

How well does Australia know China?

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China is a major trading partner for Australia and an increasingly dominant power in the Indo-Pacific. Last year the two nations celebrated 50 years since the establishment of diplomatic relations. Since 1972, Australia and China have engaged broadly in trade, education, science, technology, and many other fields. Chinese language and related studies are widely taught in Australian higher education. Australia has a small group of China specialists in the public service, universities, and think tanks. In addition, the nation has a substantial number of speakers of Mandarin and Cantonese, due to the migration of Chinese people to Australia in recent decades.

Nonetheless, the question remains, how well does Australia know China? Are there critical gaps in our knowledge? A recent report, *Australia's China Knowledge Capability*, from the Australian Academy of Humanities, argues that Australia needs 'a sovereign China knowledge capability' to meet emerging challenges. The report points to notable deficiencies in China knowledge capability across Australia. One critical gap identified is a sharp decline in the provision of advanced and specialist programs that combine Chinese language training together with cultural, social and political analysis relating to China.

Australian university students can gain advanced skills in Chinese language and China Studies in various ways. The standard pathway for both background and non-background speakers is to complete a major in Chinese language together with the study of Chinese history, culture, politics, and society. Australian students who are

native speakers of Mandarin are often not literate in Chinese script, which requires the acquisition of thousands of Chinese characters. They seek courses that offer an accelerated program in learning how to read and write Chinese. Non-background students require a different type of program that incorporates training in both Mandarin and Chinese script. Both groups seek to improve their knowledge of Chinese civilization, politics, and society. For those who seek work in China-related occupations such as foreign affairs, the public service, business, or to commence a research degree in Chinese Studies, an Honours program in Chinese Studies (or combined Honours with another discipline such as Politics) is one important way to achieve these goals.

The traditional Chinese Honours program offered a one-year course dedicated entirely to the study of China. It comprised a number of advanced language subjects together with a year-long supervised research thesis of at least 10,000 words. Honours graduates gained a distinctive qualification that set them apart from the general body of undergraduates. A First Class Honours degree gave graduates a competitive edge in a number of prestigious occupations. In some cases, excellent work done at Honours level has led to publications of international standing. At its best, a Chinese Honours program offered a unique program that provided a foundation for a life-long involvement in Chinese affairs. However, there are signs that the generational pipeline that has provided Australia with its China specialists is now in sharp decline.

The report, *Australia's China Knowledge Capability*, is based on interviews and surveys of over 100 people across industry, government, and academia, as well as existing data on China-related teaching and research in Australia. The lead authors adopted a broad definition of 'China Knowledge Capability' that includes research, teaching, and scholarly collaboration. One point of focus is the provision of advanced studies in Chinese language and related areas in Australian higher education. The report argues that the traditional Chinese Honours program has almost ceased to exist in practical terms. While Chinese Honours may be retained in University Handbooks, in reality there are very few or even no enrolments. The investigators

found that from 2017 to 2021 a total of 17 Australian students graduated with Chinese Honours across the nation from six universities, an average of just under three students per university for the five-year period (p.24).

Data on historic enrolments in Chinese Honours programs in Australian higher education is not available. However, experienced academics in Chinese language studies report that Chinese Honours programs, while always small, used to have more enrolments in the early 2000s than they do now. Why has student demand fallen off a cliff in the past ten years or so? To help answer this question I will draw upon the results of a roundtable meeting of 12 senior academic staff involved in the delivery of Chinese language programs across the nation held in November 2021. Each representative was invited to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of advanced studies and Honours programs at their home institution.

A range of problems were reported. A major issue was the pipeline of continuing students from Chinese at Year 12 level (final year of Australian schooling) through to completion of a major in Chinese at university. A declining number of high school students are graduating with Chinese at Year 12 and then going on to an undergraduate Chinese studies program. Fewer students complete the major with a skill level that allows for entrance to the Honours program.

Another factor affecting students' learning is the loss of in-country programs due to COVID-19 pandemic national border restrictions since 2020. In-country learning is a crucial component in the attainment of advanced language skills. This situation is likely to improve in the era of pandemic recovery.

In some universities, the Chinese language program is run by one or two full-time academic staff. In these cases, the program is simply not resourced to offer an Honours program. Only six Australian universities out of 14 strong providers of Chinese studies graduated students with Honours in Chinese studies with language from 2017 to 2021.

In many cases, Chinese Honours is still 'on the books' but, due to a number of

factors, student demand is low or non-existent. Due to declining enrolments, the Honours program, if it exists, may well have less China-related content than in past decades. For example, the Chinese Honours program may be operated at department or faculty level and may have compulsory generic subjects that are not specifically related to China. This can make them less attractive to students who want to advance their Chinese language and China Study skills.

