

Rudd seeks revival of Asian language study

Matthew Franklin

MATP

425 words

7 December 2006

The Australian

1 - All-round Country

4

English

Copyright 2006 News Ltd. All Rights Reserved

KEVIN Rudd will propose a dramatic increase in the study of Asian languages in schools and universities.

Judging by his previous statements, the Mandarin-speaking Opposition Leader will want to work with the states to reinvigorate the Asian language program abandoned by the Howard Government in 2002.

He will also demand greater study of Asian languages by the nation's intelligence agencies.

Mr Rudd is convinced the study of Asian languages will help Australia increase its trade within the region.

In a major speech delivered in May last year, he urged the Howard Government to make a "policy U-turn" on the study of Asian languages and cultures.

He accused the Government of short-sightedness over its 2002 decision to cease commonwealth funding of the National Asian Languages and Studies Strategy for Australian Schools, created by the Council of Australian Governments 10 years earlier.

"Only six months into his stint as education minister, Brendan Nelson took the axe to the program that his predecessors worked so hard to implement," Mr Rudd said.

"In the education sector, China has already become Australia's largest single-country source of overseas students (with) more than 40,000 young Chinese ... now studying in Australia.

"And all the while the new policy direction of the Howard Government is to disengage us linguistically and culturally from China and the rest of Asia."

When Mr Rudd worked for former Queensland premier Wayne Goss as an adviser and bureaucrat in the early 1990s, the Labor

government delivered big increases in funding to the study of languages other than English.

In his 2005 speech, Mr Rudd said that since the Howard Government cut its funding the number of people studying Indonesian in Australian universities had plunged by 15 per cent, while Japanese study enrolments had declined by 5 per cent.

Although the study of Chinese languages had increased, many of the students were from overseas, Mr Rudd said.

Only seven universities taught Korean, while three taught Vietnamese and Thai.

"Hindu/Urdu, the second-largest spoken language in the world and the mother tongue of nearly 500 million people, was available at three institutions, with about 50 students in total," he said.

He said a 2001 inquiry into the nation's intelligence services by former Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade secretary Philip Flood found they lacked depth in languages.

"Flood made the point of recommending that the agencies devote extra funding to build language capacity," he said.