

# On ‘Crisis’ and the pessimism of disciplinary discourse in foreign languages: An Australian perspective

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## **Abstract**

This article investigates how the disciplinary discourse on the contemporary state of foreign languages in universities hastily refers to these disciplines as being in ‘crisis’. This practice is nearly as old as the Humanities itself, and has been employed periodically since at least the 1940s. Despite a period of increasing foreign language enrolment in the first decade of the twenty-first century in Australia, calls of ‘crisis’ came from across the languages sector. In tracing the use of the term ‘crisis’, we show how the sector has long been characterised by such alarmist terminology, even when reality suggests otherwise. The article traces this usage in the recent disciplinary discourse in foreign languages. A topical report of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, which shows increased language enrolment over the period 2002-11, leads one to believe that things at universities may not be as bad as first thought. This finding has implications for language enrolments not just in Australia, but around the world.

**Key words:** language disciplines, crisis, disciplinary discourse, language enrolment, languages, foreign languages

## **1 Introduction**

Patterns of enrolment in language departments around the world, and how to sustain such enrolment, are currently the subject of a wide-ranging debate (Oxford, 2010). While not wishing to play down the state of foreign language learning, it is becoming apparent that recent reporting of the state of languages in universities, from both within and outside the academy, has tended towards alarmism. The prognosis is not good. Even a cursory glance at the literature is enough to warrant concern. Terms such as ‘death spiral’ (Lane, 2013), ‘disastrous’ (Jaworska, 2015), ‘worrying’ (Fisher, 2001: 33), ‘stuttering’ (Coleman, Galaczi & Astruc, 2007) and ‘perfect storm’ (Oxford, 2008) are just a few examples of the ways in which the languages sector has been described, and describes itself.

This article responds to these recent observations about the future of foreign languages in the contemporary university, and the terminology used to describe these disciplines. Following on from studies by Lo Bianco (2012), which looked at evaluations of languages in the Australian research assessment exercise, as well as Lanvers & Coleman (2013), reporting descriptions of the language learning crisis in public media, our aim is to show that alarmist terminology is not just a feature of media reporting on the state of languages, but is employed by the sector itself. We do so by juxtaposing the alarmist discourse against enrolment trends in Australia, the context of this article. Specifically, we trace the use of the term ‘crisis’ referring

to languages in universities in order to illustrate that application of this descriptor is as old as the disciplines themselves.

Such alarmist language is becoming routine (if it has not become so already) across the Anglosaxon world. For this reason, we find it necessary to focus on a recent success story for languages from Australia. Here, at least, there is a sense that talk of ‘crisis’ may be misplaced. Despite a long-held impression that enrolments are falling, recent data contained in a report of the Australian Academy of the Humanities (Turner & Brass, 2014) point to a resurgence of enrolment in Australian universities over the last decade. These data are discussed below, and are juxtaposed against the talk of the so-called ‘crisis’. Given that the situation of language teaching in an English-speaking country will likely be different from a non English-speaking country, the aim is *not* to make comparisons *across* countries. Nonetheless, it is hoped that the case-study from Australia reported here will provide inspiration for other contexts.

It will be helpful, in the first instance, to describe previous ‘crises’ in foreign language learning, before considering how those outside the academy report on the perennial ‘crisis’ in the language disciplines. Finally, we point to a group of scholars who are wary of using the term at all, and who see signs for optimism. The article concludes by drawing inferences about what this self-imposed diagnosis may mean for the way in which the languages sector sees itself specifically, and what it might mean for the Humanities generally.

## 2 ‘Crisis’ and the language disciplines

### 2.1 Early uses of ‘crisis’

Use of the word ‘crisis’ has been a pervasive feature of how language disciplines refer to themselves, and in some cases predates the establishment of languages as fully-fledged departments in their own right. Associating foreign language teaching with a situation of ‘crisis’ has been occurring since at least the 1940s, and every decade since then. This has occurred at regular intervals, including up until very recent times.

