

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS NSW

NSW DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND COMMUNITIES

Submission to the
House of Representatives
Standing Committee
on
Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander Affairs

Inquiry
into

Language Learning in
Indigenous Communities

12 September 2011

Executive Summary

Language is a vital and fundamental expression of Aboriginal culture. It is one of the most fundamental ways in which Aboriginal people strengthen community wellbeing, reaffirm our sense of belonging, express our culture, and sustain our family connections and our communities' place in society.

For Aboriginal people, language connects us with our ancestors. It stores our history and knowledge, progressed over thousands of years, and ties us to our country and to each other. Language use expresses our way of being and of seeing the world.

Much of this knowledge is now highly endangered and in urgent need of revival. Aboriginal languages are complex, and lose meaning and nuance if translated into English. According to the National Indigenous Languages Report Australia has 'witnessed the largest and most rapid loss of language anywhere in the world'.¹ Aboriginal languages are unique in their vocabulary, grammatical structure and the complex meanings they hold.

Languages in NSW are, according to the UNESCO language endangerment indicator, either in critical danger of being lost or currently sleeping. If the current situation is maintained, it is estimated that most of Australia's Indigenous languages will be lost in 30 years.² The precarious state of Aboriginal languages demands urgent and decisive action before these invaluable cultural resources slip further from reach.

NSW, as the point of first contact, has the longest history of enduring invasion, massacre and dispossession that decimated Aboriginal communities. Aboriginal communities continue to reel from the ongoing impact of colonisation and suppression of cultural expression. As a result, only thirteen of the seventy languages spoken in NSW in 1788 are now still spoken. The 2006 Census counted only 804 Aboriginal people in NSW who identified as speaking an Aboriginal language. As a result the NSW Government is focused on language maintenance, extending the number and fluency of speakers, and on the revitalisation of its sleeping languages.

The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, to which the Commonwealth Government acceded in 2009, enshrines Indigenous peoples' fundamental right to protect, use, revive and learn their own language. Key provisions of the Declaration include:

Article 8.1: Indigenous peoples and individuals have the right not to be subjected to forced assimilation or destruction of their culture.

Article 8.2: States shall provide effective mechanisms for prevention of, or redress for: Any action which has the aim or effect of depriving them of their integrity as distinct peoples or of their cultural values or ethnic identities.

Article 11: Indigenous peoples have the right to practice and revitalise their cultural traditions.

¹ Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, *National Indigenous Language Survey Report*, 2005, Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, p 24.

² *Ibid.*, p.22

Article 13.1: Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalise, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures

Article 13.2: States shall take effective measures to ensure that this right is protected.

Article 14: Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning; and

Article 31: Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions...

The NSW Government, with bipartisan support, has confirmed constitutional recognition of Aboriginal peoples' spiritual, social and cultural relationship to the lands and waters of NSW, as the traditional custodians.

In late May 2011, the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, the Hon Victor Dominello MP, committed to investigate the connection between learning an Aboriginal language and educational outcomes for Aboriginal students. This followed visits in Western NSW, where Aboriginal communities expressed the great importance of language recovery. The NSW Government recognises the strong connection between Aboriginal students' sense of self-worth, identity and pride and their ability to engage with education and perform at their best academically.

In response, Aboriginal Affairs NSW has commissioned an evidence based review on the impact of language learning on educational outcomes for Aboriginal students. The review will consider whether expanding Aboriginal language and cultural learning in NSW schools can contribute to improving Aboriginal students' academic outcomes, and make recommendations on how to maximise any potential benefits. The Review will consider both quantitative and qualitative research, analysing national and international data relevant to NSW.

This review, currently being conducted by Dr Shayne Williams, is expected to be completed by the end of 2011. The review and its recommendations will inform the Government as it designs and implements Aboriginal language policies and programs that build on the cultural and other strengths of Aboriginal students.

The review findings may further inform the House of Representatives *Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Inquiry into Languages Learning in Indigenous Communities*.

Australian Governments have had the benefit of a number of reviews around Aboriginal languages, including the *State of Indigenous Languages in Australia 2001*, the *National Indigenous Languages Survey Report in 2005*, and the *2009 Social Justice Report Chapter 3: The Perilous state of Indigenous Languages in Australia*. The adoption of a national Indigenous Languages Policy provided initial hope for Aboriginal people, but a failure to

implement change on the ground has to date not prevented the loss of Aboriginal languages.

In NSW, using and learning Aboriginal languages has been associated with increased school attendance rates among Aboriginal students, improved academic performance, particularly in levels of literacy, and a heightened sense of self-worth. For Aboriginal students, learning an Aboriginal language can strongly motivate students, promoting a sense of pride and direction.

A focus solely on schools without the engagement and ownership of the broader Aboriginal community is likely to undermine language revival efforts, its sustainability and longevity. A failure to complement language learning in school with broader community language strategies also places an unfair burden on Aboriginal children. Language maintenance and revitalisation demands a whole of community approach, utilising Aboriginal Land Councils, community organisations and TAFE Colleges, as a critical base for educational strategies.

