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All Greek to them: classics back in vogue as schools embrace languishing languages

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IT'S the beginning of the end for 72,391 students who begin their HSC exams today, with a portion of them putting pen to paper this morning in the first two exams of the four-week examination period.

Business studies and classical Greek are followed by 32 more tests this week, including English, society and culture and Latin continuers.

Latin and classical Greek students made some final preparations yesterday by watching the classical play *Mostellaria* performed in Latin and staged by the University of Sydney's Department of Classics and Ancient History.

The classics are enjoying a revival in NSW high schools and universities, reflecting a similar trend in England where Boris Johnson's Latin in London scheme is one of several initiatives to bring classical languages into more lives.

Mostellaria attracted such a large crowd that it was forced to stage a second performance yesterday afternoon.

In schools, the classics are steadily increasing their enrolment numbers.

This year, Gosford High School and St Catherine's of Waverley joined the 43 schools teaching classical languages, resulting in 342 enrolments from a typically small number that do languages.

Chinese background speakers is the most popular language with 963 enrolments and Dutch is the least popular with two.

"There's enough of a population here and enough of a history, and having survived the trends of the '70s and '80s ... we still have it," said Tom Alegounarias, the president of the NSW Board of Studies.

"It was out of fashion but we stuck to it so people are confident with it and know it works."

Classical Greek, classical Hebrew and Latin are considered difficult and scale well, with more than half of students achieving a mark of 90 or more. They are typically taken by high-achieving students and, as the number and standard of selective schools in NSW has grown, so has demand.

"But the students also see a lot of intrinsic worth," said Elizabeth Jones, a member of the Classical Association of NSW and part of a group of teachers campaigning to have classical languages included in the national curriculum.

"In some ways there is so much emphasis on the here and now that there is interest in learning something that isn't 'modern suburban Sydney' but has a timeless quality. They're reading some of the greatest things ever written," she said.

Owen Forbes, 18, from Baulkham Hills High School, said Latin has been "his favourite class ... all through high school".

"Because there isn't an oral element to the exams, there is a lot of breadth and depth to the syllabus. You have room to look at the context and the history of the Roman Empire and the texts they wrote," he said. "It personalises the ancient world."

His teacher, Helen Pigram, said Latin is now the most popular language at the school, which is considering offering classical Greek as well. "Why it has exploded the way it has, I don't know," she said. "They just fall in love with it."

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This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/education/all-greek-to-them-classics-back-in-vogue-as-schools-embrace-languishing-languages-20111016-1lrfe.html>