

The Changing Fortunes of the German Department, 1954–2003

MICHAEL NELSON*

The recent history of German at the University of Sydney parallels the fortunes of the Faculty of Arts in the second half of the twentieth century. When I started my studies in 1954 the Department of German had a full-time staff of four. In the heady days of university expansion following the Murray Report it had as many as twelve. In 2003 the Department has four full-time staff.¹ Furthermore, German has been abolished as an independent department and amalgamated into the impressive-sounding School of Modern European, Asian and Middle Eastern Languages and Studies. The staff has been ‘decanted’ from the Brennan Building—purpose-built in 1966–67 to house language departments and provide language laboratories, and named after a former professor of German. The German lecturers are now temporarily housed in the south-eastern corner of the Institute Building in City Road. Release from this quite comfortable imprisonment (the windows are barred because of security concerns in the area) will come at some time in 2004 when the Brennan and MacCallum Buildings are refurbished. An important aspect of the refurbishment as originally proposed was that the new offices will have glass doors (or possibly, as in the new Economics and Business Building, glass walls). The purpose of this transparency has been the subject of some speculation, but the staff is promised more luxurious furniture than the 1967 chairs and desks which I watched being loaded into a dump truck earlier this year.

When I look back to the mid-fifties I am struck by the austerity of the Faculty and the Department of German. In 1954 Sydney

* *Dr Michael Nelson recently retired as a Senior Lecturer in Germanic Studies and is presently an Honorary Associate in the Department.*

University had the lowest enrolment of any post-war year; the ex-servicemen were almost all gone and the baby boomers were still at school. The Department's professor and senior lecturer were Australians who had taken their doctorates in Nazi Germany. They both dismissed the Nazis as a gang of thugs who had perverted a noble nation. Because of the disruption to German literature and to the German publishing industry, suitable texts were difficult to obtain in the years after the war. The Department's part-time secretaries laboriously typed texts onto wax stencils, which were then duplicated by the university and sold at the Union. It is hard to picture these difficulties in the era of cheap photocopiers, word-processors and colour printers. Similarly, the university administration relied mainly on hand-written or typed records, and statistics were added up by hand—I doubt that the university possessed any electric calculators. Sometime in the late 1950s the university acquired its first computer but it would be another twenty years before examination results were no longer hand-written on cards. At this time most of the humanities departments were in the original neo-Gothic sandstone building in the Quadrangle, dating from the 1850s. The founders of the university hoped to create an Oxford atmosphere for the colonial students. It was now badly in need of repair (later the ceiling of the Modern Languages II Room collapsed, and it turned out that the southern staircase was riddled with termites and dry rot).

After the Soviet successes in space, beginning with Sputnik in 1957, educationists managed to persuade Western governments to increase spending on colleges and universities, and to take an interest in foreign language teaching. The Murray Report unleashed a torrent of money; new universities and colleges were set up, building programs started, staff were recruited from overseas, libraries expanded, course offerings increased, full-time doctoral programs introduced to provide future academics. The Department of German benefited from this largesse and like other departments offered permanent tenured lectureships to young people from Australia, Germany and the United Kingdom. It moved into the new Brennan Building (named after the Germanist and poet

Christopher Brennan) and occupied the entire top floor for thirty years. At the same time as the move, the first clouds appeared on the horizon. The Wyndham Scheme for high schools—whether this was intended or not—undermined the teaching of modern languages in high schools. Communicative methods of language teaching were introduced. For all their obvious virtues, these methods downplay reading and writing skills, on which the study of literature depends. University modern language departments developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and were modeled on departments of Latin and Classical Greek. Hence important activities were the translation of prose passages and ‘unseens’, ‘free compositions’, dictations and the study of literary texts—poetry, drama and fiction. Cultural studies—social customs, political history and the non-literary arts such as painting and music—played some part, but as the course progressed the study of literature and literary history became central. Honours students were expected to read challenging works in the original language, just as Latin students read Cicero or Virgil and Greek students read Homer or Plato.