It is Aboriginal communities that are the custodians of their languages. All language maintenance and reclamation work must be driven by Aboriginal communities themselves. This is a lengthy, complex process that demands a concerted effort and substantial support from Government. Aboriginal communities cannot undertake this crucial task alone or without sufficient resources. Aboriginal languages are invaluable cultural heritage for all Australians and deserve to be a high priority for Governments.

Critical issues for Aboriginal languages raised by this submission, which the Parliamentary Inquiry may wish to consider, include:

1. The establishment of a National Aboriginal Languages Body to assess the needs of critically endangered languages, to commission and coordinate language maintenance and revitalisation work;
2. Through COAG, establish, in conjunction with State Governments, State Aboriginal Language Centres to coordinate language work and priorities across the State, and to identify and support regions and communities not supported by a Regional Language Centre;
3. Through COAG, support the establishment of targeted regional language centres to coordinate and provide on the ground and hands on support to Aboriginal communities working to revive or maintain their languages. Aboriginal communities require sustained assistance to identify language recordings and primary resources, develop language learning materials and implement language learning strategies;
4. Strategies to ensure that community based language teachers receive appropriate wages, conditions of employment, accreditation and support, commensurate with the expertise and valuable role they fulfil in language learning;
5. Strategies to develop a network of community language teachers, to support the training and development of language teaching

methodologies and the 'Master' role of community based language teachers (see below);

6. Establishing and supporting a Master/Apprentice Scheme, This would encourage an increase in the number of language teachers, and the implementation of succession training for the long term sustainability of language learning programs;
7. Providing adequate financial resources, and linguistic and technological support for the development of a range of language learning resources to meet the demand, across communities, age levels and proficiency, to develop language fluency within State identified languages;
8. Strategies to encourage pre-schools, schools and high schools to offer Aboriginal languages, particularly in areas of high Aboriginal populations.
9. Strategies to encourage and support the training and retention of Aboriginal linguists.
10. Strategies to support the documentation and development of existing raw language resources.

1. The benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages.

The evidence suggest that learning an Aboriginal language has significant benefits for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. While language learning has been associated with an improved sense of self-esteem for Aboriginal students, non-Aboriginal students have developed an understanding of differing grammar and language structures and also benefited from a greater appreciation of Aboriginal culture and history.

The need to close the marked gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal student academic performance remains a priority for both State and Commonwealth Governments. Aboriginal students on average continue to perform significantly lower than non-Aboriginal students at every year of assessment. The impact of educational outcomes on future life prospects, employment and income are clear. The reasons behind poorer academic performance are complex with many Aboriginal people having to overcome a history of negative experiences of school while also facing the effects of entrenched disadvantage.

Benefits of Learning an Aboriginal Language

The inclusion of Aboriginal languages in the curriculum provided clear benefits to Aboriginal students by valuing Aboriginal cultural heritage and raising the relevance of the curriculum for Aboriginal students. Non-Aboriginal students also benefited gaining a greater appreciation of the local Aboriginal community, its culture, history and the rich complexity of the local language.

The 2004, NSW Report *Yanigurra Muya:Ganggurrinyma Yaarri - Freeing the Spirit: Dreaming an Equal Future on the Review of Aboriginal Education* states:

'Students knowledge and use of their Aboriginal languages are fundamental to the development of their identity and enhance their self esteem. Since the teaching and learning of language provide an important gateway to Aboriginal culture, this process also ensures that the school staff and community understand and respect their students' heritage'.³

The benefits of learning an Aboriginal language can be significant for Aboriginal students. Professor Paul Chandler et al's 2008 research pilot project, *'Aboriginal Languages Research: Impact of Learning an Aboriginal Language on Primary School Student's Literacy in English'*⁴, which consulted with a number of schools, Principals and teachers, found that students developed better literacy skills in English word awareness and decoding, if they learned an Aboriginal language. The process of learning an Aboriginal language supported students in developing the critical early skills of learning the connection between sounds and letters in English.

³ Ibid., p113.

⁴ Professor Paul Chandler et al, 2008, *Aboriginal Languages Research: Impact of Learning an Aboriginal Language on Primary School Student's Literacy in English*, NSW Board of Studies p2

This research project confirmed students in year 2 had higher scores in non-word reading than students from schools with no Aboriginal language program.

