

# The Korean language is booming at Australian universities. What needs to be done to keep the momentum going?

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The number of students in Australia deciding to take a language subject has been declining for many years. In some cases, Asian languages have been doing better than their European counterparts, however, Asian languages too often show low enrolments and are not offered widely, in particular when we consider the intermediate/advanced level. Within this context, I explore the case of the Korean language education.

Data for the secondary school sector shows that, despite the unprecedented amount of funding for a limited number of Asian languages during past decades, mostly at the secondary school level, Korean is one of the languages which has capitalised on this the least. While it is true that in the 1990s, the Korean language in Australia could have benefitted from unprecedented financial support, other factors fundamental to success, such as a positive perception of Korea, were missing. The death of North Korean leader Kim Il-sung (1994) and the financial crisis of the Asian markets (1997) made South Korea look like an unreliable partner from an international perspective, and an unstable country[1]. Fast forward a few decades and South Korea is now wealthier and the situation on the Peninsula, despite some hiccups, is more stable. What is probably even more important is that the South Korean government has been actively investing in fostering global interest in and a

positive image of its language and culture. The establishment of the King Sejong Institute Foundation in 2012 is one example.

While the number of students studying Korean at the secondary school level is still generally low in most Australian states and territories, tertiary level enrolments have shown a quite different trend, in line with what is happening in Europe and North America. In US universities, for example, Korean is the only language that in the period 2011-2016 showed a double-digit enrolment growth. Similarly, in Australian universities, Korean language courses have recently shown an unprecedented student increase. For example, students enrolled in beginner Korean courses at the University of Western Australia increased by 66 percent between 2015 and 2022.

Many have pointed out that the increasing interest in the Korean language has been boosted by the worldwide spread of Korean popular culture. Indeed, many secondary school students say they are studying Korean because it is 'cool', and many university students studying Korean enjoy Korean cultural products such as dramas or pop songs. Nevertheless, while it is true that the global interest in contemporary Korean cultural production is an important factor influencing language learning enrolments, it would be simplistic and reductive to consider it the only reason. We need to acknowledge that the reality is complex and multifaceted if we want to retain Korean language students beyond the beginner level.

It should be noted that the growth in Korean language student numbers is remarkable if seen in terms of percentage, but still low when other figures, such as distribution, are taken into consideration. As of 2022, only nine Australian universities offered courses in Korean language, and only seven offered a degree major in Korean Studies (with two more to be introduced in 2023 at Curtin University and in 2024 at the University of Melbourne).

To summarise, the context of the Korean language in Australia is characterised by low numbers of students at the secondary level, mostly because of a lack of opportunities than a lack of interest. This suggests that schools at the moment are

not a major supplier of students at university level. At the same time, despite university courses having seen an unprecedented enrolment explosion this is true mainly for beginner courses and does not translate into enrolments in upper-level classes. Nevertheless, the trend for the past decade has been positive.

Below, I suggest action that can be taken in the medium to long term to capitalise on this recent growth at the tertiary level and boost student retention at the upper levels.

## **Understanding students' vision**

As mentioned earlier, it would be naïve to think that all students of Korean approach learning the language because they enjoyed watching the TV series *Squid Game*, or because they listen to K-pop. The reality of student motivation is much more complex. Research conducted in a beginner Korean language class at the University of Western Australia showed that several other perspectives exist, in line with what has been found for learners of other Asian languages. For example, some students are deeply interested in learning the language to achieve advanced proficiency suitable for employment as interpreters, teachers, or academics. A further perspective is represented by students who learn Korean to give them a better chance of a career with international bodies or multinational companies. Others study the Korean language to gain a multilingual outlook and a better multicultural understanding. This shows that learners of Korean are not prompted only by interest in pop-cultural products, or attracted by the prospects of a sparkling career in connection with a top Australian trading partner. Learners of Korean are also attracted by the intrinsic interest in the language, and by the intrinsic benefits that language learning provides.

This variety of visions and motivation must be taken into consideration in setting course outcomes and designing educational material at the beginner levels and to stimulate students to study further at the more intermediate and advanced levels. If

interest in Korean popular cultural production is a strong motivator at the beginner level, but a weak one at a more advanced proficiency, then understanding much more nuanced learner visions may be the key to motivate students towards upper-level courses. Opportunities such as scholarships for long-term in-country study and internships (of which there are very few in relation to Korean language) can also be effective in promoting learners' motivation on the long run.

Such considerations bring us to the next step: how can we develop learning material and teaching strategies suited for Australian learners, able to address their vision and harness their motivation?

## **Designing and publishing learning material that suit Australian students**

Joseph Lo Bianco, Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Melbourne, has argued that behind the successful and sustainable presence of Japanese in the Australian language learning landscape lies the ability to develop a 'home-grown Australian capacity in Japanese Studies'. Unfortunately, despite vibrant Korean Studies research activity sustained by several research centres established at some of the major universities such as ANU, Monash University, and the University of Melbourne, locally developed language teaching and learning resources are not widely available to external students and practitioners. One of the reasons is that, compared to the teaching of other Asian languages, Korean language teaching in Australia has a relatively shorter history. There are, of course, excellent exceptions, such as the language teaching material developed by the Korean Language Teacher Association of NSW (KOLTA), but these resources are aimed at secondary learners.