While there are still enthusiastic students who love literature and want access to the authentic original texts, the trend in both classical and modern language departments is towards cultural studies, with literature handed over to English departments or perhaps to a Department of Comparative Literature, where all works are read in translation. Contemporary students, brought up on television, video and computer games, usually do not have the long attention span of their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ancestors, who were hardened by the boredom of Sunday sermons and the long grey columns of newspapers without illustrations. We live in a more visual and less literary age. Thus the trend since the 1970s has been to move away from literature towards ‘studies’ of the country’s culture using newspaper and magazine articles, videos recorded from the country’s television channels, films in the foreign language (preferably without subtitles) and even pop songs as ‘texts for analysis’. Translation in either direction has been largely abandoned as a teaching method (modern German

elementary textbooks cannot entirely abandon it, but use euphemisms such as 'express in German' or disguise translation as an answer to a question in German). Language departments continue to use conversation groups; these are surprisingly unpopular with most students, even though students claim their main purpose is to learn the spoken language. An amusing and devastating account of German conversation groups occurs in Martin Walser's novel *Brandungen*, set in a Californian college. Walser's students attended only intermittently and most remained silent. The basic problem is that intelligent, interesting and colloquial conversation is one of the most difficult language skills to master. Tape recorders, and later language laboratories, were seen in the '50s and '60s as the royal road to language learning. One would listen to the tapes, record one's own voice, correct one's mistakes and quickly become fluent in the language. The results were disappointing and most Australian language laboratories have disappeared. Nevertheless, Sydney University has one of the best and most successful language centres in Australia. Here the emphasis has moved from listening to tapes to providing a multi-media centre. The centre has excellent audio-visual facilities for language classes at the university, video and computer language courses available to the general public and the ability to relay foreign TV broadcasts. Budget cuts may affect its future.

The German Department of the 1950s and 1960s had a sequence of year-long courses—Elementary German, German I, German II, German III and German IV. All the courses combined language-learning with the reading of 'prescribed texts'. If one completed the Honours degree one had at least theoretically covered all the periods of German literature from the earliest documents in Old High German to modern writers like Bertolt Brecht. This structure began to split up with the introduction of optional term (later semester) units which introduced some student choice in the texts to be read. Over the years students have more and more rejected the older periods of German literature, and later, where other choices were available, literary options in general. Faculty policy is that semester units with a small enrolment² should be

cancelled, and this reinforces the trend.

The complete semesterisation of all courses³ means that a student does not have to take a literary or cultural unit with a German language-learning unit, unless the student is taking a German major. For many years the BA did not officially have majors, but it was understood that a I–III sequence in a subject constituted a major. Now that second and third year courses have been replaced by semesterised ‘senior units’, the BA requires one subject major (32 senior credit points, the equivalent of four semesters). The intention was to guarantee specialisation in at least one of the disciplines offered in the Faculty. The German major requires something resembling the old German II and III with a mixture of language learning, literature and other German-language based studies. However, there are interdisciplinary majors which do not require specialisation. For instance, the Faculty offers a major in European Studies which offers a choice of 144 ‘cross-listed’ units from eleven different subject areas (there are at present no units in ‘European Studies’ itself; students are supposed to complete two semesters of a first year advanced European language or equivalent,⁴ but need not take any further units requiring foreign language skills).⁵ Similar interdisciplinary majors with a high proportion of cross-listed units include Australian Studies, Asian Studies, Semiotics, Film Studies, Heritage Studies and Gender Studies. Cross-listing means that two or sometimes more units can be counted to a major in another discipline. At present the German Department does not cross-list any unit outside the Department’s offerings because units from other departments have no German language content.

One can expect that all the language departments, as their staff is reduced through retirement and voluntary or forced redundancy, will be forced to concentrate on language teaching and to allow units from other departments considered relevant to the area studied to be cross-listed. Thus I would foresee half the German major being made up of units such as HSTY 2026 ‘Fascism’ and PHIL 2210 ‘Introduction to German Philosophy (ii)’. This development has already taken place in Italian where it is possible to count

several units with no language requirements towards the major in Italian Studies.⁶

Clearly the content of the BA has had to change to reflect the different demands of the era. In my own student years, German students were a mixture of older people who had migrated from Europe and Australians from selective high schools and some private schools which happened to teach German. Teacher education scholarships and Commonwealth scholarships widened the range of socio-economic backgrounds of the students in the course of the 1950s and 1960s. I look back with considerable nostalgia at the years of the student rebellion (approximately 1968–1975) although at the time one may have resented its challenge to the authority of the teaching staff. It was a period in which students and staff of the Faculty felt that intellectual issues, including literary issues really mattered and debated them passionately. No one worried about jobs—there would always be something later on, and the most rebellious students of this time seem to have in fact ended up in comfortable academic or public service posts. The era ended with the dismissal of the Whitlam government, characterised by its numerous reforms and its positive attitude to universities. The long post-war boom ended with the various Middle Eastern oil shocks and ‘recoveries’, which were always promised and ‘cuts’, which replaced them. The Australian government was now perpetually short of money (or claimed to be) and taxpayers had become disillusioned with expensive universities and troublesome students. There were new causes and worries: feminism, HIV, sexism, racism were serious issues. A new Puritanism has replaced the frivolity of the age of the miniskirt, Beatles and beehive coiffures.