One of the earliest uses of the word ‘crisis’ to refer to language teaching occurred in 1942. At a meeting of the Foreign Languages Teachers Conference in New York, a major figure in American education, Isaac Leon Kandel, had used the term in reference to the secondary sector: “the crisis in which the status of foreign languages in our schools now finds itself does arise out of the immediate situation” (Kandel, 1942: 16). Collini (2012: 63) points out that the term ‘Humanities’ itself became increasingly widespread in Britain only in the course of the 1940s and 1950s, and that “the appearance in 1964 of a ‘Pelican Original’ [by J. H. Plumb] entitled *Crisis in the Humanities* provoked discussion of various kinds”. Writing in the 1970s, Lindenberger delivered what now appears a romanticised version of academic life a decade earlier. In the 1960s, he says, methodological issues were coming to the fore at a time when:

university coffers were bulging, when the government and foundations were going all-out to sponsor graduate study in the language fields, when jobs were plentiful at all levels and when undergraduates did not yet show the propensity they do today to shy away from what they take to be the less practical fields. (Lindenberger, 1976: 4)

This statement, of course, was pronounced within the context of the social unrest and turbulent decade of the 1970s, in particular during the broader "crisis in the universities" (Lindenberger, 1976: 5) that was unfolding around the world. During the 1980s, one also finds links between language departments and crises. Simon (1980), in his paper entitled *The U.S. Crisis in Foreign Language*, reported that "of those who graduate from high school today, fewer than four percent have more than two years in a foreign language" (p.32).<sup>1</sup>

This sense of crisis continued well into the 1990s. Lange (1994) identified a crisis in terms of the organisation and delivery of language teaching, which was in turn linked to complex curricular and instructional choices, as well as to factors external to college and university programs, such as publishers and textbook authors, and the need to respond to many expected learning outcomes (1994: 12). He identified six signs of a crisis in the languages sector. These signs included curricula problems, metatheoretical discussions of the problems in foreign language learning, uncritical examination of research and writing in the field and so on. Lange was under no delusions, affirming "I strongly believe that a crisis exists" (p.14) and that "the road to the crisis has been a long one" (p.15). A few years later, Saunders (1998) examined national exam results, showing worrying trends in the declining level of performance in modern languages relative to other subjects. His comment that "modern languages have certainly enjoyed plenty of successes in the last fifteen years" (p.63) contrasts with Lange's (1994) observations about the long road to crisis. Saunders provided recommendations to raise levels of performance for all students in modern languages. There is no discussion of the word 'crisis', which is only used in the title of his article, *Modern languages in crisis?* Nor is the term addressed in the body of the article. Nevertheless, the title itself made a clear link between 'languages' and 'crisis'.

## 2.2 Languages and crisis in the first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century

According to Coleman (2004: 152), recruitment to Modern Language departments peaked "at the same moment as British Europhilia, coinciding with the creation of the European Single Market in 1992". In the early 2000s, Hajek (2001: 92) noted that "The United Kingdom has, of all major English-speaking countries, been least able to adapt to a multilingual future, and provides a salutary lesson to Australia about the dangers of underestimating the value of languages to the national good". He pointed to a 1998 report of the Nuffield Foundation, which conducted a national

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<sup>1</sup> This article is an excerpt from a book entitled *The Tongue Tied American*, part of a broader study Simon conducted as a member of the US House of Representatives. Although not written from the perspective of a scholar, even an 'outsider' felt crisis was not too strong a term for America's language competencies in the 1980s.

inquiry on the future of languages (for the full report, see Nuffield, 2000). Hajek's verdict is stark: "low levels of language capability, university language sector in crisis". Other concerns raised in the Nuffield Foundation report included: a desperate shortage of language teachers, inadequate language choice, lack of coordinated language policy, and lack of direction or motivation, desperate lack of language skills in the workforce (summarised in Hajek, 2001: 92). Others noted that the Nuffield report "did not shrink from labelling the shortage of new students a 'crisis', recording departmental closures, steeply falling numbers in what had always been the two most popular foreign languages, French and German, and the near disappearance of Russian" (Coleman, 2004: 152). These concerns were reiterated later by Bassnett (2002) in her article on the state of hope for the Humanities in the twenty-first century (cf. also Belfiore, 2013). Significantly for our purposes, she singled out languages as being one of the areas suffering the most, noting that "At a time when exchange between cultures has never been more desirable or more frequent, native English speakers are becoming more monolingual (and hence monocultural) than ever before, and the teaching of foreign languages is in crisis" (Bassnett, 2002: 106).

