



Draft

Education in South Australia

**Multicultural Education
and Languages Committee
(MELC)**

Providing advice to the
Minister for Education



Government of
South Australia

Vision

All South Australian children and young people benefit cognitively, socially, and personally from quality language education, equipping them to develop intercultural competencies and engage confidently and respectfully in an increasingly interconnected world.

Introduction

The Multicultural Education and Languages Committee (MELC) has been a strong advocate for the related areas of language education, multiculturalism, and the internationalisation of education. This paper serves as a timely response to the next phase of our growth, offering strategies to be considered to help harness the full potential of purposeful, contemporary language education for the benefit of all South Australians.

Socially, learning additional languages strengthens community cohesion, promotes intercultural understanding, and fosters respect for linguistic diversity at local, national, and global levels. On an individual level, neuroscientific studies show that bilingualism and multilingual learning enhance cognitive flexibility, problem-solving skills, and literacy. Australian and international research strongly supports that learning one's mother tongue or heritage language enhances identity, well-being, and academic success, particularly for Indigenous and migrant communities. (Lo Bianco 2000)

Beyond educational and personal advantages, a strong commitment to language education delivers substantial social and economic benefits for the state. Multilingual skills are increasingly in demand across international trade, tourism, and diplomacy, equipping South Australia's workforce for global engagement. As the world evolves, embracing linguistic diversity will allow the state to expand its international presence and participate more effectively in the global knowledge economy.

Prioritising language education is essential for developing a skilled, adaptable workforce that is equipped to thrive in a competitive and interconnected global environment.

The decline in language study among South Australian students is therefore concerning, given the well-documented benefits of language education.

Addressing this decline is not just an educational challenge—it is an opportunity to invest in the future of South Australia's young people and society as a whole.

Summary of discussion points for improving languages education in South Australia

1. Reimagining languages education in South Australia

Languages education in South Australia operates within a complex and dynamic environment. A range of factors—including learner diversity, varied learning needs, different contexts, resource availability, community involvement, teacher professional learning and preservice training, and curriculum and teaching approaches—shape the outcomes and quality of language education.

A holistic approach is needed to tackle language decline, advocacy, professional learning, and curriculum advancement with educational directors playing a key role in addressing structural barriers. Achieving consensus while respecting diverse perspectives will be crucial, with a shared focus on learners and South Australia's collective interest serving as a unifying force. Improvement efforts guided by critical thinking and discourse about learner needs and the State's future, recognising the diversity of contexts and teaching approaches with foster positive outcomes.

2. Language teachers and educators

To build a robust and dynamic language-learning ecosystem, all teachers must have access to sustained, contemporary professional development that keeps pace with evolving pedagogical methods and global linguistic developments. Such professional development is essential not only for their growth as educators, but also for delivering engaging and meaningful language learning experiences for students. An investment in teachers is also critical in addressing the growing shortage of qualified language educators, particularly in rural and remote areas, and to meet the growing need in South Australia for teachers of Aboriginal languages and Auslan.

Furthermore, to reverse the downward trend at university level, incentivising and integrating language studies into education and other degrees will not only enhance student enrolments but also safeguard the future of language learning. This approach will prevent the further erosion of language course offerings, thereby building a multilingual, globally competent generation critical to the State's development.

Principals play a crucial role in shaping the educational environment of a school, and their leadership is fundamental in promoting and supporting language learning.

When principals have a deep understanding of the value of multilingualism and in fostering an inclusive school environment, they can take proactive steps to encourage language learning and create policies that support it.

3. *Aboriginal languages*ⁱ

Aboriginal children and young people are entitled to a quality education, a strong sense of identity, connection to Country and well-being enriched by learning in their own languages.

To achieve this imperative, it is critical to take action that includes improving remuneration and working conditions to ensure the continued employment of qualified educators and language owners. Aboriginal educators play a vital role in strengthening school-community partnerships, facilitating knowledge transfer, and preserving and advancing their languages and cultures. We need to appropriately recognise and reward the rare and specialised skills of language owners educating South Australian children and young people.

Closing the Gap South
Australia's implementation Plan
2024-2026: *"Improve recognition
of cultural and language
knowledge in employment
conditions, including but not
limited to Aboriginal languages
teachers in education settings
and in the interpreting sector to
address structural barriers and
support". retention and career
development.* (Government of
South Australia, 2024)

There has been meaningful progress in developing curriculum, resources, and grant programs and in the teaching and learning of Aboriginal languages, however the demand has not been fully realised. Aboriginal languages represent one of the fastest-growing areas of study in schools, driven largely by the dedication of language owners. Their persistence—often unpaid—has been instrumental in reclaiming languages and advocating for their inclusion in school curricula on their Country.

Addressing these challenges will not only strengthen language preservation but also enhance cultural identity, well-being, and healing for Aboriginal communities, enabling the survival of these languages for future generations.

Advancing Aboriginal language education in schools demands a thoughtful and strategic approach, developed in partnership with local communities. By addressing the needs of the educators, communities and young people, we can foster the learning, identity, and well-being of Aboriginal children and their communities. This, in turn contributes to healing the enduring impacts of colonisation.

4. *Artificial Intelligence (AI) and language technologies*

AI and language technologies have the potential to broaden linguistic access, foster critical and metacognitive thinking, and equip students for success in the global knowledge economy. When issues of equity, access, and safety are addressed, these technologies can also, enhance professional learning for educators, and contribute to the inclusion of underrepresented languages in Australia's socio-political and economic spheres.

Heugh (2019) and Powell et al. (2004) highlight AI's central role in the global knowledge economy, linking language learning to economic and geopolitical challenges such as climate change, trade, and social justice. Heugh (2024) underscores the importance of equipping teachers with AI-driven tools to enhance access to multilingual knowledge and ensure Australia remains competitive in an increasingly multilingual world.

‘There is every reason why in South Australia, these technologies can be used to enhance access to and learning for language continuity when a language is not available in the school.... There is every reason why we need to be equipping our students to access and engage in the global knowledge economy beyond English, and which is currently shifting inexorably towards languages of Asia. Socio-economic justice depends on access to this knowledge’. Heugh (2024)

5. Structural improvements

An analysis of how structural barriers impact language enrolment and participation clears the pathway to develop strong, continuous language learning experiences from early childhood through to senior secondary education and university. By recognising and reducing these barriers and opening further pathways, more students can benefit from the cognitive, social, and cultural advantages of multilingualism. The State will gain from better access to the knowledge economy and its citizens with enhanced life and employment skills.

We need to consider how time allocation in the primary years affect additional language learning. Is this a structural barrier that impedes meaningful engagement and student’s confidence in being successful in language learning? Perhaps incentivising preservice primary teachers to major in a language at university (Discussion point 2) will increase the number of language teachers and facilitate bilingual and transdisciplinary approaches to language learning.