Most Australian universities adopt material published by Korean institutions or developed for the European or North American markets. Considering the differences in the structure of the programs and the number of contact hours, the use of this material requires considerable adaptation.

On the other hand, despite a lack of published and widely available resources for Australian tertiary Korean language, Australian educators actively engage with material development. Most of the work in this regard is unseen, as language instructors across the country develop quizzes and classroom exercises, design pieces of assessment, create activity sheets, and adapt real material for pedagogical use. In other words, the issue is not that locally produced learning material is missing. It is that what educators have been creating is often not refined, reorganised, edited, and turned into resources suitable for publication and circulation.

My suggestion is to introduce a coordinated effort, in the fashion of a working group of Korean language scholars working in Australian universities, facilitated by existing scholarly associations such as the Korean Studies Association of Australasia (KSAA) or the Australian Association of Teachers of Korean (AUATK) and supported by Korean and Australian institutions, which able to tap into this extensive submerged potential. This initiative should re-organise, re-structure, re-work and eventually publish, or at least make available online, a series of Korean language learning and teaching resources for the Australian university context. Despite requiring considerable coordination effort, time investment, and funding, such initiatives are not new and have been successful in other Korean language learning contexts. The range of materials that could be developed would not be limited to beginner-level textbooks, but expanded to classroom activity resources for instructors and, most importantly, material for intermediate/advanced learners. This sort of collective initiative would guarantee that Australian expertise in Korean language education and instructional material design is recognised and that the material created suits Australian universities and students, therefore responding to their needs and providing a much more stimulating and motivating language learning experience.

## Developing a streamlined pathway from school to university

Currently, the Korean language is offered in Australian secondary schools through three different curricula, the ACARA curriculum, the New South Wales (NSW) curriculum, and the Western Australian (WA) curriculum. The ACARA curriculum covers Korean language instruction up to Year 10; however, both the NSW and WA curricula cover also the last two years of secondary school and have separate streams for background and non-background learners. Globally, this is remarkable for both breadth of the curriculum and quality, and a roundtable discussion at the 2022 World Convention of the Korean Language pointed out that this situation makes Australia an almost unique case in the world. In European and North American countries, Korean language educators struggle to introduce a Korean language curriculum at the secondary level. This situation puts Australian students, compared to their peers in other countries, in the privileged position of being able to pursue their Korean language study in an almost seamless way, from primary school up to university level, if the secondary and tertiary curriculum are properly aligned.

Secondary school learners of Korean who continue studying the language at university are placed, in most cases, into the equivalent of a second-year course thanks to their acquired background knowledge. Nevertheless, the secondary school curriculum and university courses are not always aligned, which means that school leavers who enter tertiary Korean language courses may repeat some content already learned, which could increase boredom, or be given content which is too difficult, which could generate frustration. While it is understandable that schools and universities have profoundly different requirements which affect the way their curricula are designed and implemented, and that some decisions are well beyond the good will of school teachers and university lecturers, it is also true that increased dialogue between secondary and tertiary Korean language teaching experts can have a positive influence on students' learning experience if it translates

in the alignment of secondary and tertiary programs. Therefore, there is a need to foster more opportunities for dialogue between the secondary and the tertiary sectors, in the form of teacher workshops organised by universities or forums organised by scholarly associations. The Australian Association of Teachers of Korean (AUATK) organises yearly workshops where university experts and school practitioners meet, but these opportunities are too scant to trigger a meaningful change. One way to improve this would be to regularly invite university experts to collaborate, as external consultants, on curricular updates. A clear and established pathway from school to university, which provides the possibility of reaching an advanced level at graduation, may itself become a motivational component for younger learners.

## **Introducing an Australian teacher training program for the Korean language**

The Korean government, through the Korean Education Center in Sydney, has been offering financial support under its 'Korean Plant-a-School program' to Australian secondary schools interested in introducing Korean language courses. However, it can be difficult for school administrators to secure a pool of qualified teachers.

In this regard, a Korean language teacher training program established within Australian universities is necessary. This would make sure that teachers are well acquainted with the characteristics of the Australian education sector, which would ultimately benefit learners. Teachers trained in such a program would understand local learners' motivations and needs and would be able to use this knowledge to design suitable courses and teaching materials. Secondly, for administrators, it would mean there would be a reliable pool of qualified teachers. Thirdly, the opening of an Australia-based Korean language teacher training program would provide current Korean language students at the university level with a tangible career pathway and an additional language-related qualification. For some students interested in language studies, this can be a motivating factor to pursue language



learning at an advanced level. Lastly, such a teacher training program would constitute a forum where the expertise of academics and school teachers can meet to produce positive results for the community in terms of enhancing the quality of language teaching in secondary schools.

## Conclusion

Despite a limited number of Australian universities offering Korean language courses and overall low enrolments in secondary schools, the trend regarding Korean language learning in Australia has never been so positive. I recognise that some of the actions suggested here require a significant collective effort and considerable funding, and that much more discussion is needed to redefine the details and implement plans to grow Korean language learning. Nevertheless, to keep the momentum going, we need to invest in long-term efforts to increase firstly, the number of Australian learners of the Korean language, and secondly, to support learners' trajectory towards higher proficiency levels.

*Image: Korean text. Credit: Evelyn Chai/Pixabay.*

**[1] Fraschini et al. 2023, forthcoming.**