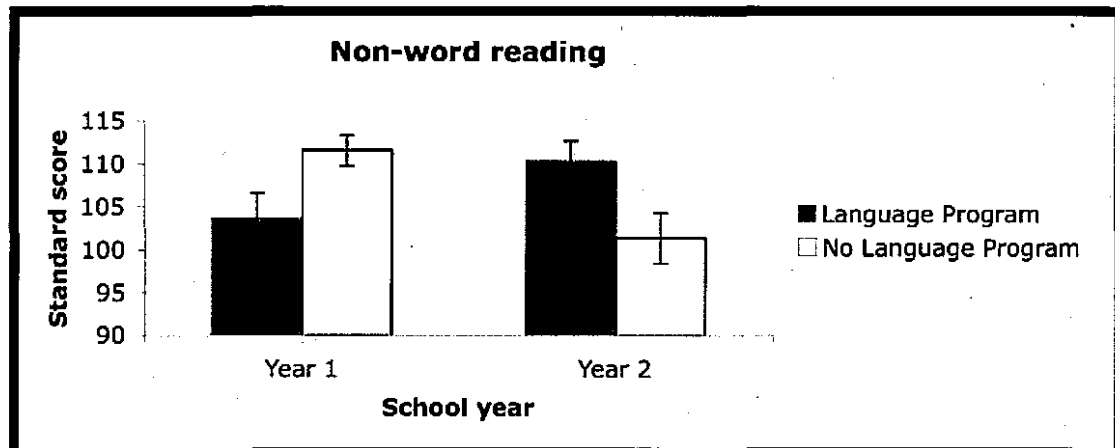


Figure 1⁵

*'Students in the language programs kept up with average performance while students not in language programs had relatively poorer skills in year 2...This result suggests that learning an Aboriginal language in school helps students maintain good decoding skills in English for their year in school.'*⁶

Improved cognitive function associated with bilingualism is also noted in the Australian Human Rights Commission's 2009 *Social Justice Report, Chapter 3: The Perilous State of Indigenous Languages in Australia*, where international studies by the United States National Academy of Sciences recorded greater brain plasticity in bilingual infants. While in studies on low status native languages, where languages were valued children performed better in school than other children whose low status first language was neglected and substituted with a second language.⁷

A study by Daly, *Rural Outcomes of Schooling Research Project Report*, examined what strategies were characteristic of the rural schools that performed at a higher level than others in state-wide tests. The Report highlighted the need to build positive relationships between school and community, build student self confidence and engage Aboriginal students through the use of culture. The teaching of Aboriginal language as a language other than English (LOTE) was a key strategy.

*'An Aboriginal language as LOTE for all students in Year 8, taught by an Aboriginal elder, is an effective community interaction that seemed to have a strong influence on the learning...[of the] whole community.'*⁸

⁵ Ibid., p3

⁶ Ibid., p3

⁷ Social Justice Report 2009, Chapter 3: *The Perilous State of Indigenous Languages in Australia*, 2009, The Australian Human Rights Commission, p62

⁸ Daly, Ann, *Rural Outcomes of Schooling Research Project Report*, NSW Department of Education and Training, Educational Measurement and School Accountability Directorate, 2010, p17.

2. The contribution of Indigenous languages to Closing the Gap and strengthening Indigenous identity and culture.

COAG Educational Targets

The arguments are strong for the learning of Aboriginal languages and culture to play a key role in engaging Aboriginal students and contributing to improved outcomes in the Council of Australian Governments' (COAG's) objectives to closing the gap for Aboriginal students. The applicable COAG educational objectives are to:

- Ensure all Aboriginal four year olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education within five years.
- Close the Gap in reading, writing and numeracy within a decade; and
- Halve the gap in year 12 attainment or equivalent rates by 2020.

Value of Cultural Studies

Aboriginal language programs incorporate a significant element of cultural studies. The inclusion of broader cultural studies, with the recognition and valuing of Aboriginal culture, has long been known to engage Aboriginal students and lead to improved outcomes. It has been shown that Aboriginal students perform better at schools where there is a stronger sense of self identity.

The Positive Self-Identity for Indigenous Students and Its Relationship to School Outcomes project by the Commonwealth Department of Education Science and Training (DEST) in 1999, found *'the extent to which schools and individual teachers recognise and incorporate the cultural identities of students into the school environment and curriculum is critical to the development of a positive cultural identity among Indigenous people.'*⁹

The teaching of Aboriginal language and culture leads to marked improvements in the engagement and motivation of Aboriginal students. Almost all studies into Aboriginal education in the last decade have recommended the inclusion and valuing of Aboriginal culture and relevant curriculum as critical factors to improve the engagement and attendance levels for Aboriginal students.

*'Aboriginal students in junior secondary school, as in other phases of schooling, will only improve if schools can support and strengthen the self esteem of their students through further developing understanding of and respect for Aboriginal culture in the schools community.'*¹⁰

⁹ *Positive Self-Identity for Indigenous Students and Its Relationship to School Outcomes* project, 1999, Department of Education Science and Training, p1.

<http://www.dest.gov.au/archive/lae/analysis/learning/1/selfid.htm>

¹⁰ The Report on the Review of Aboriginal Education, *Yanigurra Muya: Ganggurrinyma Yaarli - Freeing the Spirit: Dreaming an Equal Future*, 2004, NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc. and NSW Department of Education and Training, p110.

