AIATSIS' response to questions from the Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

Introduction

The AIATSIS response to comments received by the Senate Committee concerning access to language materials in the Institute's collections has two basic elements – legal and resource constraints. These both serve to limit the Institute's capacity to respond promptly and comprehensively to community and research requests. They are outlined in detail below to put these comments made to the Committee in a broader context.

Equally so, AIATSIS wants to practically address these concerns wherever possible. At the end of this response, there are some proposed strategies and initiatives that could effectively address many of these concerns.

1. **A couple of Indigenous groups have expressed concern that there is too much 'red tape' that communities need to negotiate to access language materials stored at AIATSIS. Could you please provide us with a brief summary of the institute's protocols around access and intellectual property?**

   - The AIATSIS Library and the Audiovisual Archive (AVA) provide access to materials in its collection in accordance with:
     a. The Copyright Act 1968 (mainly S48-S53) ;
     b. The AIATSIS Act 1989 (section 41(1) which requires individual access and use agreements with owners or their delegates as specified in deposit agreements and section 41(2) which recognises the possible existence of sensitive material in the collection other than that covered by section 41(1);
     c. The Privacy Act 1988;
     d. The AIATSIS Audiovisual Archive Code of Ethics.
   - AIATSIS does not own most of the unpublished material in its collections. In many cases individual manuscript or audiovisual collections will have their own deposit agreements which are a form of legal contract where the Institute is the custodian of the material and where ownership is retained by the depositor.
   - The Library and AVA follow access protocols that are defined by the above legislation and long-standing AIATSIS practice. The protocols try to ensure that the intent of the legislation is observed and the interests of the creators/owners (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) of the material are acknowledged in the provision of access to their material. The protocols were also designed to protect personal or sensitive cultural information.
   - The following factors contribute to the time it takes to process a request for material held in the AIATSIS collection.
     a. Some agreements are quite restrictive whereby permission must be requested each time the item is copied. Owners may be difficult to locate or slow to respond, and very occasionally may deny access.

b. Some materials are not in a useable format, such as reels and cassettes. They need to be digitised before copies can be distributed. Digitising to archival standards is a slow, labour-intensive and expensive process.

c. Some materials are not adequately documented, for example, photographic collections may be deposited without captions and many audio collections arrive without documentation. This can make material relevant to a client's request hard to find.

d. The limited funding has compelled AIATSIS' digitisation program to target the most 'at risk' collections in its race against time to preserve holdings, as older formats deteriorate or playback equipment becomes obsolete or difficult to maintain. The unfortunate outcome of this is limited servicing of requests from community and researchers. That is, the AVA currently only accepts requests for digitised materials.

e. Limited staffing has caused the Library to implement a target of a 25 working day response time for requests.

- On the other hand, the number of requests for materials held in the AVA increased by 46% between 2008-2009 (431 requests) and 2010-2011 (631 requests) while the number of the staff remained the same.

2. **Another group said that 'Aboriginal people are denied access through distance and a lack of information about what is there' in relation to AIATSIS' archives. Could you please provide us with a response to this comment, and perhaps a brief summary of the institute's approach to the repatriation of cultural materials?**

- The Institute's approach to repatriation of cultural materials is a commitment to return copies of all its archival holdings to the cultural property owners of those materials. With increased demand and no concurrent increase in capacity stress levels on both clients and staff are high.

- While all of the Institute's collections are housed in the AIATSIS building in Canberra, as is the case for most other collecting agencies, it is not always necessary for clients to travel to Canberra to access materials as staff assistance is available by phone or email, and free collection research is offered to Indigenous clients.

- The majority of access requests are conducted remotely. Of the 691 requests for materials made to the AVA completed in 2011, only 99 involved one or more visits to AIATSIS. The Library received 192 in-depth research enquiries from Indigenous individuals and organisations in 2011, many of which were remote enquiries concerning language.

- AIATSIS endeavours to have records of all its holdings in its Mura catalogue, which is accessible on the AIATSIS website. Many records are also accessible on the National Library's TROVE site or through search engines such as Google.