Current research and the firsthand perspectives of those who work in fields related to early childhood, highlight the positive early learning experiences of bilingualism and languages learning in the first 5 years of childhood. Expanding bilingual education in early childhood will enhance cognitive development, strengthen identity, and foster a sense of belonging and well-being.

Background

The Minister for Education Training and Skills asked the Multicultural Education and Languages Committee (MELC) to present a statement on improving the enrolments and profile of languages education in South Australia. The Terms of Reference for the project include to:

- identify the critical imperatives for languages education
- identify the barriers impacting languages education
- identify key strategies for consideration by the Minister of Education, Training and Skills to:
- raise the profile of languages education in SA and
- raise the number of students studying languages in SA.

Languages education in South Australia is situated in a complex ecology. Aboriginal peoples are the custodians of the oldest continuously spoken languages in the world. In South Australia we have significant and to some extent untapped cultural capital in the diversity of languages and cultures of migrant Australians.ⁱⁱ

‘The complexity of our language and cultural landscape is our reality, a rich resource and an asset in a globalised world’. (Government of South Australia, 2021)

Schools are guided by the Australian Curriculum (AC), and influenced by their jurisdiction, context, teaching and learning approaches, and availability of language teachers as to the language(s) they offer.

As one of the 8 learning areas, the AC sets an expectation of what is to be taught up to year 10. Languages are mandated to the end of year 8 and time allocations may be an area for consideration. Devoid of a languages policy, schools and sectors are guided by a time allocation and their learning policies, rather than a coherent, relevant co-constructed statewide languages policy or statement.ⁱⁱⁱ

Within the systemic structural complexities are a range of language programs and pedagogical approaches including discipline based, bilingual, content oriented, and transdisciplinary models as well as programs for continuers, additional language learning, background speakers, community languages^{iv}, heritage and Aboriginal revival languages. This environment is further complicated by the range of languages and linguistic groups in South Australia, and the socio-political context that can influence enrolments and interest in specific languages.

In this space there are many examples of good pedagogical practices (See Appendix 1) and yet the overall number of language learners is in decline.

Over the last decades there have been several reports with recommendations to build and enhance languages learning for all students and young people. These include **Review of Languages Retention from the Middle Years to the Senior Years of Schooling** (Research Centre of Languages and Cultures, 2014); **Senior Secondary Language Education Research Project** (Asia Education Foundation, 2014); and **Towards the development of a position statement and strategy (MELC, 2016)**. The imperative to improve languages education is reflected across Australia. Significant national reports and initiatives include the **National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools (NALSAS) project (1994-2002)**; **The National Statement and Plan for Languages education in Australian Schools (2005)**; **National languages plan and strategy: Making languages count (2021)**; and the **Review of Languages education in Australian Universities (2023)**.

In an increasingly precarious position in the schooling landscape, MELC has been a strong advocate for languages learning. In 2016, MELC, called for a position statement and strategy and the internationalisation of education through a meaningful, collaborative process. We need to construct

“...a new narrative for education in linguistic and cultural diversity. A new narrative is needed because of unprecedented changes brought about by globalisation, the increased mobility of people, and changing technologies of communication (Scarino, 2016).

At the Education Sectors Heads’ meeting in August 2022, MELC identified *‘the crucial need for education sectors and systems, leaders, teachers, parents and communities to ensure that all children and young people learn well and that they grow and develop in their engagement with and understanding of our dynamic world – a world with increasing linguistic and cultural diversity’.* (MELC, 2022)

Social, cultural and strategic change on the part of educational communities is needed to maximise engagement in linguistic and cultural diversity for all. MELC Reimagining learning as intercultural engagement (2017)

For all children and young people to ‘learn well’ we need deep conversations and ‘discursive deliberation’^{vi} across the educational communities about languages learning and what guidelines and standards are required to achieve this.

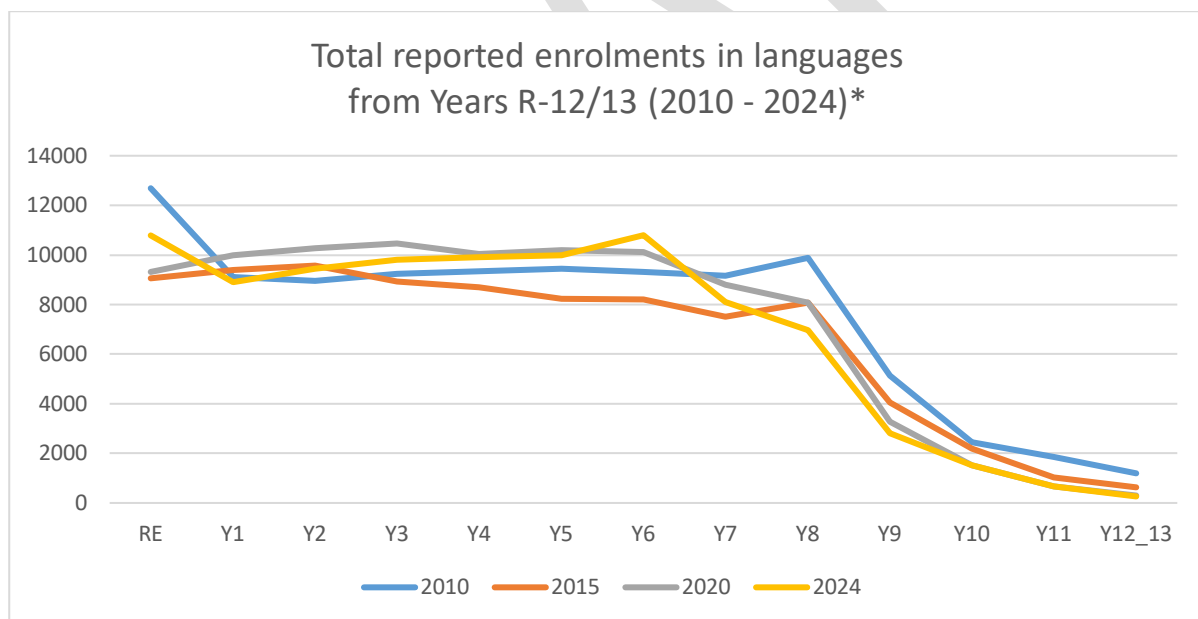
In 2019, the Minister requested MELC’s advice and perspectives on the value of the languages programs at the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma schools. In all stages of the IB, languages are treated as essential rather than optional learning for all students. In the response to the Minister, MELC posited that,

‘... the IB program not only values language learning but places Languages at the core of the curriculum. This framing has merit, and consideration should be given to how this positioning of language learning can be translated/transferred into a wider range of schools...’ (MELC, 2020)

