



Australian
Human Rights
Commission

Supplementary submission No 31a

Language learning
in Indigenous
communities

**AUSTRALIAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION
SUBMISSION TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON
ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS**
[20 December 2011]

ABN 47 996 232 602
Level 3, 175 Pitt Street, Sydney NSW 2000
GPO Box 5218, Sydney NSW 2001
General enquiries 1300 369 711
Complaints info line 1300 656 419
TTY 1800 620 241

Australian Human Rights Commission
www.humanrights.gov.au

Table of Contents

1 Introduction.....3

2 Summary3

3 Recommendation.....4

4 Māori Language Commission.....4

5 The Mayan experience7

6 The Greenland Language Secretariat (GLS).....8

7 Hawaii.....8

8 Other Examples9

9 Conclusion.....9

1 Introduction

On the 18 November 2011, the Australian Human Rights Commission (the Commission) appeared before the Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs concerning *Learning Language in Indigenous communities*. The Committee requested that the Commission provide further information regarding the effectiveness of established National Language Bodies, including the Māori Language Commission in New Zealand.

2 Summary

- 1 In Australia Indigenous languages are disappearing at a faster rate than anywhere else in the world.¹ The lack of any coordinated, focused response is hindering attempts to hold on to these endangered languages.
- 2 National Indigenous language bodies can play an important role in preserving and revitalising Indigenous languages. A national body empowered with a mandate and the resources to monitor support and promote Indigenous language acquisition and development has an ability to increase language use and foster the overall health of a language. Since the Māori Language Commission was established, the New Zealand census has reported a significant increase in language proficiency. The increase was especially pronounced in the key demographic of young adults, crucial to intergenerational transmission of languages.² The Māori Language Commission has played a part in achieving an increased public prominence of the Maori language along with improved public attitudes, as revealed by the Māori Language Survey of 2009.³
- 3 While it is difficult to attribute increases in language acquisition and usage to a single body or action, there is no doubt that over the life of the Māori Language Commission there have been significant changes in Māori language policy; particularly regarding the visibility of the language in public places. This policy builds pride in language and increases its relevance for all citizens in everyday life. The environment created by these improvements is conducive to increased language use. An assessment of the most recent effectiveness of the Māori Language Commission is hampered slightly by the unavailability of current census data due to the earthquakes in Christchurch. The Committee should source any updated census figures relating to the Māori language when they become available in 2013.
- 4 The complex context of Australia's Indigenous languages requires high level coordination and resourcing due to the numerous languages with varying degrees of use and acceptance. The Māori Language Commission is by no

¹ UNESCO, *Endangered Languages*, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/cultural-diversity/languages-and-multilingualism/endangered-languages/faq-on-endangered-languages/> (viewed 7 December 2011).

² Ministry for Māori Development, *The Health of the Māori Language in 2006: Fact Sheet*, (2007) p 5. At <http://www.tpk.govt.nz/en/in-print/our-publications/publications/the-health-of-the-maori-language-in-2006/> (viewed 9 December 2011)

³ Te Puni Kokiri, *Maori Language Survey 2009*, (2009) p 46.

means a model directly transferable into an Australian context; however it does provide an example of the successes which can be achieved by providing a framework for a coordinated response to Indigenous language policy and promotion.

3 Recommendation

The Australian Human Rights Commission recommends that in consultation with the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, a national Indigenous languages commission be established to monitor and regulate the maintenance and revitalisation of Australian Indigenous languages.

4 Māori Language Commission

5 The Māori Language Commission was established in 1987 under the *Māori Language Act* which legislated to recognise Te Reo Māori as an official language of New Zealand. The Commission was instituted to

- Promote and raise awareness of the Māori language and Māori language issues
- Promote quality standards of written and spoken Māori
- Administer examinations for candidates seeking formal certification as translators and interpreters
- Research and formulate policy related to the promotion, maintenance and progression of the Māori language; Lexical expansion work including the production of glossaries.⁴

6 During the Commission's existence, positive gains have been made with regard to the health of Te Reo Māori. Between 2001 and 2006 an overall language proficiency increase of 5-8% was recorded across the fundamental skill areas of speaking, listening, reading and writing.⁵ The most promising gains were made in specific age groups which are crucial to the intergenerational transmission of language. The numbers of people aged between 15 and 24 who had some level of speaking proficiency improved by 13% whilst gains of 16% were found in the 25-35 year old bracket.⁶ In these age groups the number of high proficiency language users more than

⁴ Māori Language Commission, *About Us*, http://www.tetaurawhiri.govt.nz/english/about_e/ (viewed 30 November 2011).