Chris Sara's *'Dare to Lead Program'* has been well recognised for its success in achieving outcomes for Aboriginal students by emphasising improved self esteem and cultural pride as the basis of improved attendance, community relations and increased academic performance of students. Under the *'Strong and Smart'* approach the school actively 'nurture(d) a strong and positive sense of what it means to be Aboriginal in today's society'.¹¹ Prior to implementing this approach, the average length of time before an Aboriginal student from Cherbourg Mission left high school was seven months after commencing. Through the *Strong and Smart* program year 12 completion rates have increased 8.59% among participating schools.¹²

Aboriginal languages contain a complex and rich cultural heritage with, according to the *National Indigenous Languages Survey Report 2005*, grammar and vocabulary like no other language in the world.¹³ Schools benefit from greater engagement with the local Aboriginal community and positive role models for Aboriginal students are drawn into the school environment, in communities where unemployment is often the norm.

Broader community benefits are also apparent when language learning is instigated in communities with high Aboriginal populations. Strong cultural ties also provide psychological and health benefits for Aboriginal communities. These benefits may also impact indirectly on other 'Closing the Gap' targets.

The longitudinal research by KG Rowley Et al, over ten years, found correlations between language and culture and the development of resilience and positive health outcomes in homeland communities¹⁴. The study asserted that *'connectedness to culture, family, land and opportunities for self-determination assist in significantly lower morbidity and mortality rates in homeland residents'*.¹⁵ Health outcomes were assessed on levels of obesity, cardiovascular disease and diabetes and found that other socioeconomic measures such as employment, housing and education did not account for the health difference but were directly attributable to the high value placed on language and cultural practices.

3. The potential benefits of including Indigenous languages in early education.

Early education is critical to early childhood development, establishing positive experiences of formal learning environments, introducing language skills and literacy and numeracy concepts. Studies indicate that children who participate in pre-school perform significantly better academically, possess stronger social and emotional tools and are better prepared for school than children who don't attend pre-schools.

¹¹ Sarra, Dr Chris, *Dare to Lead - Strong and Smart*, accessed 18/8/2011, http://www.daretolead.edu.au/RA_NSW_CHERBOURG

¹² Purdie, Nola and Buckley, Sarah, *School Attendance and Retention of Indigenous Australian Students*, Closing the Gap Clearing House, 2010, p16.

¹³ Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, *National Indigenous Language Survey Report, 2005*, Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, p 24.

¹⁴ Social Justice Report 2009, Chapter 3: *The Perilous State of Indigenous Languages in Australia, 2009*, Australian Human Rights Commission, p 60.

¹⁵ Social Justice Report 2009, Chapter 3: *The Perilous State of Indigenous Languages in Australia, 2009*, Australian Human Rights Commission, p 61

Early childhood education is a key means of overcoming Indigenous disadvantage. Aboriginal children who do not attend pre-school commence school substantially disadvantaged compared to other children. For Pre-school to be a positive experience for Aboriginal children they need to feel a sense of belonging and connection to their family and community.

Language Nests

Language Nests are Indigenous language programs that expose children in early childhood to Indigenous language learning, stories and culture, as a key strategy to prevent language loss. Language Nests immerse young children in language use through play and activities when children are young and most adaptable to language uptake.¹⁶

The National Indigenous Languages Survey Report recommends the establishment of a pilot program of Language Nests, following consultations and a scoping report.¹⁷

In New Zealand, Language Nests are attributed with averting the loss of the Maori language in a generation, with 19% of Maori youth aged between 15 and 24 are now able to speak the Maori language te reo Maori.¹⁸

The success of the Language Nest program is further supported in Hawai'i, where Pu'nana Leo, the key language body, established Language Nests in pre-schools in 1980, when less than 40 Hawaiian children were able to speak their language. Through the establishment of Language Nests by 2009, the number of children speaking language had increased to 2000.¹⁹

The teaching of Aboriginal languages to pre-school children has been occurring over a number of years in NSW, on the central coast through the Many Rivers Language Centre and through the Gugaga Childcare Centre in La Perouse, among others.

These language programs have proved very successful, with Aboriginal Elders teaching at the pre-schools and the development of age appropriate resources, such as naming body parts and stories in language, as an introduction to Aboriginal language and culture. These pre-schools report benefits for Aboriginal children who develop an increased sense of pride, language and numeracy recognition and improved social interaction skills.

¹⁶ Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, *National Indigenous Language Survey Report 2005*, Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, 2005, p116.

¹⁷ Recommendation 1, National Indigenous Languages Survey Report.

¹⁸ Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, *National Indigenous Language Survey Report 2005*, Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, 2005, p. 99

¹⁹ Social Justice Report 2009, Chapter 3: *The Perilous State of Indigenous Languages in Australia, 2009*, Australian Human Rights Commission, p 96.

4. Measures to improve education outcomes in those Indigenous communities where English is a second language.

NSW Levels of LOTE

According to the 2011 *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Report*, in 2009 4% of Aboriginal five year old children in NSW had a language background other than English. While, nationally 25% of Aboriginal children at this age had a language background other than English, due to higher levels of very remote communities in other states, the number of students in NSW is still significant.