‘The reality is, for Australia to remain globally competitive and coherent as a multicultural society, language learning needs to be seen as an essential part of quality education for all, and not simply a nice-to-have’. (Wang, 2023)

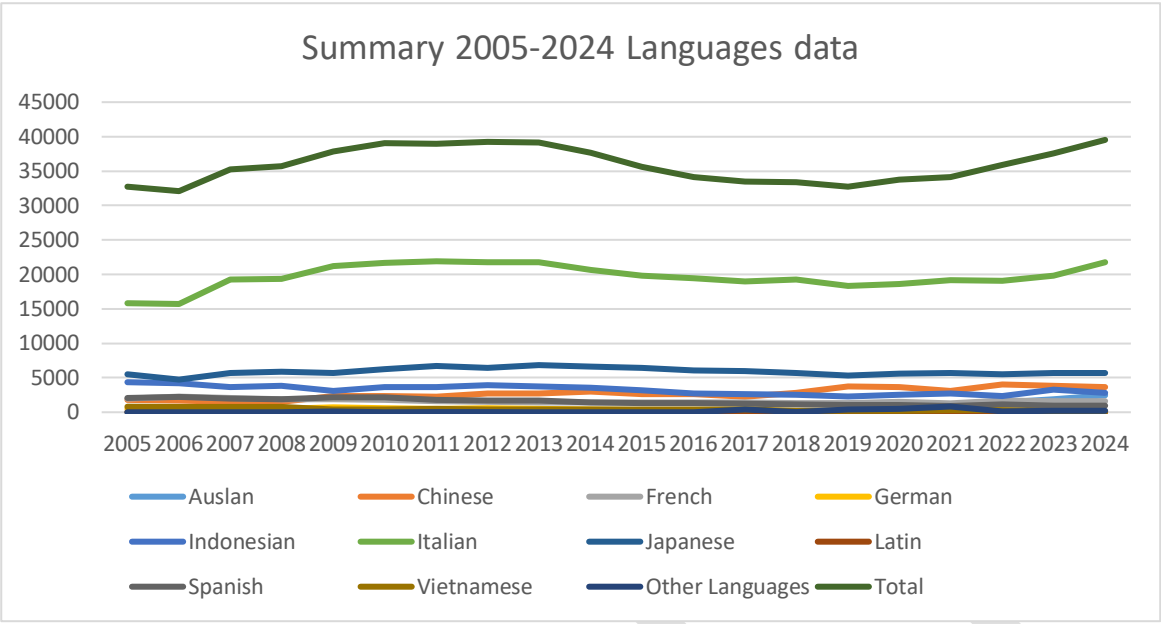
Strategies that have been proposed and enacted to address the decline in languages have not had a sustained effect.^{vi} In 2024, there has been a general downward trend^{vii} in the numbers of language learners in the post compulsory years of school and at university level. This trend can be seen in the graphs depicted below, noting that there is no central collection of language enrolments for independent schools.

Reported enrolments in language studies in public South Australian schools*

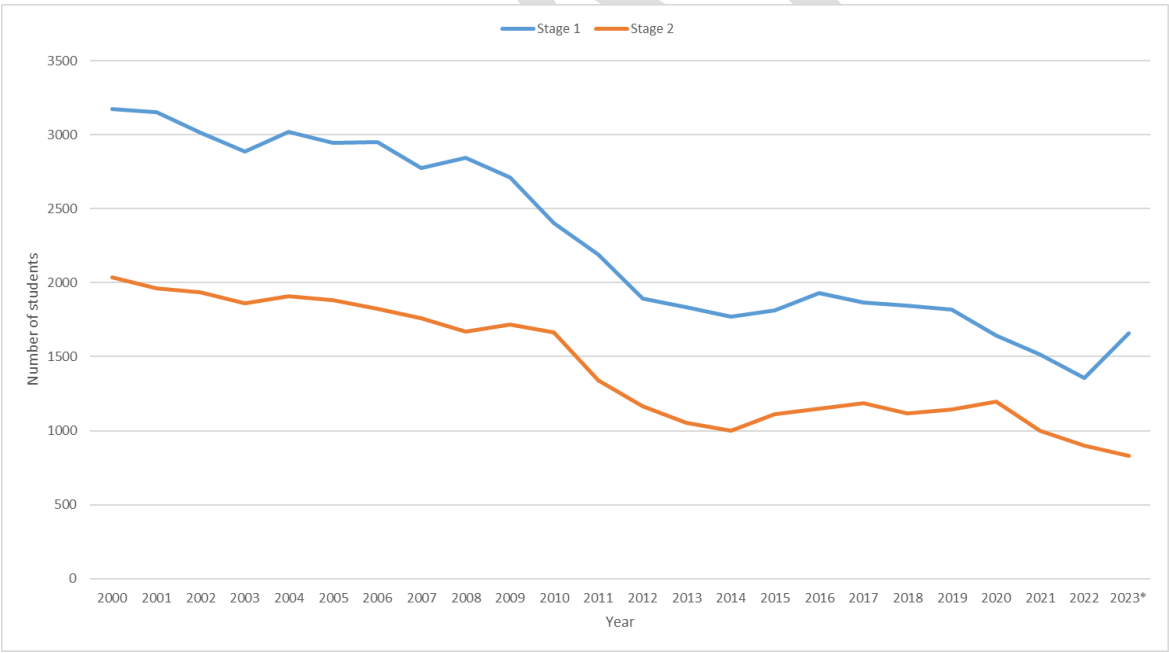


**This data is based on the proportion of schools who report their language enrolments as part of the Language Education Survey (a non-compulsory reporting requirement) and therefore, the data may not be accurately reflective of the true number of enrolments year-to-year. The response rates for the years charted are: 2010 - 100%, 2015 - 88%, 2020 - 74%, 2024 - 82%.*

