

Victoria goes off script in Chinese teaching

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Year nine students Louis, Henry, Mietta and Kathryn study Mandarin as a second language at Northcote High School near Melbourne. Picture: Stuart McEvoy *Source: The Australian*

VICTORIA will pioneer a new way of teaching Chinese to children - by focusing on speaking rather than writing - to help halt the collapse of the study of Asian languages in Australian schools.

More students across Australia are learning Latin than Chinese, once students from Chinese backgrounds are discounted.

The Victorian government is not waiting for the federal government's long-overdue white paper on Australia in the Asian Century, which is being drafted by a team led by former Treasury secretary Ken Henry.

It will act itself, with Premier Ted Baillieu expected to announce in Nanjing tonight that the state will direct the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority to investigate how to deliver the new course, which will be designed for students with no background in the study of Chinese, and will include a strong cultural element.

Similar programs are available already through the International Baccalaureate.

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The Victorian government will also send 1500 Year 9 students over five years for an "immersion experience" in schools in its sister province in China, Jiangsu, which Mr Baillieu will visit today as part of his week-long China trip with 650 businesspeople.

And Victoria is planning to provide a double bonus score to students who study the most advanced levels of both Chinese and English for which they are eligible, which would apply to the scores they receive in both languages.

This is aimed in part to level the playing field for students with no background in Chinese, ensuring they learn alongside students of a similar skill level.

To date, a high proportion of those studying Chinese through to Year 12 have come from a Chinese ethnic background. And much of the teaching of Chinese - and the curriculum itself - across Australia has reflected educational priorities within China, where the focus is more on writing than on speaking skills.

A large number of Chinese teachers in Australia also come from China, where this approach dominates and where learning to speak the language is not a priority.

A background briefing paper on the new Victorian approach, provided for businesspeople participating in this week's trade mission, reveals the number of high school students learning a language in the state fell by 24 per cent across the decade to 2010.

Although Victoria has more than half the total Year 12 enrolments in Chinese across Australia, enrolments in Chinese have been slumping by more than half when students move to Year 10.

Northcote High School in Melbourne is one of the exceptions. Assistant principal Nick Murphy said yesterday that 20 students were taking Year 12 Chinese for those from a non-first-language background, while 26 Chinese students were taking the subject aimed at first-language speakers. He said one way students were attracted to learn Chinese was through a sister-school relationship, forged together with Clifton Hill Primary, with a school in Huaibei in Anhui province - where 40 Melbourne students are staying this week.

The briefing paper says: "The incentives for students with some background in Chinese to take on the more challenging levels of study are not great, and growth in students enrolling in advanced level Chinese language courses has been slowest.

"This is partly due to some students choosing subjects that will maximise their tertiary admission score, as well as a perception that students with some background in Chinese language are unfairly advantaged by the current system."