However, most Aboriginal people in NSW are learning the language of their forefathers as a second language due to the greater impact of invasion, colonisation and mission and Government controls. As a result most of the 70 Aboriginal languages in NSW have very few speakers, or have been sleeping languages that are being reclaimed by communities. There are currently 13 languages that are being taught through NSW schools.

5. The educational and vocational benefits of ensuring English language competency amongst Indigenous communities.

It is broadly accepted that language studies and bilingualism improves language skills in English. Further, reports from schools teaching Aboriginal languages indicate students studying Aboriginal languages develop improved word recognition, decoding skills, and a greater understanding of language structure.

The transfer of language skills and knowledge from one language to another is as relevant for the teaching of Aboriginal languages as it is for other languages. For Aboriginal students, the relevance of the content and cultural connection means the learning of Aboriginal languages will have enhanced benefits for Aboriginal students and their acquisition of English language skills.

School Attendance

According to the *National Report on Schooling in Australia*, school attendance was considered the most important factor accounting for the disparity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. In 2008, Indigenous attendance was consistently lower across all States and Territory Government schools by ten percentile points, with the gap widening in later years.²⁰

With 50% of Aboriginal people currently under 25 years of age, in NSW generational change over a range of Closing the Gap indicators requires a significant focus around educational outcomes.

²⁰ Purdie, Nola and Buckley, Sarah, *School Attendance and Retention of Indigenous Australian Students*, Closing the Gap Clearing House, 2010, p16.

A lack of attendance has been found to be a key cause of poorer performance among Aboriginal students, disrupting the acquisition of core learning areas in literacy and numeracy. Missing school for one day a week was calculated, by the Western Australian Office of the Auditor General, as being equivalent, on average, to missing two years of schooling over a ten year education.²¹

The SEAM Trial Approach

Alternative strategies, such as *'Improving School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure'* (SEAM) trials, have been instigated in targeted communities across Australia, and is now to include sites in NSW, to address school attendance levels. SEAM requires school Principals to notify Centrelink of low attendance by students and where the parent is in receipt of a welfare payment that payment is suspended for 13 weeks.

Punitive approaches such as this are likely to elicit unplanned and detrimental repercussions for relations between schools, students and the Aboriginal community. Policies that punish parents may also negatively affect the interpersonal relations within the family home, and undermine the building of a constructive and trusting relationship with the school.

Reviews of SEAM by Campbell and Write²², who considered seven evaluations, saw no improvements in attendance unless accompanied by case management resources where students received \$500 for completing school rather than sanctions. While Fisher²³, who reviewed schools in the Kimberley region, found no evidence of increased attendance. Behrendt and MaCausland²⁴ were able to confirm slight increases in enrolments but attendance was actually reduced.

Aboriginal Culture as a Strategy to Address Absenteeism

Causes for Indigenous non-attendance from school, according to Purdie and Buckley, who considered studies by Biddle et al 2004, Herbert et al 1999 and Schwab 2001, 'relate to a lack of recognition by schools of Indigenous culture and history, a failure to engage parents, carers and the community and the ongoing disadvantage in many areas of the daily lives of Indigenous Australians'.²⁵

Vocational benefits of language Learning

There are strong potential employment outcomes for Aboriginal communities through language acquisition. Professor Muhlhausler et al, in the *Economic Costs and Benefits of Australian Indigenous Languages* Report (2004) highlighted a range of economic and social benefits for Australia from the enhanced knowledge of complex phenomena gained from Indigenous

²¹ Purdie, Nola and Buckley, Sarah, *School Attendance and Retention of Indigenous Australian Students*, Closing the Gap Clearing House, 2010, p3.

²² Campbell, D. Write, J. *Re-thinking Welfare School – Attendance Policies*, *Social Service Review* 2005, 79 (1), pp2-28

²³ Fischer *Submission to the Senate Select Committee Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities*, Sunrise health Service, 2009.

²⁴ Behrendt L and McCausland R, *Welfare payments and school attendance : An Analysis of experimental policy in Indigenous education*, Jumbana House of Learning , University of Technology Sydney , 2009.

²⁵ Purdie, Nola and Buckley, Sarah, *School Attendance and Retention of Indigenous Australian Students*, Closing the Gap Clearing House, 2010, p3.

languages.²⁶ Aboriginal languages are repositories of traditional knowledge developed over thousands of years of interacting with their environment, building a detailed knowledge of the ecosystem.