Catholic school sector

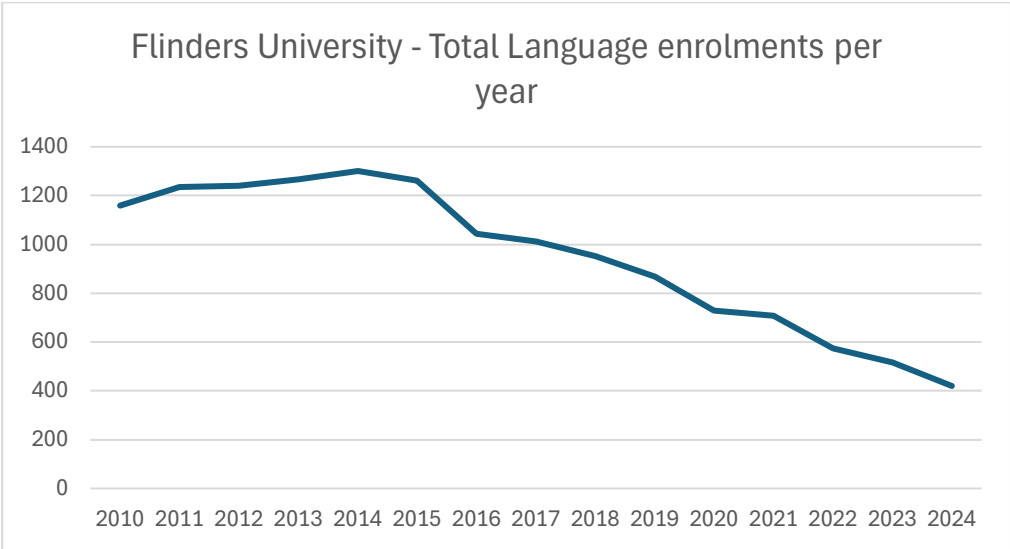


SACE languages enrolments

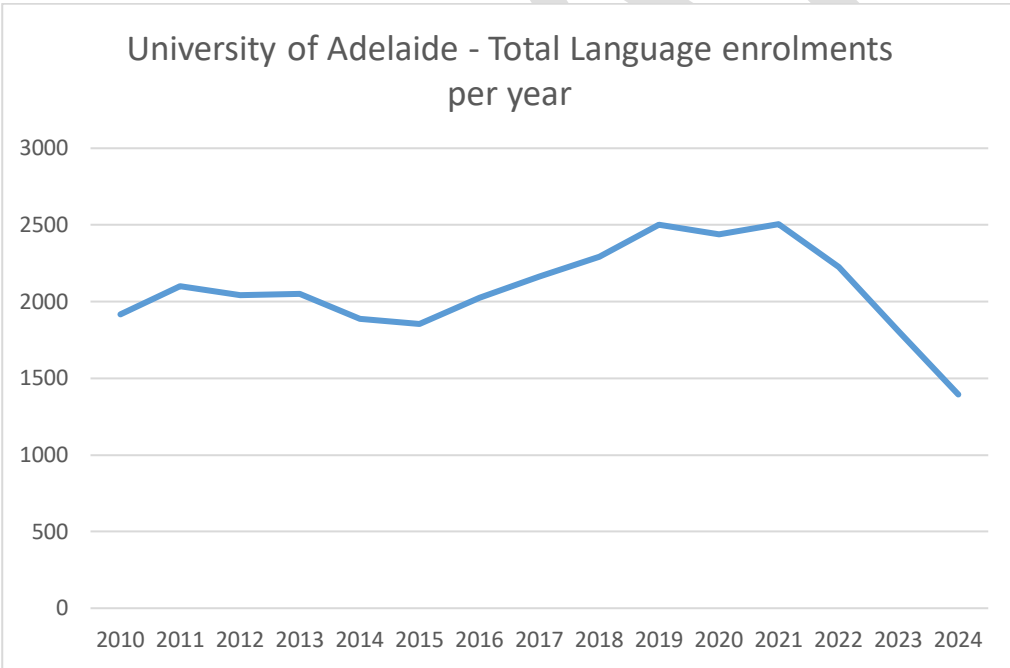


A snapshot from the tertiary sector also depicts a downward trend.

Flinders University



University of Adelaide



Fewer students taking language courses at universities reduces the number of language teachers and pressures universities to determine which languages remain viable.

In 2024 at senior secondary level, Italian at Stage 2, French, and Vietnamese Background Speakers are exceptions to the decline. Aboriginal languages saw growth in pre-SACE years but not at Stages 1 and 2. In 2024 there has been a 26% increase in the number of schools offering Aboriginal languages and a 70% increase in the number of students. There is a growing demand for Aboriginal languages in the pre-SACE years. To meet this need, we must challenge and remove the systemic barriers that limit the role of "teacher" to the Western framework. Only then can we fully empower knowledgeable leaders, educators, and community members to fill this critical gap.^{viii}

The Department for Education's two bilingual schools programs have grown over the past decade, despite challenges like COVID-19, staffing issues, and resource limitations. These schools show that with effort, achieving bilingual capability and biliteracy is possible.

Auslan is growing in popularity as the language subject of choice, particularly for school primary language programs. The rise reflects an anecdotally reported national trend, with demand for teachers of Auslan far outstripping supply. Concern as to the quality and authority of Auslan teaching in schools has been raised by the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community and within networks of language educators.

In increasing the uptake of languages in South Australian schools we need to raise an important question. Is there an underlying assumption that raising the number of students studying languages equates to an improvement in languages learning? We respectfully suggest that this requires further discussion along with several substantial questions impacting on the quality and nature of provision, the quality of learning and the learning entitlement of all South Australian children and young people.^{ix}

Therefore, in the context of *Improving Languages Education*, we should also consider the following:

- a. What do we mean by languages education in South Australian?
- b. What are the structural factors that impede the uptake of languages?
- c. Are current senior secondary certification structures and eligibility criteria conducive to boosting languages enrolments?
- d. Do students perceive scaling as a factor in choosing to study, a language in Years 11 and 12?
- e. What incentives for language learners work and what do not?^x
- f. How can we build an understanding of language learning and biliteracies?
- g. Are AI and language technologies the best way to work towards equity of provision and continuity of language learning for all? ^{xi} What are the discussions we need to have around new technologies and language learning?^{xii}
- h. How do we raise awareness that despite AI's advancements in translation, the personal and societal benefits of learning languages remain invaluable?
- i. Can AI and language technologies enhance cognitive development, or could they potentially hinder certain types of thinking?
- j. How prepared are we as a state, and as a country to access the global knowledge economy in languages other than English?

- k. What needs to be done to realise the rights of Aboriginal children to be educated in their first or revival language?
- l. How can we address the historical and systemic trauma that serves as a living barrier for Aboriginal people in teaching and learning within the Western education system?
- m. Have advocacy strategies delivered a fulsome understanding of the individual and societal benefits of learning languages? Is this understanding consistent across leadership, communities, schools and learners?
- n. Many high-performing education systems internationally mandate languages throughout schooling. Is this a viable pathway for South Australia?
- o. Should we be thinking about shifting global power dynamics and our strategic alliances and national security in the choice of languages?

These questions require deep conversations, analysis and action by educational communities, invested parties including learners and stakeholders.

The decline in the number of students pursuing language studies in South Australia is a concern, especially when juxtaposed with research emphasizing the advantages of language education. Socially, acquiring additional languages fosters community cohesion, promotes intercultural understanding, and enhances respect for linguistic diversity across various levels. Individually, studies indicate that bilingualism and multilingualism enhance cognitive flexibility, problem-solving skills, and literacy.

Beyond educational benefits, a commitment to language education can provide social and economic advantages for the state by enhancing workforce capabilities with skills needed in international trade, tourism, and diplomacy. The evolving global landscape emphasises the importance of engaging with the knowledge economy and strengthening South Australia's global connections.

