

Chapter 5

Australia's Study of Japan in the 1990s and Beyond

5.1 Growth Continues

At the time of the *Tsunami*, many people outside Japanese studies predicted that the growth in the number of Japanese learners in Australia would not continue. They argued this on two grounds: first, the growing interests in other Asian studies will take students away from Japanese studies; and second, the downturn of the Japanese economy would make a negative impact on the interest of potential students. The actual trend, however, ran counter to these predictions.

According to the figures gathered by the Japan Foundation, the Japanese learning population in Australia increased by five hundred percent (500%) between 1990 and 1998. At the end of the century, Australia recorded over three hundred and seven thousand (307,000) people learning Japanese. Further growth has occurred since then and the figure in 2001 was estimated at over four hundred and thirty thousand (430,000)*. This figure meant that approximately one out of forty four (44) Australians was learning Japanese, a staggering ratio by any standard.

* For the sources of this figure, refer to the Endnote 1.

Table 5: Increase in the Number of Japanese Learners in Australia in the 1990s¹⁹

	1990	1993	1998
Tertiary Level	6,387	9,697	9,593
Pre-tertiary Level	55,091	161,185	296,170
Others	545	8,359	1,997
Total	62,023	179,241	307,760

Note: Some of the data presented in Table 4 is repeated here.

As Table 5 shows, the most impressive growth occurred at the pre-tertiary level. In fact, Kakazu reported that in 1998, approximately one hundred

sixty six thousand (166,000) primary school students were learning Japanese, more than the number of the secondary school students, which stood at approximately one hundred thirty three thousand (133,000) (Kakazu 1999:152). This trend continues and the number of total students learning Japanese at pre-tertiary level reached approximately four hundred and twenty thousand (420,000) in 2001 (Erebus Consulting Partners 2002: 102). This revealed a remarkable phenomenon occurring in the demography of Australia's Japanese learning population.

At the university level, on the other hand, the number of students in 1998 recorded at about the same level as the 1993 figure. As we will discuss in the following pages, the number of university students enrolled in Japanese programs actually increased until 1996. Since 1997 onward, however, a significant number of universities saw a downsizing of the Japanese program, due partly to the severe cut back in government funding, which affected a broad range of humanities disciplines.

The seeming decline of the enrolment in university Japanese programs in the late 1990s, however, would not be indicative of the future trend in the Japanese learning population in Australia. In fact, with the remarkable expansion of Japanese programs at the pre-tertiary level, it is inevitable that this growth will have a significant impact on Japanese studies programs at universities in the coming years

In 1996, a major survey was undertaken by the Australia-Japan Research Centre (AJRC) at ANU on the current state of Japanese studies in universities in Australia and New Zealand. The Japan Foundation-funded project was headed by Peter Drysdale of AJRC and resulted in the publication in 1997 of *Directory of Japanese Studies in Australia and New Zealand*.

In the Introduction to the *Directory*, Drysdale reported that between 1990 and 1996 university enrolments in Japanese and Japan-related subjects in Australia increased by one hundred and forty three per cent (143%). Most of the increase occurred between 1990 and 1994, and the growth slowed down to five per cent (5%) between 1994 and 1996.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, Japan has suffered, and is still suffering, a most serious and prolonged economic downturn following the so-called 'bursting of the bubble'. During the same period in Australia, attention was increasingly drawn to other Asian economies which continued to show a remarkable growth until 1997. The strong performance by other Asian countries, to some extent, effected a reduction in the relative importance of Japan as perceived by Australians.

Stockwin speculated that the above factors might have contributed to the slower pace of growth in Japanese studies student numbers in universities in the latter half of the 1990s. Significantly, however, he also observed some changes in students enrolling in Japanese. As less attention was being paid to Japan by the media and other sources, students were no longer choosing to enrol in Japanese studies through 'immediate enthusiasm', but rather through 'sober deliberation'.

... while there was a headlong rush of students into Japan-related courses in the late 1980s, the 1990s have seen a shake-out of the less committed students. (Stockwin 1997:11)

Japanese enrolments in some universities actually declined in the 1990s, while others continued to grow at a steady but slower pace. The overall picture showed a stabilisation in the number of students in Japanese programs in Australian universities as a whole. After the so called 'bursting of the bubble' in the Japanese economy, some quarters of the Australian community, largely outside of Japan academia, predicted a significant reduction in the number of students studying Japanese at universities. This did not occur, although the 1997 set back of the Asian economies seems to have made some impact. Of all language-related disciplines in Australian universities, Japanese studies still has the largest number of students.

Drysdale offered an explanation for the strength of Japanese studies by citing the fact that Japan continued to be the largest element in the East Asian economy. He also argued that limited migration from Japan and a relatively small number of Japan-literate people in the country continued to give students larger rewards from their Japan-related education. The

situation is different, for example, in Chinese studies. In Australia's intercourse with China, Australians of Chinese origin and Australian-educated Chinese play a large role. Most of them are native or near native speakers of Chinese and pose severe competition to Australian graduates of Chinese studies. Japanese studies graduates, in a marked contrast, do not have an equivalent competition with native Japanese speakers in Australia, thus they have greater incentive in gaining Japan skills and literacy as part of their university education.

In fact, the professional and human capital requirements of the relationship that has developed between Japan and Australia ... have encouraged the continuation and elevation of demand for people educated in Japanese studies. (Drysdale 1997:3)

Australian universities on the whole seem to have coped well with the *Tsunami*-like student growth in Japanese studies in the late 1980s. Today, thirty four (34) of the thirty eight (38) Australian universities offer Japan-related courses. During the latter half of the 1990s, particularly after the 1997 Asian economic crisis, some universities saw a decline or plateauing in Japanese enrolments. On the whole, however, a lower but steady growth continued. The latest survey conducted by the team of the Asian Studies Association of Australia shows that Japanese enrolments in Australian universities increased by 2.3 times between 1988 and 2001 (Fitzgerald, J., et. al. 2002). The same study reports that six of the nine Australian universities sampled showed an increase in Japanese enrolments between 2000 and 2001.

During the past decade and a half, enrolments in Asian languages in Australian universities grew faster than the overall increase in university enrolments. Between 1988 and 2001, the overall enrolments in Australian universities grew by approximately 65% and enrolments in major Asian languages, Japanese, Chinese and Indonesian put together, by approximately 190%. Japanese remains the largest in students number (ibid.)