We are kicking Asia around

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HE World Cup might be over but the Socceroos showed how we star on the international sports stage. Our sporting success seems disproportionate to our small population. Maybe that’s what makes us so complacent about the rest of the world. Global engagement might start on the soccer field, but that’s not where it ends.

For Australia it means just one thing: Asia.

At the heart of Australia’s resources boom is increased exports to Asia, highlighted by the profits recorded by our resource companies.

In last half of 2005, BHP Billiton recorded a huge $5.9 billion after-tax profit. A significant driver was increased prices and volume sold to Asia.

Most Australians would be astonished to know we now have two-way trade with Asia of more than $100 billion, but only $40.3 billion with the US and $20.3 billion with Britain. Asia is banking our high living standards. But how long can this continue?

Our place in Asia is far from secure. The Socceroos will try to qualify for the Asia Cup over the next few months, but are we doing much else to engage with our neighbours?

Take China. Within the next 15 years it will become the world’s largest economy.

More than 107,000 Australians live in costly Britain, but only 6000 live in low-tax Hong Kong, which is the major access point for mainland China. Our connections with most Asian countries are superficial.

What will happen when the developing economies of China, Indonesia, Malaysia and India suddenly don’t need our resources, or start competing with us in high-end manufacturing or services?

We are unprepared.

We have shrunk our Asian studies departments and are not producing Asia-literate entrepreneurs, professionals, academics or government officials.

The problem has reached catastrophic proportions.

Research shows only 2.9 per cent of tertiary students have studied Asia-related subjects.

Our high schools have the lowest second-language skills in the OECD and these low-level skills are deteriorating.

Language studies have collapsed from 40 per cent of year 12 students studying a second language in the 1960s, to fewer than 15 per cent today.

In 2001, there were only 400 “Asia specialists” in Australia. This was down from an estimated 620 in 1992 and the figures are heading south fast.

His brain-drain should be seen as a scandal but it didn’t rate even a mention in the federal Budget.

This has to change.

Australia needs Asia strategically and commercially. We need to visit Asia more. We need to learn Asian languages. And our children need to be sent to Asia for extended periods of time.

This point was made clearly by expatriate Australian James Wolfensohn, the former head of the World Bank.

“Too many of my friends in Australia, and their kids, still think in terms of a European or American connection,” said Wolfensohn on the ABC. “The reality is that it is the developing world, and in particular Asia, that will have a hugely more significant impact on Australia and Australia needs to understand it and adapt.”

We need Australian lawyers to think their next major career move could be to Tokyo, while our artists might aim for an exhibition in Singapore.

A good start would be better funding for research about Asia but, sadly, doing the hard yards to learn about another culture and language is not the romantic image desired by corporations producing glossy corporate brochures.

As academics, we have seen the corporate and philanthropic malaise about Asia.

Looking for money for Asia-related research in the philanthropic sector is a bruising and fruitless exercise.

The Socceroos got somewhere because corporations and governments from across Australia got together.

Asian studies desperately needs a Bill Gates or Warren Buffett, but Socceroos backer Frank Lowy would do fine.

We love watching the Socceroos, but they won’t keep Australia prosperous and safe.

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