⁵ 'Proficiency' based on an assessment of ability to perform an element "well" or "very well", Ministry for Māori Development, *The Health of the Māori Language in 2006: Fact Sheet*, (2007) p 5. At <http://www.tpk.govt.nz/en/in-print/our-publications/publications/the-health-of-the-maori-language-in-2006/> (viewed 9 December 2011).

⁶ Ministry for Māori Development, *The Health of the Māori Language in 2006: Fact Sheet*, (2007) p 5. At <http://www.tpk.govt.nz/en/in-print/our-publications/publications/the-health-of-the-maori-language-in-2006/> (viewed 9 December 2011).

doubled.⁷ Figures were due to be updated this year by a national census, however because of national disasters the census was delayed until 2013.⁸

- 7 Between 2001 and 2006 Māori language use in the home environment increased in Te Tairāwhiti and Takitimu and this improvement is reflected throughout other communities.⁹ Overall use by adults in the home also showed an increase across the Māori population.¹⁰ Encouraging use of Māori in the home has been a focus of the Māori Language Commission's work.
- 8 Languages are influenced by many complex and fluid issues, numerous factors will affect their proliferation and use. It is therefore difficult to claim exclusively that any particular initiative directly lead to an increased use or proficiency in language. However, by maintaining an environment conducive to multilingual existences, and encouraging language use where possible, the Māori Language Commission is contributing in a valuable manner to the health of Te Reo Māori.
- 9 Public perceptions of a language are crucial to its health and overall use. The Māori Language Commission has worked hard and made great progress in changing community attitudes towards the Indigenous language. The Māori Language Commission has influenced language use in public places and this in turn has affected public acceptance of the language. Acceptance by Māori people that public use was 'a good thing' rose from 68% in 2000 to 89% in 2009.¹¹ Outside the Māori community attitudes to this issue changed more starkly, with 77% of people responding that 'it is a good thing that Māori people speak Māori in public places' in 2009 compared to only 40% in 2000.¹² There have also been changes in attitudes and perceptions in other areas from non-Māoris. In 2000 only 53% of non-Māori respondents believed it was important that 'the government took a role in monitoring the Māori language,' whereas in 2009 this figure had grown to 79%.¹³ The belief that the use of Māori in everyday situations should be encouraged rose from 25% in 2000 to 64% in 2009.¹⁴ The Māori Language Commission's work, through programs such as Māori Language Week, and other strategies, is targeted at promoting the language and influencing these attitudes.
- 10 The Māori Language Commission administers the Mā te Reo program, carefully allocating targeted funding to Māori language programs in

⁷ Ministry for Māori Development, *The Health of the Māori Language in 2006: Fact Sheet*, (2007) p 5. At <http://www.tpk.govt.nz/en/in-print/our-publications/publications/the-health-of-the-maori-language-in-2006/> (viewed 9 December 2011).

⁸ Statistics New Zealand, *About the 2011 Census*, <http://www.stats.govt.nz/Census/2011-census.aspx> (viewed 2 December 2011).

⁹ Communities with similar trends include Waikato, Te Taihauāuru, Te Upoko o Te Ika/Te Tau: Te Puni Kokiri, *The Health of the Māori Language in Te Tairāwhiti and Takitimu 2006: Use of the Māori language: Speaking Māori in the home*, <http://www.tpk.govt.nz/en/in-print/our-publications/publications/the-health-of-the-maori-language-in-te-tairawhiti-and-takitimu-2006/page/14/> (viewed 2 December 2011).

¹⁰ Ministry for Māori Development, *The Health of the Māori Language in 2006*, (2008), p 28. At <http://www.tpk.govt.nz/en/in-print/our-publications/publications/the-health-of-the-maori-language-in-2006/> (viewed 9 December 2011)

¹¹ Te Puni Kokiri, *Maori Language Survey 2009*, (2009) p 46.