Muhlhausler argues this ecological knowledge is invaluable in areas of environmental management, biodiversity, and pharmaceutical development within ecosystems that are generally poorly understood.²⁷

According to the Social Justice Report, examples of knowledge held by Aboriginal communities include the use in fire abatement processes, and the Torres Strait Islander knowledge of the effect of seasonal changes on animals and plant behaviours.²⁸

The Indigenous tourism industry also offers Aboriginal language speakers significant opportunities for employment. An increase in tourist numbers may reflect a heightened interest among overseas tourists in Aboriginal culture. Any increase in tourism benefits the *whole* community. The Social Justice Report warns that these benefits may be hard to quantify, with outcomes accruing at a future date, but have the potential to be far reaching.²⁹

6. Measures to improve Indigenous language interpreting and translating services.

Community language Teachers

Measures to improve Indigenous language interpreting and translating services need to consider the requirements of community language teachers, who as speakers are more experienced with grammatical structure and translation requirements.

In NSW there is a critical shortage of Aboriginal language teachers. Those community language teachers that can teach Aboriginal languages are cultural treasures for both the Aboriginal and the broader non-Aboriginal community.

The lack of adequate pay and conditions for community based language teachers was repeatedly raised by community members at each of the four Regional Community Language Workshops and the State Aboriginal Languages Conference held in 2010, through a partnership between the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Incorporated (AECG) and Aboriginal Affairs NSW.

²⁶ Professor Muhlhausler et al, in the *Economic Costs and Benefits of Australian Indigenous Languages* Discussion Paper, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services, 2004, p4.

²⁷ Professor Muhlhausler et al, in the *Economic Costs and Benefits of Australian Indigenous Languages* Discussion Paper, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services, 2004, p27

²⁸ Social Justice Report 2009; Chapter 3: *The Perilous State of Indigenous Languages in Australia*, 2009, Australian Human Rights Commission, p 63
Quoted the 2006 *Garnaut Review into Climate Change*.

²⁹ Professor Muhlhausler et al, in the *Economic Costs and Benefits of Australian Indigenous Languages* Discussion Paper, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services, 2004, p5.

Community based language teachers currently receive approximately \$24.00 an hour, often with only a few a few hours teaching a week. Community based language teachers lack the formal accreditation of other teachers. There is also no acknowledgment of prior learning for the significant cultural knowledge that these language speakers bring into the classroom.

The lack of an adequate wage for community language teachers is compounded by insecurity of employment, with a lack of permanency in language teaching positions. As a result language teachers receive no pay over holiday periods, which at Christmas time leaves language teachers without a wage for close to eight weeks. Standard employment conditions such as sick leave entitlements and professional training are not accessible for community language teachers.

The need for continuity of language learning between Pre-school, Primary Schools and High Schools requires coordination between schools and language teachers. In regions where a number of primary schools feed into a high school and within regions that cover a particular language, there is potential to provide consistent employment for language teachers across a number of schools and years of students. The demands and additional resources required to travel across regions also needs to be calculated and compensated for language teachers, to support the extended coverage of language programs, across relevant language regions.

7. The effectiveness of current maintenance and revitalisation programs for Indigenous languages, and

Language and maintenance efforts are currently piecemeal in application, lacking sufficient coordination to support community based language teachers or to effectively assess and respond comprehensively to the needs of Aboriginal languages. A strategic approach is required to implement successful language revitalisation programs, develop appropriate language resources, and establish coordinated teaching programs across school districts and language regions. All language work needs to be driven by Aboriginal people and the custodians of particular languages.

While there is a critical role for the learning of Aboriginal languages and culture through the education system, work with students also needs to be complemented by a whole of community approach. Where language teaching is also offered to parents and grand-parents, the resulting broader community participation enables community ownership and in turn fosters the longevity of language use.

National Indigenous Languages Body

There is currently no national language body to coordinate and commission language work in an effective and strategic way. A national Aboriginal languages body could work closely with State based language centres to identify priority language areas and develop a strategic approach to language revitalisation and maintenance work.

Language maintenance and revitalisation requires both national and State based planning and coordination, to ensure resources are targeted where they are most urgently needed and used the most effectively.

State Aboriginal Language Centre

NSW has recently established a State based Council of Aboriginal Language Development (CALD). This body is auspiced through the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Incorporated (NSW AECG) and has an Aboriginal Board to direct the work of the Council.

Within NSW, the Many Rivers Aboriginal Languages Centre (located in Murrumbidgee Aboriginal Language Centre) is an example of an effective regional approach, supporting language work across the north and central coast of NSW, including Awabakal, Wonnarua, Bundjalung, Darkinyung, Dhanggati, Kattang, (Birrbay and Warrmay) and Yaegl languages.

Regional Language Centres

In addition, a third regional tier of community language centres that can provide hands on support is required for the maintenance and reclamation of specific languages or regionally located groups of languages.

Regional approaches enable a close collaboration between Aboriginal communities and linguists, to compile existing documentation, work with current speakers if they exist, assess language needs and develop a range of resources that respond, age appropriately, to the needs of the whole community.

Aboriginal Languages Higher Education

Sydney University offers a Graduate Certificate, Diploma and Masters in Indigenous Languages Education (MILE Course) for those with a recognised four year teaching qualification. The MILE Course is provided through three one week sessions of block release, per term, over a single year. While this course does not provide fluency in any language, it does provide a solid understanding of the grammatical structure and relationship between Aboriginal languages.