Similarly, Swaffar (2003) addressed the question of crisis and languages more directly, in a paragraph worth quoting in full. She noted that crisis:

is a word used to describe potential apocalypse in a world beset with major economic, political, ecological, and military problems. The use of this term in the context of our discipline, referring as it must to a lesser scale of crisis with comparatively benign stakes, can only be justified with dictionary definitions. *Webster's* defines *crisis* as "a turning point in anything, a decisive or crucial time, stage, or event." It is in this sense, I would argue, that our discipline finds itself in crisis – a crisis of identity and accountability. (Swaffar, 2003: 20)

Swaffar delineated a picture of language teaching that went beyond general rhetoric. The crisis was one in which traditional assumptions about "how we have been doing business" needed to change, since contemporary practices had led the sector to "an uncertain sense of self" (p.20). Similarly, Spencer (2003) also saw the dawn of the millennium as a period of crisis, describing a "bleak picture" in college registration in French, using statistics from the annual report of the Modern Language Association (MLA). She detailed a number of initiatives taken at her home university (such as the promotion of the study of French, recruitment of French teachers and advocacy in the public arena), in order to respond to the 'crisis'.

These observations from the early 2000s on the state of language teaching were summarised in Absalom's 2004 Editorial of the journal *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*. He noted that "references to decline, crisis, closure and so on appear throughout the various contributions" (2004: 124). A sense of crisis continued throughout the mid 2000s, but this time with a heightened awareness of the metalanguage being used to refer to languages education. Stanton's 2005 article on linguistic human rights pointed to national security concerns, brought on by the lack of language skills. In her view, educators should see "the current language

crisis as an opportunity for articulating another conception of Babel, of linguistic heterogeneity, not as an obstacle to national unity that throws us into confusion and misunderstanding but as a resource for a less conflicted society within and for more secure relations with other societies" (Stanton, 2005: 66). This crisis had been preceded by a similar situation in the late 1950s, when another language crisis had occurred, "brought on by the launching of the Russian sputnik". In the same year as Stanton's article appeared, another paper identified similar concerns.

Martín's (2005) analysis labelled languages as being in *permanent crisis*, rather than focussing on any one particular moment of crisis or perceiving the difficulty of the sector as a temporary state. Martín traced the relative scarcity of language teaching in contemporary Australia to decisions made in the 1950s, when language entrance requirements to universities were abolished. Although the article does not address the term 'crisis' directly, it did identify two specific periods of crisis in the past. The first was in 1994, when a report of the Council of Australian Governments was released, calling for emphasis on business ethics and Asian languages. The report precipitated "a crisis in the Humanities" (p.68, referring to Maslen & Slattery, 1994: 57-71). In this sense, the position of languages in modern university curricula act as a 'canary in the mine' for the broader concern enveloping the humanities (Lo Bianco, 2012; see also Looseley, 2013). The second period occurred during the 1997/1998 Asian financial crisis, which meant that languages in Australian universities were "one of the hardest hit disciplines", leading to "a net loss of around 100 full-time language-teaching positions" (Martín, 2005: 69).

Use of 'crisis' and other alarmist terms continued to be employed into the late 2000s. The year 2007 was significant for language policy. In Australia, matters were brought to a head by the convocation of senior language scholars in Canberra at a meeting entitled 'Languages in Crisis', which produced a report of the same name (Group of Eight, 2007). The remit of the report was extensive. It was concerned not just with enrolments, but the supply of language teachers and the range of languages available in Australian universities. It noted that "crisis is not too strong a word to describe the quality and supply of language teachers in Australia" (2007: 4).<sup>2</sup>

At the same time as the *Languages in Crisis* report appeared, commentators began to evince a more measured, more conscious awareness of their own disciplinary rhetoric. Qualifications to the noun 'crisis' aimed to temper what had become a pervasive feature of discourse whenever talk of languages came to the fore. Wiley (2007), for example, referenced the "gloomy background" of foreign language teaching over the past few decades, but only talks about an "alleged

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<sup>2</sup> In the US, similar concerns were being expressed. Geisler, Kramsch, McGinnis et al. (2007) formed a committee, established by the MLA Executive Council, known as the 'Ad hoc Committee on Foreign Languages'. The committee was charged with "considering the effects of this crisis on the teaching of foreign languages in colleges and universities" (2007: 234). The report found that the languages crisis in the United States had been continuing since at least the early 2000s. In particular, the sector "found itself immersed in a dynamic, rapidly changing environment marked by a *sense of crisis* around what came to be called the nation's language deficit" (p.234) [our emphasis].

