

Have we seen the last head of Australian foreign affairs who speaks Mandarin?

by **Ciara Morris**

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The Australian government wants more students to acquire skills in foreign languages, particularly Mandarin. Yet, Australia's Foreign Relations Act – the law Foreign Affairs Minister Marise Payne relied on [to cancel Victoria's memorandum of understanding with the People's Republic of China \(PRC\)](#) on the Belt and Road Initiative – is about to make that a lot harder.

The act allows the Foreign Affairs Minister to invalidate foreign arrangements on the grounds they are inconsistent with Australia's foreign policy. The minister is given free rein to decide what that is. As well as state governments, the law also applies to universities. It applies retrospectively and there is no appeal or review process.

Universities are currently approaching the end of an expensive and time-consuming six-month long reporting process, during which they had to determine if any of their arrangements with foreign institutions are with bodies that do not have “institutional autonomy” and register them with the Foreign Arrangements Scheme.

Already the fate of the 13 Confucius Institutes, which provide language and cultural education in Australia, [has attracted attention](#), with speculation they could be shut down within months.

Universities Australia estimates over 10,000 university-to-university arrangements could be affected, with PRC-linked relationships in particular danger. That means all student exchange programs, joint degrees, research collaborations, and academic conferences with China, our largest trading partner and rising superpower are hanging in the balance.

Australian Mandarin learners are among those who will suffer if programs are cut or disrupted come mid-year.

I am an Australian Mandarin learner, a Sydney University graduate, and in my final semester of a master's degree from Peking University in Beijing. Language exchanges and in-country study programs are the best way to learn another language and understand another culture, something recognised by Australia's own New Colombo Plan.

The current head of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), Frances Adamson, is a Mandarin speaker [who has praised the work of Confucius Institutes](#) in facilitating Mandarin learning around the country. Will she be the last DFAT secretary to speak Mandarin?

Australia's capacity to both understand the PRC and to pursue our national interests, including our soft power in the region, depends on our ability to read, write, and speak the language of more than 1 billion people in our region.

Despite our multicultural population, Australia has a largely mono-lingual English-speaking workforce. There is an unspoken assumption that Australians in the PRC can use local staff to communicate in Mandarin or default to English. This is foolish.

When it comes to protecting our national security or our economic interests, we are better served by Mandarin-speaking Australians, rather than depending on non-Australians to relay critical information.

Australia has grown rich from our relationship with the PRC, yet it is undoubtedly a complex relationship given our vastly different cultures and political systems. Having China expertise is an asset and should be encouraged.

Studying Mandarin, just as doing business in the PRC, does not make you a spy. An interest in China should not put a target on your back. Australia will be more effective in deterring the risks that engagement with the PRC could pose if more mid-senior public servants were Mandarin speakers who understood the PRC.

Two problems exist. First, according to a recent Lowy report, in 2020, proficient Mandarin or Cantonese-speakers accounted for only 1.2 per cent of Australian Public Service employees in DFAT and 1.7 per cent in Defence. This is utterly embarrassing. Second, although there is significant untapped capacity for Mandarin-speaking Australians with Chinese heritage to serve our national interests in the public service, many struggle to get security clearances.

Our universities and other institutions must be safeguarded against foreign interference. Our sovereignty is not up for debate. But Australian unis were already safeguarding the national interest before the Foreign Relations Act.

Unis are bound to comply with a range of legislative requirements concerning international arrangements. In fact, in 2019, the government established the University Foreign Interference Taskforce with the specific goal of safeguarding against foreign interference in universities.

Over the last three years of declining Australia-China relations Australia's foreign policy and security debate has become more politicised and populist. Universities have been caught in the crossfire. The Foreign Relations Act should be amended at the soonest possibility to remove universities.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison says this law protects Australia's national sovereign interests. China-literate and Mandarin-proficient Australians are also essential to protect our national sovereign interests.

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