Trained linguists are critical to language revival efforts, yet there remains a lack of trained Aboriginal linguists to support language revival and maintenance work. A concerted effort is required to ensure Aboriginal people are trained and supported as professional linguists to work with communities.

There remains a critical shortage of well developed language learning resources that effectively target the range of age groups and level of language knowledge required to support language learning and maintenance programs.

8. The effectiveness of the Commonwealth Government Indigenous languages policy in delivering its objectives and relevant policies of other Australian Governments.

NSW 2021 Plan

The NSW 2021 Plan, a ten year plan, recognises that Aboriginal people are disadvantaged across almost every social indicator and incorporates Aboriginal specific targets across all relevant goals.

Creating a sense of pride and purpose amongst Aboriginal people and communities is critical to building the personal and community strength of Aboriginal people required to overcome adversity and reach their full potential. Supporting Aboriginal culture, country and identity by increasing access for Aboriginal people to learn their languages is a key NSW Government target to achieve this.

Within the NSW 2021 Plan, the following goals specifically impact on the teaching of Aboriginal languages:

Goal 15: *Improve education and learning outcomes for all students* includes the Aboriginal specific target: *Halving the gap between NSW Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in reading and numeracy by 2018*; and

Goal 26: *Fostering opportunity and partnerships with Aboriginal People*, establishes that a reinvigorated Aboriginal affairs strategy will be developed in conjunction with Aboriginal people, through a real and meaningful partnership.

Ministerial Taskforce

A Ministerial Taskforce for Aboriginal Affairs has been established to advise the NSW Government on the development of an Aboriginal affairs strategy and to refocus efforts to close the gap in Aboriginal disadvantage in NSW. The Taskforce is unprecedented in establishing real and meaningful engagement of the Aboriginal community with the decision making of Government.

The Ministerial Taskforce brings together Aboriginal community experts and organisational representatives to work directly with seven key Ministers, including:

- The Minister For Aboriginal Affairs;
- The Minister For Health;
- Minister For Education;
- The Treasurer;
- Attorney General;
- Minister For Family And Community Services; and
- The Minister for Mental Health, Healthy lifestyles and Western NSW.

The Taskforce will ensure that Aboriginal people and communities are a core priority for the NSW Government. As part of its terms of reference two key

focus areas have been identified as vital to achieving generational change. These key areas are:

- ❖ Identifying opportunities for improving education; and
- ❖ Improving employment outcome for Aboriginal people.

NSW Aboriginal Languages Policy

The NSW Government established the first Aboriginal Languages Policy in 2004. A five year Aboriginal Languages Strategic Plan 2006-10 was developed after lengthy consultations with Aboriginal communities, and recognised the critical role of educational sector to the reclamation of Aboriginal languages. The Strategic Plan outlined the following four key result areas:

- 1) Aboriginal languages in Aboriginal communities
- 2) Aboriginal languages in the educational sector
- 3) Aboriginal language Programs in Goals and Detention Centres, and
- 4) Aboriginal languages in the wider community.

Through the Strategic Plan, Aboriginal Affairs NSW, has contributed more than \$1.4 million since 2005 to 78 community based language projects through the Aboriginal Languages Research and Resource Centre.

The Aboriginal Languages Research and Resource Centre (ALRRC)

The ALRRC was established in 2003, initially funded with 1.1 million over four years. The ALRRC was located within Aboriginal Affairs NSW from 2005-10 with financial resources, of around \$200,000 a year, focused on funding community language projects. These projects have included the production of linguistic materials, dictionaries, teaching and multimedia language resources.

In 2008, the ALRRC produced the CD-Rom *Introduction to Aboriginal Languages* with a copy going to every school and pre-school in NSW and the *Handbook of Aboriginal Languages*, among other resources. In addition, the ALRRC has supported the implementation of *It's a Hard Road to Hoe* on how to establish community language centres, funded two State-wide language conferences, *Bayabangun Ngurrawa* in 2007, in conjunction with the Office of the Board of Studies, and a State Aboriginal Language Conference in 2010 in partnership with the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Incorporated (NSW AECG). This partnership also sponsored four Regional Language Workshops held by the AECG, in 2010.

Centre for Aboriginal Languages Coordination and Development (CALCD)

A Review of the ALRRC, in 2010, identified that language maintenance and reclamation work needed to have greater ownership and be driven by the Aboriginal community. The review recommended the establishment of a peak community state based language centre to coordinate language revival efforts and resources in NSW. As a result the Centre for Aboriginal Languages Coordination and Development (CALCD) was established in early 2011 with funding of \$1.277 million over three years, which includes annual funding of \$400,000 to cover staffing, administration and language projects.