foreign languages crisis". Identifying the proper corrective to remedy the state of foreign language instruction "depends in part on whether there is a language crisis in the US and whether it is best characterized as a foreign language crisis" (2007: 181). Lo Bianco & Slaughter's 2009 paper described a situation of jumping from one crisis to another, noting that the widespread perception that English language literacy is in a state of national crisis stems from "the so-called 'literacy crisis' of the mid-1990s" (2009: 47). With regard to foreign language teaching, rather than being in a state of crisis, it is the *interventions* that "have been driven by crisis-mode responses to short-term needs" (2009: 23). These authors highlight how the Asian Studies Association of Australia had been "expressing alarm at a crisis in Australia's Asian language capability" since the early 2000s, and that "during 2009 alone newspapers (...) reported a string of stories about language problems with the adjective 'crisis' becoming a regular feature of these accounts (*The Australian*, 2009a; 2009b; Taylor, 2009)".<sup>3</sup> Recently, Mason & Hajek (2019: 189) found that, in Australian press coverage of the languages sector from 2007 to 2016, "the most prominent theme, spread across 70% of the coverage, was the crisis of language education in Australian universities". They call openly for a "more nuanced and in-depth public discussion" (p.196).

### 2.3 Languages and crisis since 2010

Lo Bianco (2010: 104) identified six areas where erosion of language policy has been felt in recent years, which has "produced extensive characterisation of the current language scene in Australia as being in 'crisis'" (although he does not go as far as to state with impunity that a crisis actually exists). These six areas include:

1. the scope of what is attempted in language policy
2. the style of language policy making has become more tightly managed, with the voices of non-language education experts prevailing
3. participants involved in language education have been made more selective
4. proficiency expectations are generally lower
5. smaller number of languages supported in public
6. reasons for broad support for language policy have become narrower, with these reasons mainly being tied directly to trade and economic relations

Ferrari & Hajek (2012: 29) talked about a 'projected crisis' in academic employment. While relevant to many places around the world, the data from their article focussed on conditions in Australia.

The continued use of alarming rhetoric was, and continues to be, a characteristic of the disciplinary discourse. In 2011, the then-president of the MLA, Russell A. Berman, wrote a short paper for *Academe*, the journal of the American Association

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<sup>3</sup> Similar comments are echoed by Oxford (2010: 66) when she writes that "rather than acquiescing our pedagogical and professional responsibilities to the most current trend or always operating in a crisis management mode, institutions would gain by anchoring their practices in twenty-first-century literacies, focusing on what our students should know and be able to do".

of University Professors, entitled *The Real Language Crisis*. In it, he reacts to the series of funding cuts which had eliminated, cut back, or threatened a number of language programmes. He makes it clear that "there is a language crisis in the United States, and we should take a close look and be frank about it" (2011: 32). Berman highlights several issues, such as enrolment levels and casualisation of the academic workforce, writing that "we should challenge the argument that language enrollments are too small and that programs therefore need to be cut" (2011: 34). In the same year, Levine (2011) picked up the notion of crisis, both in the title of his article and in addressing the term directly in his paper. Like Berman, he comments on the elimination of programmes and on the MLA report itself, but in a positive way – a question to which we return below. In short, he glosses his use of the term 'crisis', by placing it in inverted commas, noting that "the current 'crisis' in language education can be overcome if we succeed in coming out of our relative isolation" (2011: 136).

Recently, Galina (2016) has been adamant of the existence of a crisis, but is far more optimistic. First, he notes that Ham & Schueller (2012) call out an "identity crisis", referring to a "set of binaries that are commonly understood but rarely discussed" (2016: 2; also Swaffar, 1999 on this point). These binaries manifest themselves in various ways, but no more so than in the traditional 'language' and 'literature' divide that characterises many modern language disciplines. Rather than emphasising a crisis of low enrolment, Galina is aware that modern language departments find themselves in a "perpetual crisis", created more by a "discourse of division" that "plagues the history of teaching and learning in world language departments". The measured tone of his conclusion arises from the observation that "while the future seems less dim (...) than the constant crisis discourse of the humanities would have it, it is in no way guaranteed" (p.13). These comments point to an already emerging self-awareness of the metalanguage used to describe modern language departments by academics themselves.