¹² Te Puni Kokiri, *Maori Language Survey 2009*, (2009) p 46.

¹³ Te Puni Kokiri, *Maori Language Survey 2009*, (2009) p 47.

¹⁴ Te Puni Kokiri, *Maori Language Survey 2009*, (2009) p 47.

communities throughout New Zealand. The variety of programs have been assessed as achieving many positive outcomes including:

- The promotion of Te Reo Māori
- Increased accessibility to Te Reo Māori domains and resources
- Reinforced reo Māori domains within the communities
- Strengthened community leadership
- Increased acquisition and use of Te Reo Māori
- Increased confidence to speak Te Reo Māori
- Increased commitment to learn and speak Te Reo Māori
- Increased opportunities for whakawhanaungatanga
- Strengthened Māori identity.¹⁵

- 11 The Mā te Reo program has been identified as increasing opportunities for communities to learn and maintain their skills in Māori by providing suitable environments and providing learning approaches outside other formal language learning options.¹⁶ The programs are community initiated and lead, allowing them to be tailored to the specific needs of the population in question and empowering communities to generate positive outcomes in Māori language revitalisation. The Tāmaki-makaurau region found that 75% of participants in various programs gained “knowledge, skills and proficiency as a direct result of the Mā te Reo investment.”¹⁷ Participants felt more confident with the language and to speak it in different domains. The Māori Language Commission’s ability to administer these funds in a consistent and constructive manner, with an understanding of the broad context of language issues, as well as an awareness of particular local circumstances, has been a key to the program’s success.
- 12 The Māori Language Commission encourages and provides guidance for smaller language revitalisation programs in the form of language groups. The *tuakana-teina* project encourages informal learning in pairs or small groups and provides frameworks for these groups to most effectively empower themselves to share and improve their own language skills. The program is designed to build on similar but more formal models of language transmission such as ‘*Te Kōhanga Reo* (Māori language preschools), *Te Ātaarangi* (an oral based method of Māori language teaching) and *Wānanga Reo* (advanced immersion courses)’ all of which have had success.¹⁸ This is an informal, unstructured, and unmonitored program so it is difficult to find any quantitative evidence of its success. However the Māori Language Commission provides anecdotal examples of the program’s success and it is considered to be a valuable tool.¹⁹

¹⁵ Māori Language Commission, *Annual Report 2011*, (2011) p 12. At http://www.tetaurawhiri.govt.nz/english/pub_e/annualrpt/2011.pdf (viewed 1 December 2011).

¹⁶ Māori Language Commission, *Annual Report 2011*, (2011) p 13. At http://www.tetaurawhiri.govt.nz/english/pub_e/annualrpt/2011.pdf (viewed 1 December 2011).

¹⁷ Korero Māori, *Tāmaki-makaurau: Mā te Reo Fact Sheet 2011* (2011) At http://www.korero.maori.nz/news/news/Fact_Sheet_2011_Tamaki-makaurau_d11 (viewed 5 December 2011).

¹⁸ Māori Language Commission, *Tuakana Teina*, http://www.tetaurawhiri.govt.nz/english/issues_e/tt/index.shtml (viewed 1 December 2011).

¹⁹ Māori Language Commission, *Tuakana Teina*, http://www.tetaurawhiri.govt.nz/english/issues_e/tt/index.shtml (viewed 1 December 2011).

- 13 Encouraged by the successes of Māori Language Commission, the New Zealand Human Rights Commission has, along with other parties, made recommendations surrounding the establishment of a National Languages Commission, to provide for other minority languages. The National Languages Commission would possibly be more analogous to Australia's requirements as it would monitor and support multiple languages spoken by small populations.
- 14 In an Australian context, the mandate of any language commission would be complex because of the hundreds of Indigenous languages our country is fortunate to have. The Māori Language Commission has not operated without criticism, and any Australian model could benefit from examining any shortcomings of the New Zealand example. The Māori Language Commission has been criticised over not having enough power, or a broad enough scope to more forcibly drive an agenda to strengthen the Māori language. Any consideration of an Australian model would need to contemplate allowing additional powers than those accorded to the Māori Language Commission. This would be particularly relevant with regard to the coordination of primary and secondary educational programs which are outside the jurisdiction of the Māori Language Commission. The New Zealand Education Department controls the large budget relating to Māori language in schools - and the Māori Language Commission has no authority over language policy in schools. Obviously, policy across these different portfolio areas should be consistent and work to a common goal. In Australia it would be essential for Indigenous language policy to be consistent and workable within Australia's National Curriculum Framework.