The European language departments have benefited from the increase in European travel by Australians since the 1960s. Before mass air travel a European trip would be undertaken after graduation; now our students have often had an exchange school stay, and it is normal for undergraduates to visit Germany or Austria in our two long vacations (frequently they ask to take their examinations earlier than the stay-at-homes and arrive a

week or longer after classes start). A student who has visited or gone on exchange to Germany does not immediately see Germany as the land of Goethe, the Grimm brothers, Bach, Beethoven, Bismarck, Thomas Mann, Hitler, Adenauer, Böll, Grass and Süßkind. He or she sees it in relation to the personal experiences and friendships of their own visit and often the main motive for choosing German is the feeling that study will continue these in some way. Even for those not able to travel, the German-speaking world is much closer than it was even in the 1980s. One can follow German news as it happens on satellite TV and radio, and all German sites are instantly accessible on the Internet. The days in which we read three-month-old German newspapers and magazines are gone.

The University of Sydney is no longer the leisurely institution of former affluent times. The environment has changed and the university now competes with other tertiary institutions for the potential student's Universities Admission Centre application, the donor's dollar and the Research Council's grant. Public relations and image have a high priority in the thinking of the Senior Executive Group.⁷ Traditional subjects, if they do not appeal to students or if not enough students register for them, must be revised or replaced. New degrees are invented to obtain a higher cut-off point than the 'straight' Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science. The best students are lured by scholarships (offered in a personal letter⁸ from the Vice-Chancellor; Sydney University has to match the offers made by other universities). Glossy brochures are distributed and exciting stories about the University's work fed to the media. On a day which was started as an occasion for serious academic advice to potential students, the University becomes a kind of Luna Park with helium balloons and sideshows.

Providing education at tertiary level in the humanities, social sciences, economics and law is not necessarily an enormously expensive undertaking, as the various non-university institutions delivering similar services show. What runs up the costs of a university, and particularly of Sydney University, is its elaborate superstructure and infrastructure, and the expenses imposed on

it because it is accountable to the Federal Government through the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) and to the NSW State Government. The superstructure includes the Senate, the highly paid Senior Executive Group headed by the Vice-Chancellor, academics relieved of most teaching duties such as Deans and Heads of School, a complicated web of administrators and accountants at various levels, security staff, tradesmen, cleaners, technical officers and attendants. The tenured academic staff consists of an elaborate hierarchy which defends its traditional privileges vigorously, though its prestige has declined (this is reflected in the dealings of administrative staff with academic staff). There is a vast infrastructure on the various campuses of buildings, roads, sports grounds, gardens, glasshouses and even farms. There is an expensive program of new buildings and of refurbishment of existing buildings. The University runs a large fleet of vehicles, ranging from university-owned cars for the top staff with reserved parking to pushbikes for the security staff and sit-on lawn mowers. In recent years additional costs have been added by the demands of the Commonwealth as the main funding body, plus legislation relating to freedom of information, health and safety, risk management insurance, anti-discrimination, harassment and equal opportunity. Since the 1980s the whole University has been equipped with several generations of computers and elaborate cable connections installed. This monster organisation quickly eats up its Commonwealth operating grant and is hungry for more, through fee-paying students, commission from research grants, hiring of rooms, donations⁹ and, most recently, daily parking fees and parking fines. No wonder, then, that there has been pressure to downsize the permanent academic staff (the major expense of universities is the salaries of its staff), to amalgamate departments, to eliminate subjects or units with small enrolments and to maximise the use of casual teachers or lecturers on short-term contracts.

In spite of this more hostile environment the German program still attracts undergraduates (but unfortunately not the more profitable postgraduates and fee-paying foreign students). The

2000 and 2001 figures were approximately: First year, beginners 80, intermediate 25, advanced 40; senior years, intermediate (the follow-on course for beginners) 35, advanced II and III 60; fourth year (2002 figure) 2.¹⁰