The CALCD is auspiced by the NSW AECG as the peak Aboriginal education advocacy body, which has played a significant role in promoting and supporting language revitalisation work in NSW. An Aboriginal Council will direct the language work priorities of the CALCD. The CALCD Council is due to be established by October 2011. Providing informed advice to the NSW Government on the development of a revised Aboriginal Languages Policy and Strategic Plan is also a priority of the CALCD Council.

The NSW Aboriginal Education and Training Policy

The NSW Government's *Aboriginal Education and Training Policy* commits to the teaching of Aboriginal languages, Aboriginal studies and Aboriginal cross curriculum content. The Policy acknowledges the strength, diversity, ownership and richness of Aboriginal cultures, and custodianship of country are respected, valued and promoted. The Policy also outlines the incorporation of cultural contexts, values and practices of local Aboriginal communities into the mainstream delivery of education and training.

NSW Aboriginal Languages K-12 Syllabus

The NSW Aboriginal Languages K-12 Syllabus commenced in 2005 and has been developed in conjunction with the Aboriginal owners and custodians of each of the languages offered. The syllabus supports sequential learning and covers linguistic features of Aboriginal languages, grammatical structures, listening, reading, writing and speaking in an Aboriginal language, and an understanding of Aboriginal heritage and contemporary culture. In NSW in 2010, 7986 students, 1571 Aboriginal and 6415 non-Aboriginal students, undertook study in one of the 13 Aboriginal languages offered at one of 36 public schools. At TAFE, Certificate 1, 2 and 3 is offered in an Aboriginal language. The course commenced in 2007, and by 2011 532 students had undertaken one of these courses.

COMMONWEALTH GOVERNMENT

At the Commonwealth level the bipartisan approach of the COAG objectives to 'Close the Gap' in educational attainment for Aboriginal students aims to ensure there is coordination and commitment across and between Governments.

National Indigenous Languages Policy

In 2009, the Commonwealth Government announced the National Indigenous Languages Policy to protect Indigenous languages and \$9.3 million for language work and resources. The Maintenance of Indigenous Languages and Records (MILR) program is the main Commonwealth source of language funding. In 2009-10 this project funded 63 projects a total of \$7.9 million from the 130 applications received. This funding was down on the previous year in 2009-10, when 64 projects were funded a total of \$8.8 million, from the 104 that had applied for funding through this program.

The significant number of applications not able to receive funding each year reflects the clear need among Aboriginal communities for financial resources to support language revival and preservation work. The increase in applications, by a further 25%, may also reflect an increased level of interest within the Aboriginal community for language revival and maintenance work. It

may also reflect the impending sense of urgency felt by Aboriginal communities to undertake language conservation and revitalisation.

National Curriculum

The National Curriculum, being developed through the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), is ensuring consistency of curriculum content across the States. The National Curriculum has established three core areas that are being embedded across all curriculum content and include *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures*.

The inclusion of Aboriginal studies provides an Indigenous perspective across all core subject areas. This inclusion has significant potential to inform all students of the histories and cultures of Indigenous Australians, and to raise interest in learning an Aboriginal language.

There are concerns that Aboriginal content may not be sufficiently covered, with the Stolen Generations and other key issues not a compulsory component of Aboriginal history. The number of hours allocated to the Australian History curriculum in junior high school, which includes Aboriginal history, has also been raised as a concern, with 50 hours allocated for this subject that was initially intended to cover 70-80 hours a year.

In addition, the level at which Aboriginal studies is introduced and maintained through the grade years is not evenly spread from early primary onwards, with age appropriate resources, but is weighted to the latter years of high school.³⁰

Aboriginal Languages

Through the National Curriculum, Aboriginal Languages will be offered as a language option. The inclusion of Aboriginal languages recognises the potential benefits for all Australians of learning an Aboriginal language. ACARA acknowledges, in reference to Aboriginal languages, a demand for 'language revival initiatives for languages at risk of extinction'.³¹

The option of choosing Aboriginal languages in the National Curriculum offers opportunities and challenges. Teaching Aboriginal languages requires a substantial investment in resources to respond to the need for language research, documentation and development of a range of language learning materials. The potential benefits of such an investment are likely to be widespread and profound, providing crucial support to Aboriginal communities' language revival efforts at a critical time.

Conclusion

Aboriginal languages are critically endangered. Aboriginal languages are an invaluable asset to both the Aboriginal communities and to the broader Australian community. Without substantial effort by both State and Commonwealth Governments, many Aboriginal languages, cultural concepts, and the repository of histories and knowledge will be lost.

³⁰ Stevenson, Andrew, *Stolen Generations' history is key*, Sydney Morning Herald, 29 August 2011.

³¹ ACARA, *Draft Shape of the Australian Curriculum : Languages*, Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2011, P3

The need for Governments, both State and Commonwealth, to work together with Aboriginal communities to salvage and strengthen Aboriginal languages is of critical importance. Through combined and coordinated State and Commonwealth efforts, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, the Aboriginal community and the broader non-Aboriginal community may continue to benefit from the unique cultural heritage of Aboriginal languages.