5 The Mayan experience

- 15 The Mayan Language Academy of Guatemala was established in an attempt to preserve the many Mayan languages in Guatemala. In a very difficult political climate, the Academy has been able to act as an authority on language, launching a unified alphabet. It also promotes the use of the language through many strategies including providing guidance for bi-lingual education²⁰, producing instructive texts, and establishing 'linguistic communities' in local areas to tailor specific programs and ensure regional languages remain robust.²¹ Perceptions of language have been changed by efforts of the Academy and the linguistic identity of communities has been strengthened. The Academy has had success in its goal of regulating the writing system in order to strengthen its use and maintenance.²² In the first ten years since from its official recognition in

²⁰ A Lieberman, 'Invigorating Mayan Language, Culture, and Education Bilingual Education', in LearnLink *Digital Opportunities for Development*. (2003) 166, p168 At http://learnlink.aed.org/Publications/Sourcebook/chapter3/quatemala_casestudy.pdf (viewed 5 December 2011).

²¹ AO Jiménez Sánchez, *Mayan Languages and the Mayan Movement in Guatemala*, Latin American Studies Association Chicago, (1998) p 7. At <http://lasa.international.pitt.edu/LASA98/JimenezSanchez.pdf> (viewed 5 December 2011).

²² AO Jiménez Sánchez, *Mayan Languages and the Mayan Movement in Guatemala*, Latin American Studies Association Chicago, (1998) p 7. At <http://lasa.international.pitt.edu/LASA98/JimenezSanchez.pdf> (viewed 5 December 2011).

1991, double the amount of material was published in the Mayan Language than in the previous decade.²³

6 The Greenland Language Secretariat (GLS)

16 The GLS was established after *Kalaallisut*, the Indigenous Language dialect of Greenland was made the official language of Greenland. The Secretariat's brief includes research and monitoring of the language as well as involvement in language planning and decision making.²⁴ The Secretariat provides support to a number of Parliamentary Committees and reports annually to Cabinet. The Secretariat has responsibility to guide the Greenland public and authorities on language matters and is largely credited with restoring and promoting the language.²⁵ Grenoble, an expert in minority languages, identified organisations such as the Language Secretariat as playing a critical role in ensuring the survival of small languages.²⁶

7 Hawaii

17 The revitalisation of the Hawaiian Indigenous language has been remarkable. The numbers of language speakers has risen dramatically after fewer than 50 native speakers under the age of 50 were thought to be present in the early 1980s.²⁷ Now over 7,500 people are actively learning the language.²⁸ The language was revived through community driven education programs and most significantly; early childhood immersion programs. The language is now available in public schools across the islands and recently the first PhD in the Hawaiian language was granted. No official government language body exists in Hawaii however *Hale Kuamo'o* is the Hawaiian Language Centre, established through state legislation as part of the University of Hawai'i. *Hale Kuamo'o's* role is to "support and encourage the expansion of the Hawaiian language as a medium of communication in education, business, government and other contexts of social life in the public and private sectors of Hawai'i and beyond", and can take some credit for the dramatic revitalisation of the Hawaiian language.²⁹

²³ J Richards & M Richards, 'Mayan language literacy in Guatemala: A socio-historical overview' in NH Hornberger, *Indigenous Literacies in the Americas: language planning from the bottom up*, (1997) 189, p 192.

²⁴ Oqaasileriffik - the Greenland Language Secretariat Website. At <http://www.oqaasileriffik.gl/en> (Viewed 5 December 2009).

²⁵ T Calma, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, *Social Justice Report 2009*, Australian Human Rights Commission (2009) p 78. At http://www.humanrights.gov.au/social_justice/sj_report/sjreport09/index.html (viewed 9 December 2011).