We often had over 100 beginners in the first week of the academic year. Many withdrew when they realised the full horror of a language with three genders, four cases, seven forms of the definite article, a complex system of adjective endings, at least seven ways of forming plural nouns, about 170 strong and irregular verbs and a habit of putting a string of verbs at the end of dependent clauses. It is hard to compete for foreign languages within the Faculty when 'studies' subjects offer an easier progression to the degree. Foreign languages also compete with each other for the limited number of students with an interest in (and talent for) learning languages: the Faculty offers Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Modern and Classical Greek, Classical and Modern Hebrew, Hindi-Urdu, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Latin, Russian, Spanish, Thai and Yiddish. In order to publicise its wealth of languages and to compete with the University of Technology's International Studies degree, the University introduced a 'Bachelor of Arts (Languages)' with a small intake and therefore a high Universities Admission Index (UAI) cut-off. The attraction is that the University subsidises a semester overseas in the four-year course. Curiously, in spite of the plural 'Languages' in the title, only one language major is required.¹¹

The language departments follow suit in the merchandising game. The image of the country whose language is studied is presented to potential students in talks and handouts as attractively as possible. Spain, Italy and France are easier to sell to students than Germany, and one does not need to spend money on market research to find out why this is so. The majority of our students already have some connection with Germany, Switzerland and Austria—sometimes through ancestry or a European visit, often through an interest in music or German history, only rarely in German literature or art.

The image of Germany has changed considerably since I first

took German at school. In 1950 Germany and Austria were still occupied countries and one thought not of the new democratic governments but of ruins, poverty, refugee camps and black-marketeers like Harry Lime in the film *The Third Man*. The Cold War, starting with the Berlin Blockade and airlift of 1948–89, was the beginning of Germany's rehabilitation and rise to prosperity. Two new states were set up, the Soviet Union stopped stripping their zone's industrial assets and the 'economic miracle' in the western zones emptied the refugee camps—and made the study of German in Australia reputable again. Australian Professors of German—at one time there were three in Sydney alone—received medals from the German and Austrian governments in recognition of their contributions to international understanding. Memories of an aggressive Greater Germany and the Axis allies faded as Volkswagens, Mercedes, Toyotas and Datsuns replaced Austins and Renaults. Post-war German-language writers 'came to terms with the past', providing new texts for our students, in the simpler language which replaced the complex, flowery German of the past. There was a literary revival also in the German Democratic Republic, once the 'haemorrhage' of refugees to the West had been stopped in 1961 by the Berlin Wall. Brecht was discovered by German departments throughout the world—his wit, irreverence and theatrical inventiveness delighted students. Simultaneously, he was discovered and appropriated by Departments of English and Theatre Studies, so that German cannot claim a monopoly.

As the Cold War faded away after the end of the war in Vietnam, the two postwar Germany states came to an agreement to live together. The interesting confrontation of the 'neo-fascist capitalist state' (in the West) and the 'Stalinist dictatorship' (in the East) was replaced by concentration on making money, with the German Democratic Republic essentially propped up by Western subsidies. It was therefore a surprise to the rulers of both sides when people power put an abrupt end to this arrangement and the 'Ossis' ('Easties') broke through the Wall. Beethoven's choral setting of Schiller's *Lied an die Freude (Ode to Joy)* was performed repeatedly. In fact there has not been a great deal of economic joy.

Reunification revealed the decrepit state of East Germany, and the collapse of Communism made the West responsible for a further series of collapsing economies from the Oder River to the Pacific Rim.

One would like to say that united Germany presents a positive and interesting image which would encourage new students to study its language, literature and culture. The German government, through the Goethe Institute (which has a branch in Sydney) and through its direct support of our Department, promotes the study of the German-speaking countries as well as offering scholarships (support and scholarships have also come from Austria and Switzerland). I think the problem is that since unification Germany has become just another boring, Americanised industrial country with cities indistinguishable from each other and from other western cities (pedestrian plazas, traffic problems, night life, gay pride parades, women's refuges, shopping malls, historic houses, film festivals, antique shops, cultural centres, new subways, ethnic ghettos with interesting restaurants, lists of famous people born in the city concerned). The same is true of the literature, films, music and visual arts produced in present day German-speaking countries which hardly differ from those of other Western countries. There is nothing really wrong with this trend towards a homogeneous Western culture but if one is trying to sell courses in German one would like to be able to offer a unique product rather than one where the label 'Made in Germany' is in very small print.

Some people have thought that Germany might become so dominant in the European Union that German would be the main language of the Union. There is no indication so far that this will happen, though the accession of Eastern European countries with historical associations with the former German and Austrian empires might change the situation. At present English is dominant—the language of the most insular of EU nations. The German language itself has been infiltrated by Anglicisms and Americanisms.