In an emerging trend, University Honours programs face competition from other courses that are seen as more lucrative. Over the past decade, many universities have set up full fee-paying Masters by Coursework programs that can enrol university graduates of any discipline. The typical Masters by Coursework charges high upfront fees and is more lucrative for the university than Honours language programs with their small enrolments. Top students are now encouraged to perceive the Masters by Coursework as the routine way to round off their university experience. A common example would be an MA in International Relations. These broad courses do not generally include language training. This means that if a student enrolled in a Master of International Relations wishes to use Chinese-language sources in their thesis then they must already have the requisite Chinese language skills.

Another issue is lack of encouragement and incentive. The Roundtable interviewees reported that students enrolled in a Chinese major were not explicitly encouraged to take up Honours. Further, there were few or no incentives for academic staff to run programs with tiny enrolments. For example, supervision of Honours students writing a thesis was not always taken into account in workload arrangements.

There was general agreement at the roundtable that there was a system-wide crisis in the training of advanced Chinese skills in language, analysis, and research across the nation. However, Chinese is not the only language affected by a sharp decline in enrolment in Honours programs. The provision of Honours in European and Asian language programs in Australian higher education was further discussed at the Language and Cultures Network of Australian Universities (LCNAU) Colloquium of

November 28-30, 2022, in a panel entitled, 'Challenges in the Provision of Honours and Advanced Language Courses in Australia'.

In presentations from experienced practitioners in Chinese, German and Japanese, it was observed that language Honours programs in languages in their home institutions were either very small or in sharp decline. Associate Professor Heather Benbow (German, University of Melbourne) further noted that in 2022 a reported total of only 25 students enrolled in six European language Honours programs across the country (French, German, Italian, Russian, Spanish and Ukrainian). This is an average of around four students nationally in each of these languages.

European languages face the same pipeline difficulties experienced by Asian languages. Most European languages have seen a decline in post-Year 12 language enrolments, which means that most students are concentrated at the lower proficiency level. European language Honours programs have also been affected by competition from new Masters by Coursework offerings that have been actively promoted by university administrations over the past decade. Honours provision and cohort experience has suffered as a consequence. With reduced subject choice, the Honours program is less able to offer deep study in one's chosen area.

There are no specialist Masters by Coursework focusing on China Studies in Australia, surely a critical gap at a time when Australia needs to retain and boost its China knowledge. In fact, the typical Masters by Coursework in the Arts and Social Sciences in Australia allows entrance to students with no previous disciplinary knowledge. This allows for maximum student enrolments but little disciplinary specialisation within the Masters degree.

Does it matter for Australia if we do not produce Honours graduates in Chinese? I would argue that the Honours program is still the best way for Australian students (whether they are of Chinese-background or non-Chinese background) to gain reasonable literacy in Chinese and the ability to use Chinese sources to pursue a topic of interest. The traditional Honours year offered an entire year dedicated to

exploring the Chinese world, with close attention from a supervisor, and, one would hope, in the company of enthusiastic classmates. At its best, it provided a basis for a life-long interest in China and a strong foundation for occupations that require writing and analytical ability, multicultural skills, and Asia-related knowledge. There is no other course in Australia that can provide this specialist combination of Chinese language and China knowledge.

The cost to Australia in the falling away of Chinese Honours programs is that we are cutting off the generational pipeline that has enabled this country to provide a core of China-ready graduates. Australia has always imported a significant number of China specialists to fill appointments in universities and think tanks. Current trends suggest that in the future we will have even fewer home-grown China specialists than in the past. This is an extraordinary gap at a time when we need Australian perspectives to help navigate our future.

There are signs that this is an issue of concern at national level. Channel 9 media published an editorial on October 27, 2022, headed 'Dire prospects if we let China ties unravel'. We are told that the Chinese leadership is a 'black box we struggle to see inside'. The editor adds 'we need to find a way inside the black box. That will demand China literacy on a scale we have not seen so far. It will require us to try to find areas in which the two nations can cooperate, and to establish channels where enduring disagreements can be expressed out of the political spotlight.' I would add that finding areas where the two nations can cooperate and establish channels to mediate enduring disagreements needs to be done in Chinese as well as in English.

In conclusion, a concerted effort is needed to either bring back Chinese Honours programs or to establish one or two specialist China-focus Masters programs for Australians who have completed majors in Chinese language and related disciplinary studies. Universities will need incentives in the form of salary support for the program and students will need encouragement in the form of scholarships and fee waivers. The market incentives driving the decision-making of University administrations need to be balanced by government incentives to provide outcomes

in the national interest.

Main image: A couple on a motorbike in Jiashan township, Zhejiang province, China.

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