- Great improvements to the discoverability of materials could be made by more in-depth documenting and cataloguing, summarising of material, developing more finding aids, providing more online documents, a better web presence and a continuing community outreach program. However, the Library and the AVA only have the equivalent of three and two full-time positions respectively, dedicated to cataloguing and documenting. Currently, the Library lacks a conservation officer, permanent archivists, and a language collection

manager. The Sound Unit in the AVA has one staff member dedicated to documenting sound recordings, so the rate at which recordings are summarised and catalogued is extremely slow.

- With limited capacity for local storage and curation of material, Indigenous people have tended to repeatedly make requests for the same materials to fulfil their needs. This has resulted in a very large number of requests to AIATSIS. This situation could be improved by better local storage capacity.

3. **Any other comments you'd like to make about the archive's Community Access Program.**

- The AVA's Community Outreach Program was suspended in 2009 due to lack of funding, though the program did reallocate some funds from its budget to conduct some small activities. However in 2011 no community outreach activities were possible. The Library never had specific repatriation or dedicated community access programs due to a lack of resources to properly service the major demands that these programs can generate.
- The AVA, however, runs a Return of Materials to Indigenous Communities (ROMTIC) program (details available at http://aiatsis.gov.au/ava/romtic.html). Under this program, Indigenous clients may obtain copies of up to 20 items that relate specifically to their language group or their family, free of charge.
- The AVA has developed a community focused course and handbook Keeping Your History Alive aimed at training communities to establish and maintain their own local audiovisual archives, however the program is unfunded and can only be conducted rarely.

4. **A number of witnesses spoke of the need for better cataloguing and storage of language research and resources (in general terms). It seems that some material is being produced and archived around the country, but is not always being stored centrally. Could you comment on this, and AIATSIS' role in acting as a repository for all Indigenous language material produced across Australia?**

- AIATSIS agrees that at a national level there is a need for better cataloguing and storage of Indigenous language material and that this should be supported at a local level and centrally. To date, AIATSIS has acted as a de facto national archive for language material. In 2009, the Library's "Australian Indigenous Languages Collection" was placed on the register of the UNESCO Memory of the World in recognition of its extensive and historically unique holdings.
- AIATSIS is, however, neither currently funded to carry out comprehensive collection and storage of Australian Indigenous language material, nor is it required to do so under its legislated function. The fact that the current language collection functions as a national archive is largely due to the foresight of several generations of the collections staff, and also due to the research conducted on Indigenous languages by AIATSIS researchers and researchers funded by the AIATSIS Research Grants Program (which was suspended for the 2012-2013 financial year due to the lack of resources).
- The Library and the Research Program have undertaken major projects to enhance discoverability and access to AIATSIS' language collections,

including an online language thesaurus, several hundred Indigenous language bibliographies online, available for download or mailed out to communities and individuals, and an online Australian Indigenous languages database, AUSTLANG.

- AIATSIS has been promoting the importance of archiving language material to those who develop such material. It is, however, often up to individuals to obtain the resources and time needed to carry out the archival work. AIATSIS has also suggested to the Indigenous Languages Support Program (in the Office for the Arts) that it make it compulsory for their grantees to archive language material created under their funding program at a collecting institution, preferably in AIATSIS.

Conclusion

AIATSIS is eager to address the comments on access to our language collections outlined above. Our response explains in detail the reasons as to why there are constraints on our capacity to respond the community and research requests.

The Australian Government's draft National Cultural Policy, Goal 1 states:

"To ensure that what the Government supports – and how this support is provided – reflects the diversity of 21st Century Australia, and protects and supports Indigenous culture"

AIATSIS sees one of its roles as a National Indigenous Knowledge Centre, with preservation and access to language material a major part of this role.

With the funding received from the Indigenous Languages Support program (for the period from 2010-2011 to 2012-2013), AIATSIS has established the AIATSIS Centre for Australian Languages. The Centre is located at the Research program and currently runs research projects and projects that support community language work. The Centre can potentially develop into a language hub for all language related work at AIATSIS, including the Indigenous language collection development and management. Development of such a hub would allow the acceleration of the return of language collection to communities although this would require additional staffing as well as infrastructure for digital asset management as outlined in the suggestions above.