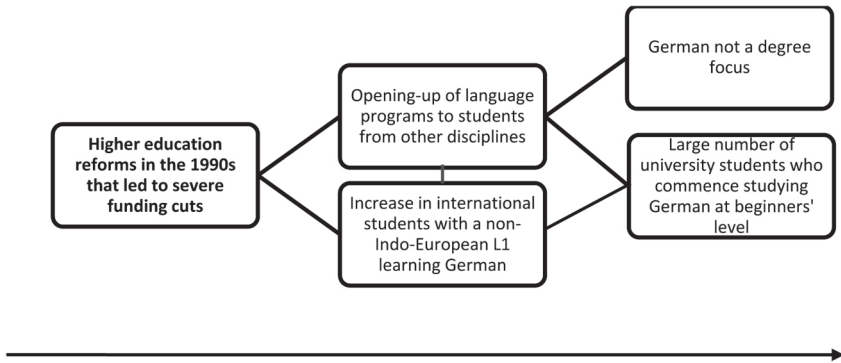
*Figure 1: The abolition of language requirements and its impact on learning German at tertiary level as reflected in the data collected in 2005 (Schmidt 2011)*

Figure 1 shows how the increasing number of beginners' students can be linked to the abolition of language requirements at secondary and tertiary level. Although the dropping of language requirements for matriculation, university entry and university graduation had already begun in the middle of the last century, the data confirms that the consequences are still having an impact. The latter had already been noted by Barko (1996: 6) who had also come to the conclusion "that the process of change that began in the late sixties is still continuing". One of the survey's major results is the sharp decline in learning German at secondary level. While, in 1987, 58.1% of students learning German at university had learnt the language at secondary school (Ammon 1991: 58), the corresponding figure in the 2005 survey was only 41.9%. It appears that without being necessary for the Year 12 school leaving certificate and without being a prerequisite for university study, German, as with other languages, is not being considered as a central school subject. Liddicoat (2010: 20) points to the fact that the situation cannot be explained by a lack of policies and funding, which are aimed at supporting languages in schools, but rather by a weak implementation of policies.

The survey's results also raise serious questions with regard to the consistency of language education in secondary schools. For those 41.9% of respondents who had learnt German at secondary school, the average of 3.5 years is rather small. The data shows that most language learning takes place in Years 8, 9 and 10. This means that many students would have had at least a two-year gap when they continued with German at university. For that reason, it is not surprising that 30% of students enrolled in the beginners' level had previously learnt German at secondary school for an average of 2.5 years. This lack of continuity often leads to students repeating the lower language levels several times causing a feeling of non-achievement (see also Nettelbeck et al. 2009: 12).

### 3.2 The changes to higher education funding in the late 1990s and their impact on learning German at tertiary level

While the dropping of language requirements weakened the teaching of languages in secondary schools — which has had and continues to have severe consequences for universities with many tertiary students beginning their language study without sound previous knowledge — the higher education reforms that were introduced in the late 1990s targeted universities directly.



*Figure 2: The higher education reforms in the 1990s and their impact on learning German at tertiary level as reflected in the data collected in 2005 (Schmidt 2011)*

Funding cuts to universities introduced by the Howard Government in the late 1990s meant that "languages was one of the hardest hit disciplines" (Martin 2005: 69). In order to increase enrolments or to compensate for a decrease in students majoring in a language, universities were forced to find new 'markets'. First, as Pauwels (2002:

17) points out, the reforms caused universities to make languages “more accessible to a wider range of students”, i.e. to students not majoring in a language and to students enrolled in non-Arts disciplines. The 2005 data confirms a diverse body of students studying German at university. Nearly a third of all respondents were not enrolled in an Arts degree, and counting the first and second degree, over half of all students were enrolled in a non-Arts degree. The most frequent non-Arts degrees were Science, Economics/Commerce and Engineering/IT.