Methodology and MELC position

In accordance with its charter, MELC offers a platform for inclusive and cross-sectoral perspectives on languages and multicultural education. Such a mandate is reflected in the diversity of committee members and in preparing this paper, our engagement with specialists in languages, key stakeholders, contact with languages organisations (see questionnaire Appendix 2) and other relevant parties. This paper does not prioritise one pedagogy over another, acknowledging that the choice depends on experience, professional learning, and context. Context includes the learning environment, the language, and the learner's prior experiences.

Students continuing and discontinuing with languages were asked to complete a survey in early 2025 (see Appendices 3 and 4). The responses were as anticipated: many of the continuing students cited building stronger connections to their heritage, a desire to travel, that they found learning languages interesting and could achieve good academic results. To a lesser extent, students thought that speaking another language might be useful for their futures. Disincentives included competing subject choices, the perceived difficulty of language courses, and their lack of

enjoyment, purpose and interest in languages. Notably, only one student mentioned the cognitive benefits of learning a language and students were not aware of the additional literacy benefits afforded to language students.

The advice, opinion and responses to consultations and surveys affirms the complexity and diversity evident in the languages education landscape. As with many investigations, more questions were raised than answers.

Literature reviews yielded a comprehensive argument for why languages learning is an imperative and generates personal, academic and societal benefits. (Marsh D., 2020) (Morgan, 2024) (Bialystok, Craik, Green, & Gollan, 2009) (Europe, 2020) (MCEETYA, 2005). Many countries like England, Scotland, Canada and The United States of America have developed programs to address languages development and raise the profile of languages education. (The Importance of Languages in Global Context: An International Call to Action, 2021) (Government of Canada, 2023)^{xiii}

An historical review of strategies to enhance the importance of languages education reveals that they have not achieved long-term success, raising questions about the approaches used.

- a. Were the strategies themselves flawed?
- b. Did they not reach the target audience?
- c. Is it that the momentum has been lost and needs to be regenerated?
- d. Do we need a paradigm shift in thinking about English as the main medium of knowledge sharing and building?
- e. Do people in leadership of both systems and schools, the general community and non-language teachers also agree that a strong languages program can support cognitive, academic and personal growth?
- f. Have we addressed equity and entitlement in language learning?
- g. Does the community know that bilingual students achieve stronger results in tests such as NAPLAN and PISA as well as problem solving activities?

'...during the 1970s and 1980s Australian language policy debate was characterised by high levels of participation, generating attitudinal improvements and major public resourcing. This unprecedented and productive phase in national language planning yielded major progress towards recognising pluralism, language rights, and concrete action towards ameliorating persistent discrimination and disadvantage, (Lo Bianco, 2009)

This paper affirms the belief that a contemporary languages education can provide essential skills and capabilities to engage with a dynamic world. It supports the need to reimagine languages education and its importance to cultural identities, cognitive growth, literacies^{xiv}, well-being, social cohesion and engagement with global knowledges.

The discussions and recognition of the complexity of the language landscape have led to discussions 1-5. Through a collaborative and constructive approach, we aim to reposition languages education in South Australia as an integral part of our education system.

Discussion points for improving languages education in South Australia

1. *Reimagining languages education in South Australia*

Issues such as language growth and decline, the ongoing need for understanding the value and importance of language learning, the nature of language teaching and learning, and the role of languages within the curriculum are deeply interconnected and must be approached holistically. Meaningful change requires the active involvement all stakeholders, including educational leaders, principals, policymakers and sector leaders to developing effective and inclusive language education strategies and directions.

Actions for improvement will be driven by critically thinking and collegial discourse as to what we want for our learners and will be situated in an environment where the diversity of learners, contexts and a range of pedagogical approaches are the reality.

Reaching a shared vision for the future—one that embraces inclusivity and language learning entitlement while respecting and accommodating diverse perspectives—will be a significant challenge. However, by placing the learner at the centre and focusing on what best serves South Australia's collective interest, we can build a strong foundation for unity and meaningful progress.

*'It is not too late to turn attention to the positive consequences for (South) Australia's future through a bold language policy that recognises language as a key capability for engagement in the knowledge economy in its widest sense'.
Professor Kathleen Heugh 2024*

The questions posed in the background section of this paper are fruitful springboards for discussion.

2. *Language teachers and educators*

To build a resilient and future ready language learning ecosystem, all language educators need to have equitable access to sustained, high-quality professional learning. This support must evolve alongside contemporary pedagogical practices and respond to the shifting demands of a globally interconnected world. Strategic investment in professional learning not only enhances teaching quality but also addresses the growing shortage of language educators, particularly in rural and remote communities, by making the profession more attractive, accessible, and well-supported.

Universities are experiencing a steady decline in language course enrolments, resulting in a reduced range of language offerings and a diminishing pool of graduates with specialist language skills. Reversing this trend requires targeted support: strengthening and incentivising language programs within higher education institutions is critical to maintaining student interest and rebuilding capacity. Embedding languages more systematically into degree and diploma pathways and supporting students to study a language alongside their primary discipline will broaden access and appeal.

There is also merit in mandating language study within the Bachelor of Education (Primary Years) curriculum, ensuring that future educators are equipped to support language learning from the earliest stages of schooling. Collectively, these measures will protect the pipeline of qualified language teachers and reinforce the role of language education as an essential component of a holistic, future-focused education system. By prioritising this agenda, we prepare the next

generation with the multilingual proficiency and intercultural awareness required to thrive in a globally connected world.

Principals play a crucial role in shaping the educational environment of a school, and their leadership is fundamental in promoting and supporting language learning. When principals have a deep understanding of the value of multilingualism and foster an environment where a rich languages program is central to identity, well-being and social cohesion, they take proactive steps to encourage language learning and create policies that support it.

Teachers need ongoing professional learning to strengthen their language skills and stay informed about effective teaching strategies. This continuous development is essential not only for their growth as educators, but also for delivering engaging and meaningful language learning experiences for students. A key challenge is how to leverage the expertise of language academics, universities, highly proficient and lead teachers, language advisors, and the School of Languages to provide contemporary, affordable, and flexible professional learning opportunities that meet the evolving needs of educators.

‘Teacher shortage and its impact on language program provision in schools is contextual and needs to be understood holistically. Whilst some schools report not being able to find suitable teachers to fill language vacancies, there are also instances of language teachers employed out of field or teaching other subject areas due to competing school needs’.
Modern Language Teachers Association of SA

Despite considerable efforts to recruit qualified language teachers, some schools, particularly those in rural and remote areas, struggle to secure specialist instructors. Anecdotal evidence indicates a growing demand for Auslan teachers, with many classroom teachers stepping in to fill the gap. However, they often find themselves just one or two lessons ahead of their students or relying on YouTube tutorials. This approach is clearly not conducive to effective language learning.

