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By: Tim Williams

The one-in-13,500 pupil keeping a language alive

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IN THE study of Latin, Henry Millar can be considered a true wolf. As experts debate the Federal Government’s decision to invest in “dead” languages, he is the only Year 12 student in the state wrestling with translations of ancient Rome’s great historical and poetic works.

The 15-year-old St Ignatius College student, who is among 1,500 Year 12s in the state this year, said he chose Latin because it was the origin of many scientific and other English words, and because the Roman Empire was “the basis of Western culture.”

“I’m a scientifically minded person and I enjoy learning where words come from,” he said.

The Federal Government has angered some modern language advocates by allocating $1.5 million to develop national curricula for Latin and classical Greek, as well as Hindi, Turkish and the sign language Auslan.

Modern Language Teachers’ Association of SA president Joe van Dalen said the funding was a waste as Latin had limited appeal for students and there were few qualified teachers.

“It’s going back to the 1950s or 60s. This is part of an educational agenda of turning the clock back a long way,” he said, adding the money would be better spent promoting modern languages that were suffering declining student numbers.

Adelaide University Honorary Professor Dr Jacqueline Clarke, who teaches a single-semester Latin course that attracted 60 students this year, said studying the ancient language was “a really good way of learning English grammar”.

“It introduces students to basic grammatical concepts that unfortunately they tend to miss out on in schools. Students often tell me they are learning as much about English as Latin,” she said.

“It’s a very good language to improve analytical skills and skills in comprehension.”

Some of his students are intrigued by Latin because of its use in the Harry Potter books; some are law students wanting to understand the Latin terms used in the profession. Others have postgraduate ambitions in classics and want to be able to read original sources.

No state schools offer Latin and the Association of Independent Schools of SA was not aware of any in its sector.

But the dead language is alive and well at St Ignatius College, where all Year 7s at the Catholic school take Latin for a term as part of cultural studies, and almost 30 students are continuing in Years 8 to 10.

A state Education Department spokesman said there were no plans to introduce Latin in public schools because the “focus is on studies in languages currently in use”.

Tell us: Should the Government be investing in old languages?
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ORIGINAL: Henry Millar from St Ignatius College is the state’s only Year 12 student studying Latin. Picture: SAM WUNDKE.