The Department, at least for 2003, has continued with a substantial literary content in its senior units, rather than adopting

the 'German cultural studies' approach which appears in the program of other universities. The literary offerings reflect the interests of the (now reduced) staff and the reluctance of most students to read older writers or longer texts. Greater demands are made on the dwindling number of honours and postgraduate students who are expected to be able to read long novels in the original German.¹² In the selection of texts for the units which offer a general survey of literature, attention is paid to Austrian and Swiss writers, as well to women writers. A recent innovation is an optional semester unit in Business German. The Department does not yet offer on-line courses in spite of the strong pressure from the University administration to do so (this is one area where money flows freely). Experience both with tapes and computer packages is that the live instructor cannot be dispensed with completely, however inconvenient this may be for university accountants and students with substantial part-time employment. It is also significant that, while there are many outside alternatives to the study of European languages at beginners' and intermediate level (such as those offered by the Goethe Institute and the packages of Open Learning), the Sydney (and other university) departments are unique in providing advanced and honours-level study.

I have had a most satisfying career at the University of Sydney in what was, until the last few years, probably an ideal occupation. The members of the Department on the whole worked together harmoniously. Certainly they enjoyed teaching their students and pursuing their research without much interference from above. What has changed in recent years is that, under pressure from government sources, the senior administration is making demands for efficiency and productivity which are inappropriate in a university context, because these demands derive from industrial and commercial models. Obviously the University of Sydney, like any large organisation, has to be run in a business-like way and has characteristics of a service industry, but it must not be forgotten that it is primarily an academic community and that most academics are motivated in their work by a love of their subject and dedication to their students.

Notes

- 1 The current Head of School is nominally Professor of German but his participation in the teaching program is understandably limited.
- 2 There is some uncertainty about the exact figure—I understand it is 15 for regular classes (in 2002 Honours Entry classes were exempt) and 12 for fee-paying Summer School classes.
- 3 In the nomenclature prescribed by the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST), the word ‘course’ now means a ‘course of studies’ leading to a degree or diploma; a unit is ‘a unit of study’ as a component in such a ‘course’; the value of the unit to the degree is expressed in ‘credit points’. In 2003 Sydney University also replaced ‘semester’ with ‘session’ in order to give the Summer and Winter Schools equal status with the two semesters (*Arts Handbook*, 2003 edition, p.203).
- 4 ‘Advanced’ refers to first-year courses with assumed knowledge equivalent to the Higher School Certificate examination in the relevant language.
- 5 *Arts Handbook*, 2003 edition, p.19. Curiously, German, French, Italian and Modern Greek senior language-teaching units are excluded from cross-listing of the European Studies major.
- 6 Most language departments over the last years have appended ‘Studies’ to their titles and, as in the case of Italian, this might justify the cross-listing of related units. The German major is officially in ‘Germanic Studies’, deriving from a period of flirtation with the teaching of Dutch and Swedish in the 1970s.
- 7 Reflecting the shift away from the collegial system of university government to a managerial system favoured by the Federal Government, the Senior Executive Group comprises the Vice-Chancellor and his team of administrators including heads of the three academic colleges.
- 8 During the January enrolment session a new student showed me such a letter which included an invitation to contact the Vice-Chancellor himself, and she insisted on phoning from the enrolment centre for an appointment. I understand that there is now a special function, attended by the Vice-Chancellor, for these potentially top quality students. The introduction in 2004 of a degree called ‘Bachelor of Arts (Advanced)’ is likewise a device to attract the top school students.
- 9 A number of full-time employees devote themselves to looking for and after donors. An ingenious source of income is renting out the Quadrangle to wedding parties so that they can be photographed with the neo-Gothic buildings in the background (\$220, cash only accepted). On some Saturday afternoons as many as four bridal parties can be seen jostling for the best position.
- 10 These are average figures based on my recommendations to the Co-

operative Bookshop for textbook orders (the enrolment at the beginning of the year is higher and at the end lower). The half Fourth Year took joint honours with another department. The 2003 Session 1 preliminary enrolment figures are much the same. Unfortunately the nomenclature of language levels differs from department to department.

- 11 Faculty Resolution 37(b). A second major is required but this can be in any area including those offered by Science and Economics.
- 12 Students wishing to proceed to the Honours (Fourth) Year in 2004, in addition to the major, would probably take two of the following advanced semester units offered in 2003: Drama of the Nineteenth Century (three plays); Contemporary German Fiction (three stories, two by women writers); Literature of the Turn of the Century (two plays, one novella); Novels by Max Frisch (two novels and a novella); Medieval German: Language and Literature (selections from medieval poetry and romances).