While this opening-up of languages to students from non-traditional disciplines can be seen overall as a positive development, as is Pauwels’ view (2002: 17), the results from the 2005 survey show how this development is reflected in the student profile. The data reveals that many of the non-Arts respondents were already in their later years of their degrees, with 44% in their third year or higher. For Engineering students the percentage was even 70.4%. The comparable figure for Arts students is 17.6%. Hence, it is not surprising that with regard to the intended length of studying German the mode (the value that occurs most often) for Arts students is three years and one year for non-Arts students. These figures show that for the majority of non-Arts students German is not a degree focus but rather an elective for one or two semesters, which appears to be one explanation (among others) for the low retention rates in languages (cf. Nettelbeck et al. 2007: 14–15).

A second response by universities to increase enrolments, and thereby income, to compensate for a reduction in government funding has been to increase the number of international students. Figures show that between 1996 and 2006 the number of international students rose by 371% across the sector (Group of Eight 2007: 4). This development can also be found among German Studies students. If one compares the 2005 data with those of Ammon (1991: 92) one finds that the number of students with a non-Indo-European first language increased from 5.5% in 1987 to 10.4% in 2005. Of these 10.4%, 89% were born in an Asian country. While this development has contributed to a culturally more diverse learning environment, it can also be linked to the increasing number of beginners’ students. The data has shown that respondents with a non-Indo-European first language were less likely to have learnt German at secondary school and less likely to have visited a German-speaking country. The results also point to a link between non-Arts disciplines and a non-Indo-European first language. Comparisons between the degrees have revealed significant differences. For example, Arts students had the lowest ratio of native speakers with a non-Indo-European first language while Economics/Commerce and Engineering/IT students had the highest ratios.

Although the large number of beginners’ students has contributed to the survival of language programs at Australian universities, I agree with Pauwels (2002: 20) that this “is also a worrying trend”. The 2005 survey has revealed that students enrolled in beginners’ level courses intended to study German for less time than those attending the intermediate level (2.3 vs. 3.0 years). The lack of previous knowledge in the language and the short time of studying German at university “will affect the number

of people graduating with advanced language skills” (Pauwels 2002: 20). Supporting this further, the survey’s results have also shown that beginners’ students had less intention of doing a major or honours in German. This also has a direct impact on the number of higher degree research students in German Studies. The small number of PhD students in most German Studies programs in Australia can easily be misperceived as low research activity in the discipline despite many academics being active researchers.

## **4. Challenges to the curriculum**

The question that remains is how the curriculum should be adapted in response to the diverse student population. Are, for example, students from non-traditional disciplines interested in different topics than those students enrolled in a traditional Arts degree? This section will firstly, explore what expectations students have with regard to their German courses, and secondly, discuss whether German Studies departments should offer two different streams, one for traditional Arts students and another for learners from other disciplines. It will then consider approaches of how to deal with the “language tasters”.

### **4.1 The expectations of Australian university students with regard to content in their German courses**

Participants in the 2005 student survey were given a list of eleven thematic areas and were asked to mark on a scale how strong their interest was. The scale consisted of three items: strong interest = 1; moderate interest = 2; no interest = 3.

Table 2 (below) provides an overview of all areas by ordering them by their means (the lower the mean the stronger the interest). The table shows also the mode for each area. The first and third ranked areas of interest, communication and society/contemporary culture, reflect not only a strong interest in travelling to a German-speaking country and in communicating with German-speaking people abroad but also in learning about German-speaking people and their culture. The latter is also confirmed by the rather strong interest in history and film.

Since most German programs nowadays do not have a focus on translating and interpreting, the second strongest area of interest comes unexpectedly and needs to be investigated further. The two more traditional areas of linguistics and literature both reflect a rather moderate interest. The eighth-ranked area ‘German for specific purposes’ was included in the list to explore whether this is an important area for students enrolled in non-Arts degrees. The next two areas, politics and philosophy, both have a mean of more than 2, indicating little interest. The topic ranked last — business — also points towards only a small interest in learning German for career purposes. Correlation tests revealed a strong cluster of history, literature, philosophy, politics and contemporary culture.



