Students from bush miss out on language learning

University students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and in regional Australia have fewer opportunities to study foreign languages, shows study.

The paper’s lead author, Deakin University’s Research Fellow Dr Tebeje Molla, points out that in a globalised economy, this lack of access may negatively impact on the future opportunities for these students. The paper is based on research led by Associate Professor Andrew Harvey of La Trobe University and Dr Sam Sellar of Manchester Metropolitan University.

Researchers surveyed 21 universities on measures in place to support under-represented students to study a foreign language and to participate in overseas mobility programs. They also gathered data from universities’ strategic plans and the Australian Department of Education and Training, and interviewed 15 students studying foreign languages.

“While it is widely acknowledged that learning a foreign language opens a range of doors for students, it is very clear that these doors are only accessible for some students,” said Dr Molla.

The research team found that 46% of students studying foreign languages were from a high SES background, while just 11.7% were from a low SES background. High SES students make up 32% of all university enrolments, while low SES students make up 17.6%. Each group makes up 25% of Australia’s total population.

While almost 10% of students at prestigious Group of Eight universities studied foreign languages, less than 3% of students at all other university groupings did so. At regional universities, less than 2% of students studied foreign languages.

The researchers found four main causes for the unequal outcome. Firstly, lower SES students had less opportunity to study languages other than English at a school level. While schools with high
parent contributions per student offer as many as four foreign languages, those with lower contributions offer less options, and in many cases none.

Secondly, the lower ATAR results of disadvantaged students means they have lower access to leading providers of foreign language learning. In 2014 for example, students with ATARs below 80 made up about 43% of university enrolments, but only 21% of foreign language enrolments.

Thirdly, disadvantaged students have lower access to overseas study programs during school, as there is limited funding to allow students to go if their families cannot afford to pay.

Fourthly, there are limited foreign language courses available in regional universities. In 2014, while 31% of Australians live in regional or remote areas, only 14.1% of students studying foreign languages were from such a background.

In Victoria in 2015, over 70% of schools that offered no foreign languages were from regional areas. Only 10% of schools offering four languages were from regional areas.

Dr Molla said the results resonate with similar findings across the English-speaking world. He says the results are worrying, given the importance of foreign languages to participating in an increasingly globalised economy, and Australia’s increasing diversity.

In his view, the results are “further evidence of how education systems reproduce advantage and disadvantage in society.” As such, he suggests that foreign language learning for disadvantaged students needs greater support from both policy-makers and education providers. Special support is needed to broaden the availability of foreign language subjects in regional and low SES schools, he said.

Dr Molla believes policy-makers should look beyond the purely economic benefits of language learning.

“There is a need to recognise the non-economic societal benefits of languages other than English. Multilingual competence is critical for social cohesion and productive global engagement,” he said.

"Widening access to foreign language courses is a public responsibility. It is timely and important that universities and schools explicitly address the disparities of enrolments in language studies, which are exacerbating a broader inequity in relation to the educational goal of creating global citizens.”

Sources:
Andrew Harvey, Sam Sellar, Tebeje Molla et al. (2016). Globalization opportunities for low socio-economic status and regional students. Report for the Australian Government Department of Education and Training, Melbourne, Access and Achievement Research Unit, La Trobe University.

Source: MCERA