3. *Aboriginal languages*^{xv}

Aboriginal children and young people are entitled to a quality education, a strong sense of identity, connection to Country and well-being enriched by learning in their own languages.

Action is essential to support the ongoing learning and development of Aboriginal languages. Enhancing pay, job security, and professional support will help retain Aboriginal educators ensuring uninterrupted knowledge transfer and a steady supply of qualified language owners. Aboriginal educators play a crucial role in preserving and advancing languages and culture and in strengthening school-community partnerships.

Closing the Gap South Australia’s implementation Plan 2024-2026. *Improve recognition of cultural and language knowledge in employment conditions, including but not limited to Aboriginal languages teachers in education settings and in the interpreting sector to address structural barriers and support retention and career development.* (Government of South Australia, 2024)

Securing sustained investment and guaranteeing long-term funding will further augment the progress made in Aboriginal language learning. These efforts and development of curriculum and resources will foster a deeper connection to culture, positively impacting the learning, identity, and well-being of Aboriginal children and young people.

There has been meaningful progress in elevating the status and expanding the teaching and learning of Aboriginal languages. Aboriginal languages represent one of the fastest growing areas of study in schools, driven largely by the dedication of language owners. Their persistence, often unpaid, has been instrumental in reclaiming languages and advocating for their inclusion in school curricula on their Country.

'There was also a dramatic increase in positive student engagement in the period directly after the inception of the (Aboriginal language) program'

Aboriginal educator

However, the full extent of demand from schools, school communities, and Aboriginal people for the teaching of local languages has yet to be fully realised. Language owners, who possess specialist cultural and linguistic knowledge, are frequently employed under inadequate conditions, and poor job security. As a result, many of these vital educators understandably seek more stable and fairly compensated roles where their expertise is also in high demand.

In the public sector, significant progress has been made in developing curriculum, resources, and grant programs in collaboration with language owners to support Aboriginal language education. However, implementation challenges remain. These include the need for formal recognition of the rare and specialised skills of language owners, improved working conditions, access to professional learning, and sustained funding. Additionally, there must be ongoing efforts to address the lasting effects of colonisation and support cultural and language continuity and preservation.

"The fragility of the program centres around the availability of suitable and skilled personnel which is exacerbated in a remote setting. It is vital that programs exist to facilitate ... student aspirations to work in the program or in the field of Aboriginal language revival, to gain skills and qualifications to become future leaders ..."

Aboriginal educator

Advancing Aboriginal language education in schools requires a thoughtful and strategic approach. By attending to the needs of the educators and appropriate curriculum development, we can not only support the learning, identity, and well-being of Aboriginal children and communities but also contribute to healing the enduring impacts of colonisation and support the health and continuity of Aboriginal languages for future generations.

4. AI and language technologies

Further exploration and development of AI and language technologies can significantly enhance every student's language learning experience, broadening access to a wide range of languages. These advancements have the potential to foster critical and metacognitive thinking skills, preparing future generations to thrive in a global knowledge economy.

By leveraging AI, students can engage in personalized, adaptive learning that supports diverse linguistic needs, empowering them to develop a deeper understanding of language structures and some cultural nuances. With appropriate guidance, this innovation can also equip learners with the cognitive tools necessary for problem-solving and independent thinking, skills that are essential in an increasingly interconnected world.

As long as access, security and safety are not an issue, AI-powered language learning can significantly enhance both student language acquisition and professional development for teachers, promoting equity in educational opportunities for all. ^{xvi}

Kathleen Heugh, Associate Professor at the University of South Australia writes,

'The year 2010 marked the return of a focus on translation in languages teaching and learning (Horner & Tetreault (2016), and the new generation of neural machine translation (NMT) technologies released in 2020 are core applications of generative AI that use 'deep learning' processes. These technologies are available to school students and can be used in contemporary language learning pedagogies to advance critical and metacognitive thinking, as well as to teach students to recognise the limitations of technologies (Heugh et al., 2022; Chang, 2024). They offer students access to knowledge generated in languages beyond English – essential if Australia is to prepare future generations to understand different ways of thinking, producing, and using knowledge expertise beyond Australia (e.g., Welch & Welch, 2008) ... There is every reason why in South Australia, these technologies can be used to enhance access to and learning for language continuity when a language is not available in the school.... There is every reason why we need to be equipping our students to access and engage in the global knowledge economy beyond English, and which is currently shifting inexorably towards languages of Asia. Socio-economic justice depends on access to this knowledge.'

'The relationship between language, knowledge, translation, and AI is substantial.^{xvii} ...The relationship between language learning, machine translation technology and AI is now central to the global knowledge economy (Chen, 2019; Powell et al., 2004). It has become critical to Australia's 21st Century socio-economic, political, and international security. The urgency of the global knowledge economy extends far beyond conventional economic argument. It has to do with rapidly changing power relations, and preparations to meet challenges at state, national and transnational levels in relation to Australian participation in world affairs (including climate change, green energy, trade and security,^{xviii} and achieving equality and a socially just society).'

'The implications of AI and language technologies include enhanced professional learning of teachers. This is to ensure that they understand how to use and maximise the advantages and purpose for which AI and machine translation offer access to knowledge and expertise available beyond English...

It is not too late to turn attention to the positive consequences for (South) Australia's future through a bold language policy that recognises language as a key capability for engagement in the knowledge economy in its widest sense^{xix}. This would include harnessing the affordances of language technologies including neural translation tools embedded in AI, and the role these play in developing metalinguistic and metacognitive capabilities for all students (Heugh et al., 2022; Chang, 2024)'. (Heugh, 2024)

5. Structural improvements

An analysis of how structural barriers impact language enrolment and participation clears the pathway to develop strong, continuous language learning experiences from early childhood through to senior secondary education and university. By recognising and reducing these barriers and opening further pathways we can ensure that more students benefit from the cognitive, social, and cultural advantages of multilingualism. The State will gain from better access to the knowledge economy and its citizens with enhanced life and employment skills.

In 2014 the Asia Education Foundation noted that *'...a stronger pipeline of languages students from the Early Years to Year 10 is required to scale up senior secondary languages enrolments. The pipeline is largely to do with student retention and continuity: more students in Years 9-10 need to be able to choose to study a language for senior certification'*. (Asia Education Foundation, 2014)

One of the questions concerning structural impediments concerns current senior secondary certification structures and eligibility criteria.^{xx} This is a key area to address.

While some schools have creatively offered Stage 1 language courses at the Year 10 level, this approach is not suitable for all schools and learners. Significantly, students report that they are not able to accommodate language learning in their senior secondary subject choices.

Further, in secondary schools, will raising the year level of compulsory language study promote language study after the compulsory years? How does timetabling affect language choice?