*Table 2: Respondents' preferred areas of interest*

Areas of Interest	N	Mean	Mode	Standard Deviation
Learning the language for communication	508	1.21	1	.469
Translating and interpreting	510	1.53	1	.638
Society and contemporary culture	512	1.64	1	.653
History	511	1.69	2	.668
Film	512	1.73	2	.674
Linguistics	508	1.84	2	.726
Literature	512	1.91	2	.733
German for specific purposes, e.g. Business German	508	1.94	2	.757
Politics	511	2.19	3	.764
Philosophy	513	2.22	2	.721
Business	511	2.29	3	.775

## 4.2 Separation of traditional language students from learners from other disciplines?

One of the main research questions of the 2005 student survey was to explore whether students from non-Arts disciplines have different motives and needs that would require different course offerings. A supporter of two streams has been McGuiness-King (2003: 48) who in her analysis of "Developments in German Studies in the Asia-Pacific Region" comes to the conclusion that "the discipline needs to develop two clear foci, which would do justice to both its cultural/literary mission and its functional role in the labour market". However, the data on student motivation, which was collected for the 2005 survey, suggests caution with regard to the implementation of two streams.

First, McGuiness-King's proposal is based on the assumption that there is an "increasingly pragmatic justification for the learning of foreign languages as opposed to the traditional cultural justification" (McGuiness-King 2003: 47). While this might apply, for example, for the rationale with which the government justifies language learning it does not mean that students also have strong pragmatic reasons for learning a language. The data from the 2005 survey has clearly shown that pragmatic reasons were not the major motives for learning the language including students from non-Arts disciplines (Schmidt 2011: 107), and the retention study by Nettelbeck et al. (2009: 14) supports this assessment.

Unsurprisingly, the data has revealed minor differences between students from different degrees. For example, Economics students expressed strong support for the reason that German "improves career prospects". However, these differences

must not overshadow that the top reason for both Science and Law students was “because I enjoy learning languages” with even stronger support than that expressed by Arts students. Even for Engineering students, who recorded the largest number of significant differences, items such as “I liked it at school”, “learning German is fun” and it “broadens my world view” ranked high in the list of motives for having chosen German at university. A similar overlap was found with regard to course content. Students from all major disciplines expressed a strong interest in learning German for communication, in translating and interpreting, and in history. On the whole, the data does not support a separation of Arts and non-Arts students.

Second, McGuiness-King’s ‘two foci’ model that even mentions a physical separation of the two streams (McGuiness-King 2003: 48) is also academically questionable. While the first focus in her model is designed to continue the outdated language and literature model, the second focus would concentrate on ‘the vocational potential’ of the discipline. However, ‘service courses’, as she calls them (McGuiness-King 2003: 49), would be extremely vulnerable with regard to their academic credentials and would be under extreme pressure to demonstrate that they are different from low level or credit free courses offered by private language schools. Leal et al. (1991a: 7-8) warn that language programs without “a strong intellectual and cultural base [...] will be seen solely in a service role and not as part of the general educational process”, a situation which will be “ultimately self-defeating”, and as the data has shown, students themselves appear not to have chosen German for primarily pragmatic reasons. One comment listed in White and Baldauf’s (2006: 35) analysis of Australia’s tertiary language programs also cautions against “the setting up of Language Institutes to get the language acquisition out of the way.” The respondent continues that “we need to reassert that our prime function is in sophisticated teaching of a whole language/culture/society/history complex, and that you cant [sic] really have any of those properly out of the context of all the others”.