References to 'crisis' characterise at least the past three decades of disciplinary discourse on foreign language departments. While many of the studies discussed above highlight low levels of language enrolment, some literature touches on aspects of identity, faculty structure, and employment conditions that face modern language departments. Scholars rarely address the 'crisis' directly, and are more inclined to take for granted that one exists. The mood which emerges is a generally depressed one, with semi-apocalyptic terminology adopted, almost from year to year, to talk about the issues and challenges that language disciplines face in the twenty-first century university. Observant readers will note the restrained descriptions provided by a small sample of studies. Rather than slavishly declaring their disciplines to be in crisis, certain authors deliberately refer to a *perception* of crisis, gloss the term itself, or simply note that the literature frames the debate in precisely these terms. There is no doubt that the sector has faced, and is facing, serious obstacles – as are many Humanities subjects in higher education. Nevertheless, this terminology is not just used by 'insiders', those working within the academy. It is also a feature of media reporting and those looking in on

languages from the outside. It is worth briefly considering the ways in which this happens, before turning to the minority who are wondering what all the fuss is about in the first place.

### 3 Outsiders

Commentators outside traditional academic structures are quick to point to what (they believe) are instances of 'crises'.<sup>4</sup> Media reporting refers to a variety of adverse situations facing language departments, from funding, enrolments, and abolition of entire departments - circumstances that are of periodical concern to almost all structures in universities. In these cases, where 'outsiders' survey the state of languages, headlines invariably (and unsurprisingly) adopt inflammatory rhetoric. This is the case, for example, with articles such as Dorell (2013), who reports on the 'A-level languages crisis'; Boffey's 2013 article, whose title reads 'Language teaching crisis as 40% of university departments face closure'; Ratcliff's 2013 article on 'why is UK language teaching in crisis?' and McAleavy's 2014 article, which reads 'A level languages in crisis'. Friedman's 2015 headline in *The Atlantic*, 'America's Lacking Language Skills' is also indicative of the broader tone used to report on languages, although it makes no specific reference to a 'crisis'. The term does appear, however, in *language magazine's* 2015 headline, "Feds Face Foreign Language Crisis". In one sense, these kinds of headlines can be good news for departments, since they point to a real need for skills in foreign languages. In this way, 'crisis' takes on a different dimension, depending on the perspective of whoever uses the term, and contrasts to the 'detrimental rhetoric' coming from the sector itself. All these examples show the kind of language that is regularly employed to describe language teaching and the state of language departments on both sides of the Atlantic and around the world.

It is important for trends and language enrolments to be communicated to the general public. But the tone adopted by these reports often does not represent a realistic picture of how departments are faring. Such analysis must per force be carried out by experts in the field, 'insiders' who can deliver first-hand evidence of the state of languages over the long-term. Although governments and language academics alike produce analyses reporting precisely on such developments, these too are not immune from constant calls of 'crisis' or, indeed, 'permanent crisis' (Martín, 2005).

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<sup>4</sup> The most comprehensive treatment of the language learning crisis in the public media is Lanvers & Coleman's 2013 study on the UK. They examined 90 newspaper articles that contributed to the public debate between 2010 and 2012. The paper showed several ways in which language learning was represented in different newspapers, with different target readerships and different political orientations. But the authors never place the term 'crisis' into doubt. They show how "the vast majority of headlines carry a negative tone, often featuring negatively charged words such as decline, deplorable, dump and slump" (2013: 18). While they find that alarmist terminology is featured throughout the debate across many newspapers, "it would thus be simplistic to take the press coverage as necessarily representing genuine concern for the crisis" (2013: 19).



#### 4 Against crisis.

Voices of optimism are to be found. It is educational to highlight the small but determined group of scholars who explicitly warn against using the term 'crisis' in such an overt manner. Instead of anecdote, they counsel us to look at evidence.