²⁶ J. George, Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, *Saving world's words*, <http://pulitzercenter.org/articles/saving-worlds-words> (viewed 5 December 2011).

²⁷ KC Keiki Kawai'ae'a, AK Housman & M Alencastre, *Pūyā i ka ūŌlelo, Ola ka ūŌhana: Three Generations of Hawaiian Language Revitalization*. At http://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&q=cache:zoxRwSlhGI4J:www.ksbe.edu/spi/Hulili/vol_4/Pua_i_ka_olelo_ola_la_ka_ohana.pdf+Three+Generations+of+Hawaiian+Language+Revitalization&hl=en&gl=au&pid=bl&srcid=ADGEESgE_qqrPE-IQoh7UJ8TuP4HgdGOwuwQmKQsoxkXm5aXS4w_C4I4GUm18ZrNkWGnYI3nFqYQMX0w5Sg6X0FaMzsY5Kjfkf0u2KpSmDFH_uNLAOXM65H8rQwVs8li5zv4uC3sPP5oYg&sig=AHIEtbRjIEetHQDkdvQKqe-UEYa7z6Wopg (viewed 8 December 2011)

²⁸ Hale Kuamo'o, *Did you know?*, <http://www.olelo.hawaii.edu/olelo/uaikeanei.php> (viewed 8 December 2011).

²⁹ Kualono, *Overview*, <http://www.olelo.hawaii.edu/khuok/hk.php> (viewed 8 December 2011).

8 Other Examples

- 18 Several reviews into the health of Canada's Indigenous languages, including the 1996 Royal Commission, have recommended a national body to ensure a consistent and productive approach is taken to language conservation and revitalisation efforts.³⁰ The African Union has recognised, through an examination of failed initiatives, that the absence of structures to guide the implementation of language policies was a contributor to the lack of success. They established the African Academy of Languages to oversee and direct the preparation and implementation of language plans and initiatives.³¹ South Africa has also established a Pan South African Language Board which endeavours to revitalise Indigenous languages post-apartheid and oversees local language commissions which seek to strengthen and preserve local languages.³²
- 19 UNESCO's endangered language program stresses the importance of coordinated responses.

*"The most important thing that can be done to keep a language from disappearing is to create favorable conditions for its speakers to speak the language and teach it to their children. This often requires national policies that recognize and protect minority languages, education systems that promote mother-tongue instruction, and creative collaboration between community members and linguists to develop a writing system and introduce formal instruction in the language. Since the most crucial factor is the attitude of the speaker community toward its own language, it is essential to create a social and political environment that encourages multilingualism and respect for minority languages so that speaking such a language is an asset rather than a liability."*³³

9 Conclusion

- 20 Australia's Indigenous languages are in a perilous state. The current practices, including the grants program, do not provide big-picture oversight or policy direction. Australia's approach needs to reflect a national commitment to the health of these languages, coordinating programs strategically, using evidence that is based upon international best practices. The successes which have followed the creation of the Māori Language Commission provide encouragement that a national body can be effective in changing the course of language health.

³⁰ Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, *Highlights from the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, (2006) At <http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100014597> (viewed 8 December 2011).

³¹ African Academy of Languages, *About ACALAN*, http://www.acalan.org/eng/about_acalan/about_acalan.php (viewed 8 December 2011).

³² Pan South African Language Board, *PANLAB History*, <http://www.pansalb.org.za/pansalbhhistory.html> (viewed 8 December 2011).

³³ UNESCO, *Endangered Languages*, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/cultural-diversity/languages-and-multilingualism/endangered-languages/faq-on-endangered-languages/> (viewed 7 December 2011).

- 21 In New Zealand, improvements in language usage, particularly amongst age groups that are critical for the transmission of languages to future generations, have been accompanied by changes in community attitudes. Whilst the Māori Language Commission is part of a range of language preservation measures, its role in directing policy, influencing community attitudes and supporting and promoting community programs cannot be underestimated. The Mayan and Greenland experiences also provide examples language leadership being exercised by national language bodies.
- 22 The task of preserving and revitalising Australia's Indigenous languages is complex. However, a coordinated and considered response managed by a national body, is a necessary first step in coordinating the maintenance and revitalisation of these ancient and valuable languages.