

A language can be a passport to international success



'The limits of my language are the limits of my universe'

Ludwig Wittgenstein, Austrian Philosopher

The Australian Federal Police College in Canberra is home to the Culture and Language Centre (CLC) where participants in the Language Training Program are building their policing skills by learning to understand a foreign language and culture.

Helen Coventry, team leader with the CLC, said the language courses help in the AFP's fight against international terrorism and transnational organised crime, and importantly along the way, the course members prove that extending personal boundaries can have professional and personal rewards.

The Language Training Program was established at the AFP College in March 2005 with funding from the Australian Government's Fighting Terrorism at its Source program and was recently incorporated into the Leadership, Management and Corporate Development Team.

"Initially, full-time training was offered in Mandarin, Thai, Russian, Indonesian, Tagalog and Arabic," Ms Coventry said.

"The program has proved successful with all participants reaching a proficient level in foreign language skills enabling those who

were deployed overseas to use their new language skills immediately.

"Since the program started, demand for language training has continued to grow and by June 2005, more than 450 people in the AFP had expressed an interest in studying a language to assist national and international operations, Ms Coventry said.

The size of this response raised the question about how the AFP could assist members study a language while maintaining current and future work commitments. A strategic approach was applied to enable as many members as possible to undertake language training while ensuring that the workplace was not adversely affected with a number of approaches introduced including:

Graduating from the Australian Defence Force School of Languages in December 2006 were AFP members (back row) Federal Agent Mark Jager, Emma Woodhouse, Federal Agent Robbie Robinson, Federal Agent Carolyn Jolly, Federal Agent Mark McKiernan.

Witnessing the graduation were (back row right) Brigadier (Retd) K. A. Brownrigg and (front) AFP Melbourne Office Deputy Manager Andrea Quinn, AFP Manager Human Resources Alan Scott, Squadron Leader Catherine Smith, Group Captain R Cooper, and Helen Coventry from the AFP's Culture and Language Centre.

Federal Agent Ian Tate graduated at an earlier ceremony.



- full-time training for a year at the Australian Defence Forces (ADF) School of Languages in Laverton, Victoria
- full-time training for up to three months at the AFP College
- part-time training with private language training providers in the states – with some training taking place at AFP state offices
- on-line training for those deployed overseas
- immersion training that requires AFP personnel to study overseas for a short time to learn the language and gain knowledge of the local culture.

"Since its implementation, there have been a number of positive outcomes from the language program. In January 2006, six members began studying at the ADF School of Languages, some of whom were selected to join the AFP's International Network," Ms Coventry said.

"Federal Agents Ian Tate, Mark Jager, Robbie Robinson, Mark McKiernan,

Carolyn Jolly and Emma Woodhouse had an intensive year of study and towards the end of 2006 underwent two weeks of immersion training overseas," she said.

The graduates now have a high level of skill in the languages studied which will be of significant value to the AFP in its increasing involvement with investigations into terrorism and transnational crime, peacekeeping and capacity-building initiatives.

There are another six members studying at the ADF School of Languages this year.

"While the program is demanding, it is expected by its end, participants will be approaching fluency in the languages they are studying.

"More than 50 people have started language training in the full-time program at the AFP College in the past 12 months. The training is delivered by tutors, with most being native speakers of the respective languages, and who incorporate cultural awareness into the training program as well.

Ms Coventry said that it is expected at the conclusion of each program most participants should reach a level of proficiency that allows them to engage in basic conversations with the local populace. Languages offered on this program are Indonesian, Arabic, Mandarin and Thai.

The Overseas Language Immersion Training program began in 2005 and unexpectedly some members have engaged for operational purposes while overseas completing their training.

"Federal Agent Elias Farah, who was studying Arabic in Lebanon, was able to assist in the repatriation of Australians after the outbreak of hostilities in 2006. Another language student, assisted the Jakarta Regional Cooperation Team with their tasks following the air crash on 7 March in Yogyakarta which claimed the lives of two AFP members," she said.

To date, members from the language program have been sent to Lebanon, Thailand, China and Indonesia. Immersion

Language study worthwhile

training is considered to be the most effective way to increase language skills as it incorporates language lessons and cultural activities.

"It is planned to expand this program to incorporate a range of countries in the near future and this will include a 12-month program on Mandarin tuition in China in association with the Ministry of Public Security, Beijing," Ms Coventry said.

Two programs which have been successfully implemented on a small group basis include specific pre-deployment Arabic programs for those being deployed to the Sudan through the International Deployment Group (IDG) and in-house training in Arabic and Indonesian for members of the Adelaide Office conducted by the University of Adelaide.

"Feedback from participants has been positive and the Language Training Program will continue to develop with further training opportunities in Australia and overseas also being explored. Any AFP members who have an interest in studying a language and assisting the AFP's challenges in protecting the Australian community are encouraged to apply," she said.

Further information on the programs can be obtained from Helen Coventry at the Culture and Language Centre, AFP College. Ms Coventry can be contacted on 6270 4323 or by email at: <helen.coventry@afp.gov.au.>

Federal Agent Mark McKiernan has been with the Chiang Mai office in Thailand since mid-February 2007 and putting his language skills to the test after completing the intensive language program.

"I specifically entered the language program to prepare for a posting to Chiang Mai. The course lasted 46 weeks with classes held up to eight hours per day and expectations were high, as we had to complete three hours of study and external work per night. It was a long haul but worth it in the end.

Participants were also expected to complete in-country training and for one week we lived with a family in Bangkok who were reasonably wealthy. We then spent a week in Kanchanaburi Province with a poor family which provided a striking contrast. This was an exhausting period as the family members did not speak any English and you had to concentrate 100 per cent of the time to understand what was being said. During this time we attended tutorial sessions at the university, completed research assignments in Thai, and interviewed strangers in Thai.

I am lucky that the majority of official areas I liaise with speak mainstream Thai although in Chiang Mai there are a number of dialects making communication confusing at times.

I generally get by with my language, but I am still a little slow in my speech and comprehension. In my workplace, a Japanese police officer for the Japan



Federal Agent Mark McKiernan

Consulate does not speak English, so we communicate in Thai and provide much entertainment for the locals.

The reading and writing component of the course proved very useful and some of the Thai people I have liaised with are impressed that I can make sense of Thai script. It is rare for a non-Thai to be able to read or write this language which dates back to 1283.

So far, I have found that having language skills is critical to my work and personal life and simple trips to the local shops or purchasing petrol, for example, require competency to successfully complete the tasks. Even travelling beyond the main tourist area of Chiang Mai has proven challenging as English is uncommon and I'd like to think, as yet, I have not offended anyone by using inappropriate language when asking for directions.

Since arriving in Chiang Mai, I am confident that I have become reasonably fluent in the Thai language and while my vocabulary could do with some improving, time will take care of that – practice and patience. It was worthwhile completing the language-training course and, even though it was difficult at times, I have found it professionally and personally rewarding.