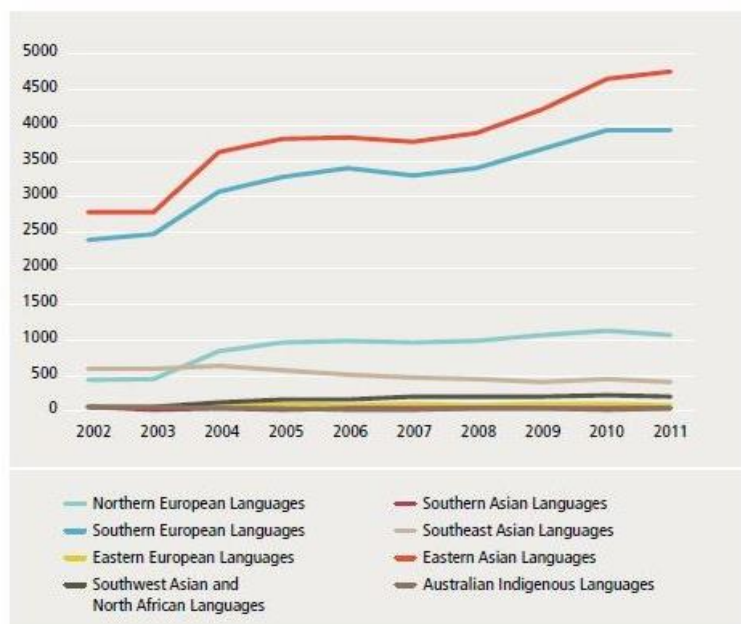
As mentioned above, Levine's summary of the recent cuts to language programmes notes that these steps "have been initiated at a relatively small number of universities overall compared with the number of universities that have maintained or even bolstered language education" (2011: 134). As evidence, he points to the University of California at Berkeley, where "the administration demonstrated its commitment to language learning by proposing capping language classes at 15 [students per class]". Levine maintains that "there is at once reason for hope in the general stability and even some growth in enrollments", and that "the scope and volume of scholarly responses alone [to the MLA report] constitute reason for optimism for university language education in the US" (2011: 136).

As early as 2001, Fisher noted that "it might be precipitate to speak in terms of crisis" (2001: 33). With regard to the Humanities more generally, Barnett's 2015 article entitled *Are the humanities in crisis? In Australia, the sector is thriving* answers its own question. Collini provides very sage advice, noting that "the humanities has been largely reactive and has thus tended to have a defensive or vindictory edge to it in a way not true of most discourse about 'the sciences'" (2012: 63). More importantly for our purposes here, he concludes that "the humanities always seem to be in crisis" (2012: 63). In an article for *Humanities Australia*, Graeme Turner, a professor of cultural studies at the University of Queensland and co-author of the 2014 *Mapping the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences in Australia* report for the Australian Academy of the Humanities, noted that "despite the rhetoric we increasingly hear from the United States and the United Kingdom, the HASS [Humanities, Arts and Social Science] fields in Australia are not accurately described as being 'in crisis'" (2015: 96). In fact, Australia provides the most convincing example to date of languages *not* being in crisis.

In terms of language enrolment, the recent (and substantial) data from the aforementioned report are encouraging. In a one-page 'languages snapshot', professor John Hajek, a former president of the Languages and Cultures Network for Australian Universities, noted that across the sector as a whole there was "a significant increase in university enrolments over the period 2002-11" and that this is "a positive indication of rising student interest in languages, and institutional attempts to address that interest" (2014: 22). As shown elsewhere (see Brown & Caruso, 2016, but also Shin, 2018), this report highlights several features of structural reform which have helped to alleviate impediments to language study. These include bonus points added to highschool leavers' scores for university entry, the introduction of the Diploma of Languages, as well as the specific tagging or naming of degrees, for example, Bachelor of Arts (Languages). This increase in student enrolment is best seen by a graph from the *Mapping the Humanities* report itself:

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Figure 1. Languages Other Than English enrolment, measured by Equivalent Fulltime Study Load at all course levels, 2002-2011. From *Mapping the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences in Australia*, p.20, by G. Turner & K. Brass, 2014, Canberra: Australian Academy of the Humanities. Copyright 2014 by Australian Academy of the Humanities. Reprinted with permission.



As the graph above shows, enrolment levels have been steadily increasing for almost all language groups over the past decade in Australia. The report lists language disciplines according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) ‘fields of education’ classification typology. Table 1 below provides a listing of these fields and example subjects, as listed by the ABS website.