(In the post compulsory years, consider the electives timetabled against languages).

We need to consider how time allocation in the primary years affects additional language learning. Is this a structural barrier that impedes meaningful engagement and student's confidence in being successful in language learning?

Perhaps incentivising preservice primary teachers to major in a language at university will increase the number of language teachers and facilitate bilingual and transdisciplinary approaches to language learning. Language learning becomes not just a separate discipline but a holistic and integrated way for children and young people to learn. (Learning in and learning through languages)

In the **Second Languages and Australian Schooling Report** (2009) Lo Bianco and Slaughter raised the issue of inadequate time on task for meaningful language learning. They advised to discontinue programs which do not meet minimum standards, including those of less than an hour a week or one lesson a week, or where one teacher is responsible for many classes for very short periods each. (Joseph Lo Bianco, 2009)

The thinking behind this statement is that minimal time allocation does not allow language learning to take place and indeed may be detrimental to future engagement. We suggest that all children and young people are entitled to the positive personal and social benefits of language learning and to the spaces to explore and affirm identities, develop language competencies and capabilities including intercultural understanding. To enable these lifelong advantages, systems

Students' reasons for not continuing with languages in year 11. March 2025
The main reason is timetable space. I had 7 elective subjects: two I filled with math methods and specialist math, two I filled with chemistry, one I filled with psychology, one I filled with biology. These are all of my biggest interests, which left me with only 1 elective left (I would need 2 free electives as a language is a full year subject). I chose not to because I had to sacrifice a subject for my prerequisites for the things I want to study in university which is civil engineering.

and schools need to consider languages as a key learning area that has a positive impact on student identity, well being and overall academic performance.

Current research and the firsthand perspectives of those who work in fields related to early childhood languages learning, highlight the positive early learning experiences of bilingualism and languages learning in the first 5 years of childhood. Evidence suggests, early-start bilingualism (at ages 0–5), including learning home languages and additional languages, is beneficial for successful English outcomes and achieving a sense of community and belonging. (The Multicultural Education and Languages Committee (MELC), 2022)

The evidence points to the advantages of language learning as a core component of the preschool curriculum.

Unfortunately, some children enter school as bilingual or multilingual students but gradually lose their language skills over time. To prevent this, we must find effective ways to support community and small-candidature languages in schools. One solution is the implementation of virtual classrooms and online teaching, ensuring language learning is accessible to all students, regardless of location. This approach would also promote language continuity for children who change schools and provide vital support for learners in regional areas. Does Open Access have a role to play in this initiative?^{xxi}

We acknowledge that the ability to deliver an increase in time allocation and access for meaningful language learning at primary and early childhood centres is contingent on the availability of skilled language teachers.

Analysing the structural barriers that affect language enrolment and participation offers valuable insights into creating a seamless, continuous language learning journey from early childhood through to senior secondary education and university. By addressing these obstacles, we can pave the way for more inclusive, accessible, and effective language education, ensuring students and the State benefit from a strong languages education.

Final Words

There is now an opportunity in South Australia to take a bold stance in realising our learners' language entitlement and in doing so become a national leader in languages teaching and learning^{xxii}. This will require a collaborative process, a shared vision and commitment to realising and supporting languages education into the future.

Persuasive evidence on the advantages of additional language learning has emerged in the last decades. On the social level, learning a second language, fosters social cohesion within communities and promotes respect for linguistic and cultural diversity at the community, state, national and international level. For the individual, both as a bilingual and a learner with additional language capabilities, neuroscience has demonstrated growth in executive functioning, cognition, problem solving as well as evidence of improved overall literacies.^{xxiii}

Although good practices, such as the implementation of Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Pedagogies, the Language Learning Hub partnership (Community Languages), bilingual education, and the expansion of compulsory language learning years, are evident in several schools, there is still substantial work to be done.

Developing and capitalising on our linguistic and cultural assets, building our capacity and delivery of strong languages education programs re-positions South Australia as a lead in contemporary language practices. More importantly it fosters open-minded, reflective learners prepared to make culturally responsive language and behavioural choices that enhance both interactions with others and understanding of their own languages and culture. As (South) Australians we will have greater access to knowledges beyond English and be prepared for the global knowledge economy. To do this we need to debate, have deep conversations and plan collaboratively.

Our children and young people deserve a vibrant, futures oriented and comprehensive languages education that responds to their developmental and personal needs, interests and aspirations. Our state's future requires this too.

Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration

Goal 1: excellence and equity -ensure that young Australians of all backgrounds are supported to achieve their full educational potential

Appendix 1

Based on literature reviews, expert opinions, research, and teaching and learning experiences, good practices indicate an understanding that:

- Language education involves deep learning about how we learn and is situated in our languages and cultures
- In all areas of the curriculum, learning is mediated through languages and cultures – those that children and young people bring to their learning and those that they encounter and learn at school (MELC, 2023)
- Rich learning takes place in contextual understanding, recognition of prior learning and the connectedness of literacies and capabilities that are interrelated across the curriculum
- Conceptual shifts in languages education that have occurred over recent years are testament to increasing emphasis on the needs, rights and agencies of the learner
- Developing intercultural capabilities is central to languages education, identity formation, citizenship and the well-being of individual. It promotes the vitality of communities and the state. It is fundamental to equity and equal opportunities for all
- In developing our identities and awareness of self through languages education, we can create new ways of seeing and interacting with the world
- Respect for what the learner brings to the class engenders motivation to learn, identity building and connects life experiences with building new learning
- The realm of knowledge is international, and so intercultural capabilities and language competencies are needed to navigate the interpretation, creation and exchange of knowledge
- Inconsistent and minimal exposure to the language can hinder retention
- There is an increasingly extensive body of knowledge demonstrating that people who use more than one language have enhanced cognitive functioning and academic, employability, and cultural benefits when compared to monolinguals. (Marsh D., 2020) (Bialystok, Craik, Green, & Gollan, 2009) (O'Brien M. , 2017, 2019)
- Monolinguals have been shown to be at a disadvantage in standardised testing (like NAPLAN and PISA), in mathematics, literacies and problem solving
- In the face of the dominant Anglosphere, language learning that explores, sustains and reinforces cultural identities is vital for migrant and Aboriginal children and young people
- Heritage and additional language learning in preschool gives children a head-start with their pre-reading and pre-writing learning, promotes cognitive flexibility, enhances literacies, and fosters deeper connections with different cultures and languages
- English monolingualism is not enough for the 21st Century. We need to provide a strong counterclaim to address the misconception that 'English is enough'
- Learning through language as well as about language is a powerful motivator
- Motivation will build if languages education is equally valued by all parties and not seen as an elective
- Learners find satisfaction in real world language experiences
- Further examination of motivational and contextual factors will yield a language curriculum that is differentiated to learners needs, interests and aspirations
- The degree to which language study has a positive impact on them is what learners consider important in their decisions to continue with languages (either in academic terms or because of student-exchange programs or in-country experiences). (Curnow & Kohler, 2008)
- Language is the foundation of all learning.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Thank you to the Aboriginal Languages team, Curriculum and Learning Division, Department for Education for sharing their expertise in this area.