### 4.3 The ‘language tasters’

As previously noted, the beginners’ LOTE study by Nettelbeck et al. (2007: 12) reports for the 2005-2007 period an increase in beginners’ students of German of nearly 12%. On the one hand, the growing number of beginners’ students in university language courses can be regarded as a positive development and, one could argue, compensates in some way for the decrease in language learning at secondary level. On the other hand, however, the same report by Nettelbeck et al. (2007: 14-15) confirmed what language professionals at universities had observed for some time, namely the fact that the majority of beginners’ students discontinue their language study after a few semesters, many even after the first. The report states for German that only 29% of beginners’ students learn the language for more than four semesters. According to Pauwels (cited in Lane 2010), the phenomenon of ‘language tasters’ can also be observed in other English-speaking countries, for example in the

United Kingdom. She emphasises that university language programs need to adjust their course offerings to cater for this new group of learners. Pauwels' observation points to one of the problems which Nettelbeck et al. (2007: 19) had identified in its first report: that "in almost all cases, courses are designed on the assumption that beginning students will be undertaking a sequence of three year's study ... This assumption is problematic because ... a significant majority of students do not do so".

One shift might be for language programs to focus more on defining outcomes at the course level along the lines of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe 2001) instead of on setting out what a student has achieved on completion of a major. The CEFR defines six different language levels and most beginners' students would have reached at least the first, if not the first two levels (A1 and A2) by the end of their first year (two semesters) of German. In addition, offering internationally acknowledged language certificates after each language level would further shift the current focus from what many students do not achieve, i.e. not completing a major, to what students do achieve, for example having successfully completed the A2 level. "Clearly articulated" expected outcomes are also mentioned by Nettelbeck et al. (2007: 4) as "good practice".

However, accepting the 'language tasters' should go beyond formal recognition such as certificates. The current course design of many university language programs is modelled around a six semester major. This means that in particular the courses at the beginners' level are considered as laying the linguistic foundation for courses at the intermediate and advanced levels (cf. Nettelbeck et al. 2007: 4). Given the fact that many of the beginners' students will not attend the next language levels, it might be a step in the right direction to design the beginners' level as an independent module with a strong academic focus on culture and intercultural communication. Focussing again on the learning outcomes, this would mean that learners would complete the beginners' level with basic skills in the language but at the same time with a profound insight into the target culture(s). This could, for example, be achieved by linking basic language skills to universal cultural concepts, such as greetings or the expression of certain feelings, and their culture-specific realisation.

While such a restructuring of course offerings would not improve the overall linguistic proficiency gained by language students, it would, however, acknowledge the growing existence of 'language tasters' and improve their intercultural awareness. In addition, certificates even at the lower language levels may motivate some students to continue either at university or later in their life. This agrees with Pauwels' (cited in Lane 2010) observation that "language tasters in Britain ... had proven adventurous in seeking work outside the country" which might also result in continuing with learning the language after university. A similar conclusion can be found in Nettelbeck et al. (2007: 16) who also indicate that it appears that 'language tasters' "undertake further study of it [the language] later in life".

## 5. Conclusion

Despite the “comparatively good performance of German Studies in Australia” (Kretzenbacher 2011: 52) the discipline faces several challenges with regard to adjusting itself to an increasingly diverse student cohort. The 2005 survey of German Studies students (Schmidt 2011) has shown that, although nowadays language students are enrolled in the whole spectrum of degrees available, they nevertheless share common motives and expectations with regard to their language study. The diversity has, however, resulted in studying a language not necessarily being the focus of their degree for many students, but rather an elective for a few semesters. This attitude puts the generally low retention rate of language students into a new light and supports other studies (e.g. Nettelbeck et al. 2009; Martin and Jansen 2012) which conclude that the low retention rate cannot be linked to student dissatisfaction with their language courses.

Three developments appear to be steps into the right direction. First, the opening-up and increased flexibility of degrees, as for example in the ‘Melbourne Model’ implemented at the University of Melbourne, which makes it easier for students to include subjects from other disciplines, including German Studies, into their core degree. Such structures facilitate early language learning by students in other faculties, e.g. Engineering. Second, the ‘thinking outside the major’ which structures language courses around proficiency levels and learning outcomes rather than around a complete major sequence. Two examples of recent developments into this direction come from Monash University, which has aligned its language courses with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, and from the Australian National University, which in 2012 has introduced minors in most degrees. Third, changes to course design which, for example, might emphasize more transferable cross-cultural knowledge.

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