Table 1: Language classifications according to ‘narrow fields’ used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Available at: <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/B0F91F0BFC276D5FCA256AAF001FCAB4?opendocument>

091503 Northern European Languages	Gaelic Danish Dutch German Norwegian Swedish
091505 Southern European Languages	French Greek Italian Latin Portuguese Spanish
091507 Eastern European Languages	Croatian Finnish Hungarian Lithuanian Russian Serbian Ukrainian
091509 Southwest Asian and North African Languages	Arabic Persian Hebrew Kurdish Iranian Turkish
091511 Southern Asian Languages	Bengali Hindi Nepali Punjabi Sinhalese Tamil
091513 Southeast Asian Languages	Indonesian Khmer Lao Malay

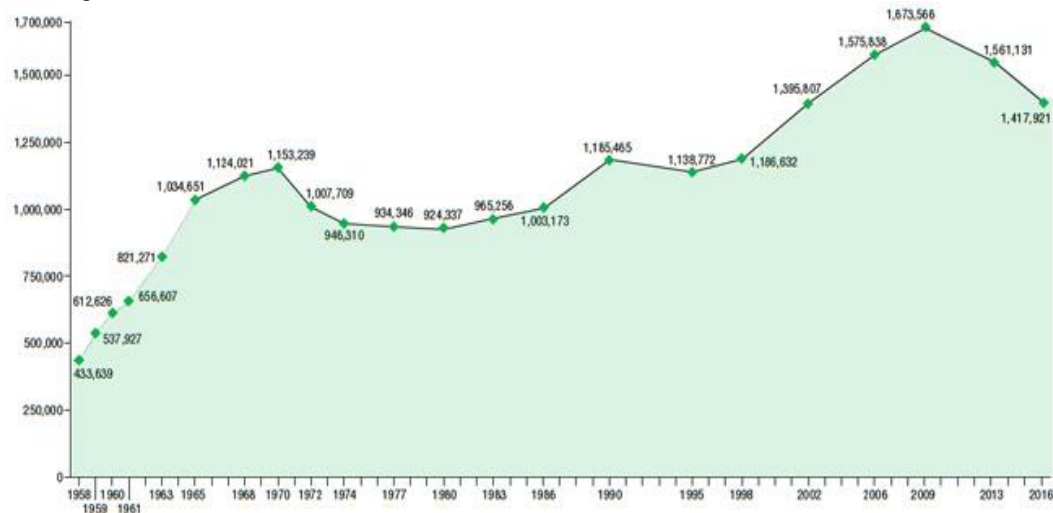
	Thai Vietnamese
091515 Eastern Asian Languages	Cantonese Japanese Korean Mandarin
091517 Australian Indigenous Languages	Anindilyakwa Anmatyerr (Anmatyirra) Arrernte (Aranda) Yindjibarndi Meryam Mir Pitjantjatjara

Although there appears to be a downward trend for Southern and Southeast Asian Languages, the growth particularly in Eastern Asian Languages and Southern European Languages is positive, and seems to contradict the state of languages enrolment as being ‘in crisis’. Turner & Brass (2014: 21) note that it is not just enrolment which has increased and which is a positive sign for the sector, but that there was also “relative stability of widely taught languages”. Nevertheless, they concede that the picture is less favourable for less commonly taught languages, since 50% of the sector’s offerings occur at one university, the Australian National University. The report also highlights that “important structural initiatives have been taken to facilitate language study” (Hajek, 2014: 22) in Australia, mainly by individual universities. Rather than focussing on the vicissitudes of certain language or language groupings, the data show that, in aggregate, there has been an increase in enrolment in languages other than English throughout the sector as a whole from 2002 to 2011.

While not wishing to enter into a comparison of enrolment patterns with other countries, it will be enough to note here that the most recent data from the MLA report finds that enrolment in foreign language programmes in US institutions continued to decline in the similar period reported above. The data produced in Figure 2 below are taken from across more than 2,500 colleges and universities throughout the US, and is the first such survey since the MLA’s last census effort in 2013. The data from this report are provided below:

Figure 2. Total enrolment in languages other than English in US colleges and universities, 1959-2016.

Source: MLA. Available from: <https://monitor.icef.com/2018/03/foreign-language-enrolment-us-trending-downward/>.



From these data, one sees falling enrolments in the period 2009-2011. Comparing the data from Australia contained in Figure 1 with those from the US in Figure 2, it is clear that enrolments in the US were falling from 2009 onwards while this was not the case in Australia. The tendency in Australia is different from that in the US, and ‘crisis’ does not apply to all contexts of foreign language learning. Rhetoric of ‘crisis’ can be self-defeating, and can shield us from those success stories which are worth championing to the languages sector and to the broader parts of the academy, both inside and out.