ⁱⁱ In 2021, just over 7 million people in Australia were born overseas, representing 27.6% of the population. This was an increase from 6.1 million, or 26.3%, in 2016. (Education, 2023)

ⁱⁱⁱ Since 2011, South Australia has not had a specific policy or plan for languages education. (Kohler, 2017)

^{iv} Community Schools in South Australia is a longstanding and valuable part of languages education in the state and the ongoing maintenance and development of languages in the Australian community. The dominant feature of the program is complex linguistic and cultural diversity, and this creates particular needs and expectations. 2018 Review of ethnic schools program of South Australia.

^v Articulated by Professor Jo Lo Bianco, public address, 4 March 2025

^{vii} Trends in the numbers and nature of language education as evidenced from DfE, CESA, contributing independent schools, SACE and the universities' data. The selection was from 2010 to 2024, from reception to university level. Due to inconsistencies, preschool was omitted in this data range.

Languages in the post compulsory years is generally in decline. In 2021, only 8.6 per cent of Year 12 students were enrolled in a language — an historical low. Between 2010 and 2021 the nation saw a 23 per cent drop in this figure. Wang (2023)

Languages that are growing in South Australia include Aboriginal languages, Chinese, Auslan and most recently in 2024 Stage 2, Italian. French and Vietnamese Background also saw significant growth in proportion to their size.

The numbers of students studying Chinese Continuers has remained stable

(The question of equity was raised by key stakeholders. Their recommendation was to divide Asian languages students into three categories: Second Language, Background Language, First Language to ensure all students are assessed at a fair and appropriate level.)

The issues facing Aboriginal languages are unique. The demand for First, Revival and Additional Language teachers is greater than the supply of teachers.

With Auslan's rapid growth, there is high demand for qualified teachers, particularly in the primary years.

Universities and schools are finding creative ways to promote the uptake of languages including enrolling Stage 1 and 2 at year 10 and 11, accrediting language courses from other universities, introducing the Diploma in Languages and promoting the Job-ready Graduates Package.

^{ix} We applaud the SACE Recognition of Aboriginal Cultural Knowledge and Learning program that offers '...Aboriginal students the opportunity to have their cultural knowledge and learning formally recognised within their SACE qualification... empowering Aboriginal students to deepen their connection to community, land, and culture, fostering a sense of belonging" SACE (2025). Equally, we must respect and acknowledge the teachings and knowledge shared by Aboriginal teachers, community leaders, and elders.

^{ix} A priority to strengthen specialist teaching, including in Languages, is recognised in the Department for Education's [Specialist Teacher Workforce Plan](#). The Specialist Teacher Workforce Plan includes goals to be met by 2026 through focus on three areas: recognising specialists, supporting existing teachers, and strengthening the specialist teacher pipeline. It does not describe specific actions for Languages.

^x University of Adelaide noted that there is some improvement in the uptake of languages in 2024 '*thanks to federal and state government funding support, through the New Colombo Plan and funding from the Department for Industry, Innovation and Science (DIIS), which has fully-funded Italian student study tours to Siena, Italy in November/December 2024*'.

^{xi} Noted concern of the School of Languages. '*Languages education is at risk of being elitist as programs in the public sector collapse. This is an equity issue for current and future generations of young South Australians and an economic and educational risk for all South Australians*'.

^{xii} New technologies' impact on translation and language learning is profound. We can look forward to greater personalized learning and accessibility for diverse and remote learners. However, AI and language technology advancements also raise important ethical and practical questions. Learners might become too dependent on technology, hindering the development of their own problem-solving and language-production skills. There is also some concern about student's development of critical thinking and metacognition in an AI world.

^{xiv} Language teachers model biliteracy by demonstrating translanguaging, helping students enhance literacy through a multilingual approach. This is crucial in South Australian classrooms, which typically focus on monolingual literacy. Evidence shows that a multilingual approach boosts educational success. Department of Education 2025

^{xv} Thank you to the Aboriginal Languages team, Curriculum and Learning Division, Department for Education for sharing their expertise in this area.

^{xvi} A current challenge for AI is an inability to determine cultural nuances and language use in contexts. Son, Ružić and Philpott write “Language educators need to ensure that AI is effectively used to support language learning and teaching in AI-powered contexts with a clear understanding of what needs to be considered in the implementation of AI-supported language learning and teaching. They need to be prepared to use AI technologies and applications and to support learning experiences in specific contexts. They also need to ask the question of how to deal with human skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity in their practices in AI environments. Researchers are recommended to respond to the need for more rigorous research on AI technologies and applications for L2 and FL learning and teaching”. (Jeong-Bae Son, 2023)

^{xvii} Contemporary generative AI technologies can trace their origins to seven decades of language translation technology (Stone et al., 2024).

^{xviii} See also Baumgarten & Cornella Detrell, 2019; Bratianu et al., 2024

^{xix} “Monolingual English graduates are at a disadvantage in the global workplace, lacking the communicative and translingual and transcultural capabilities to excel in diverse international teams and collaborations”. Dr Angel Lin Reimagining Bilingual Education in the 21st Century

^{xx} By starting SACE Stage 1 in year 10, many schools have addressed the decline languages at Year 12 when Stage 2 was reduced from five, 20 credit subjects to four. Languages was often the fifth choice. Whilst this action affirms schools’ commitment to languages education, it poses the question if Stage 1 at Year 10 is developmentally and academically suitable for all students. We note with interest that in the IB Diploma, language study is compulsory, and students undertake six subjects at Year 12 level as well as an Extended Essay, Theory of Knowledge and Creativity Activity Service requirements.

^{xxi} A community member has reported that her children who were trilingual when they started school are now monolingual. What a loss to these children’s knowledge base and to our state’s cultural capital.

^{xxii} “The development of multilingual capabilities for all Australians, commensurate with high performing nations in our neighbourhood and beyond, is critical. Without this development, Australia risks isolation and reduced opportunities in a world in which plurilingual, pluriliteracy and pluricultural skills are core requirements for everyday engagement and successful futures”. (Morgan, 2024)

^{xxiii} Research has demonstrated that bilinguals outperform monolinguals in various standardised tests. This is not just in English literacies but in cognitive flexibility, divergent and convergent thinking and mathematics, science and language arts. (Marsh D., 2020) (Bialystok, Craik, Green, & Gollan, 2009) (O’Brien M., 2017, 2019).