## 5 Conclusion

In a contribution to a volume entitled *Crises of the Humanities: Challenges and Opportunities*, Barnett (2001: 25) reflects on alarmist terminology more generally: “it is possible to be optimistic, so much so that the language of crisis becomes a hindrance rather than an aid to sensible appraisal and realistic strategy”. Terms of alarm have appeared in a habitual manner throughout the disciplinary discourse on foreign languages since at least the 1940s, and regularly since then. Languages in particular, and the humanities more generally, have constantly been described as being in a state of ‘crisis’ or even ‘permanent crisis’. This language has appeared not only in media and popular articles about the state of languages, but from inside the academy and by the languages sector itself.

One reason for a heightened awareness of ‘crisis’ in all language disciplines, at least in Anglophone countries, is the rise of so-called Global English. The impact of globalisation and the rise of English as a global lingua franca will clearly have different consequences in different countries and contexts. Nevertheless, Pauwels (2014a) has highlighted how the competing forces of globalisation and Global English create a situation in which “only a handful of languages are considered to

be the desired / necessary linguistic capital for a global environment" (2014a: 310). She points to a number of studies (Block & Cameron, 2002; Liddicoat, 2013; Pauwels, 2007) which amply document precisely how these forces are shaping language-learning policies around the world. Although never adopting the term 'crisis', she notes that "the dominance of English and its status as global lingua franca may reduce the need or desire to acquire skills in another language" (Pauwels, 2014a: 310). In another publication of the same year, she notes that in communities where English is the dominant and / or official language, such as those discussed in this article, "the status of English as the main global language is a powerful factor in the continuing struggles to increase LL [language learning]" (Pauwels, 2014b: 45).

What implications might a study of this kind have for the Humanities as a whole? The relationship between language disciplines and the Humanities is a delicate question, and one that has been crucial to the early development of both. It is of vital concern that languages education continues to prosper, but then when was this not the case? As early as 1959, the British scientist and novelist Charles Percy Snow remarked in his work *The Two Cultures* that "it is frustrating to be told that some of the more valuable discussions have been taking place in languages not accessible to most Englishmen, such as Hungarian, Polish and Japanese" (p.54). The central thesis of Snow's work was that intellectual life of the whole of western society is split into two cultures – the sciences and the humanities – and that this split was a major hindrance to solving the world's problems. In his Introduction to the reprint of this work, Collini noted how the passage of time has done much to reduce this divide, but has not removed it entirely. In any case, as English continues to become more and more used as the sole medium for scientific advancement and publication, it seems timely for the Humanities to remind itself of the importance and necessity of drawing on knowledge not only accessible to English-speaking audiences. As the world grows smaller and smaller, access to this knowledge will be in the privileged hands of those who are able to access those languages.

The aim of this article has not been to deny the serious circumstances facing many language departments around the world. There are real financial constraints that many staff and Schools find themselves in. Nor has the aim been to trace the policy interventions of any one report, article or recommendation. Further, we have *not* sought to come to a decision here about whether a crisis actually does exist, however it may be defined. Use of the term 'crisis' may relate to many different aspects, including language policy, or a mismatch between societal, political and economic demands for language skills and actual language learning. In this case, a 'crisis' could persist even if a robust upward trend in enrolment is occurring. Rather, we have tried to highlight how the term 'crisis' is an all too pervasive feature in the disciplinary discourse on foreign languages. Although showing increases in foreign language enrolment over the period 2002-2011, at least in Australia, calls of a 'crisis' still came strongly from across the sector. Matters are not easily solved, and low enrolments, casualisation, as well as funding levels, are issues that every department must deal with. This is indeed a reality. But it is a reality that has been

in existence since the foundation of the disciplines themselves. Although different countries around the world will per force deal with issues of enrolment and structure for their respective contexts in different ways, there is much that can be learned from the successful efforts carried out in places other than one's own. 'Permanent crisis' may indeed be an apt descriptor for the language disciplines, particularly when the current mantra of 'relevance', 'job ready' degrees and 'STEM' (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) is so insistent, and so insidious. One must present a realistic picture of how languages are faring. What is important, though, is that a tempered rhetoric does not fall on deaf ears, and that our successes are communicated openly and with conviction.

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