

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

**Inquiry into**

***Language learning in Indigenous communities***

**New South Wales Department of Education and Communities**

**August 2011**

## INTRODUCTION

Article 13 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples stipulates:

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, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.

Article 14 stipulates:

2. Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination.
3. States shall, in conjunction with Indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for Indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.

Article 15 stipulates:

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations which shall be appropriately reflected in education and public information.

The Australian Government's endorsement of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, in particular those Articles detailed above, confirms the absolute connection of language and culture and language and education. The NSW Department of Education and Communities<sup>1</sup> and NSW Government were strong in urging the Australian Government to declare its support of the Declaration.

Given the connection of language and culture and language and education, the NSW Department of Education and Communities is committed to supporting government schools and TAFE NSW, in partnership with local Aboriginal communities, in the implementation of local Aboriginal language delivery. In doing this, the Department offers a range of policy and program support and initiatives in the discipline of Aboriginal language education and training, managed by the Aboriginal Education and Training Directorate. The specific details of these are stated under those Terms of Reference to be addressed.

The Terms of Reference to be addressed in this submission have, to varying degrees, specific relevance to the core business of the NSW Department of Education and Communities. Seven of the eight Terms of Reference will be addressed, namely:

- The benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages

---

<sup>1</sup> In referring to the NSW Department of Education and Communities, or the Department, this submission pertains to the delivery of education and training by the Public Schools and TAFE and Community Education portfolios of the Department.

- The contribution of Indigenous languages to *Closing the Gap* and strengthening Indigenous identity and culture
- The potential benefits of including Indigenous languages in early education
- Measures to improve education outcomes in those Indigenous communities where English is a second Language
- The educational and vocational benefits of ensuring English language competency amongst Indigenous communities
- The effectiveness of current maintenance and revitalisation programs for Indigenous languages
- The effectiveness of the Commonwealth Government Indigenous languages policy in delivering its objectives and relevant policies of other Australian governments.

## ADDRESSING THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

### 1: The benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages

Auntie Rose Fernando, a NSW Gamilaroi Elder, stated, “*Language is our Soul.*” (NSW Aboriginal Languages Policy, 2004.)

It is important to understand that cultural experiences directly shape what and how people learn, and in specific relevance to the purpose of this inquiry, what and how Aboriginal people learn. The NSW Department of Education and Communities believes that good education practice values and incorporates the knowledge, understandings and perspectives of Aboriginal students, their families and communities and focuses on engagement, collaboration and participation. Not only are national, state and local perspectives important in learning, but so too are the historical, social and cultural contexts and backgrounds of the peoples and communities involved in learning. Aboriginal languages, as do all languages, give voice to the heart and soul of culture.

Without maintenance and nurturing of language, the fundamental sustainability of culture is at risk. Aboriginal languages embody Aboriginal lore, law and wisdom and give expression to the experiences of the thousands of generations who have gone before. Aboriginal languages are intrinsically linked to connectedness to country and to what it means to be Aboriginal.

Understanding and respecting this perspective is intrinsic to fully acknowledging the multiple benefits which arise from giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages in the education and training sector. By ensuring Aboriginal languages have a legitimate place in mainstream education delivery, education providers are contributing to the process of building and/or enhancing Aboriginal student identity, self-esteem, connection to country, engagement in learning and, ultimately, educational success.

Aboriginal languages are inextricably linked to cultural and spiritual identity, opening the way to cultural and spiritual understanding. Recognising the importance of Aboriginal languages ensures the retention and restoration of pride in Aboriginal cultures and boosts determination to preserve what can be saved for the enrichment of future generations.

Language holds the key to Aboriginal people's history, through songs, storytelling, poetry and law and is a critical tool to establish and locate individual, community and collective identities.

*Language is such an important part of a person's culture and identity. By examining how we can give attention and proper recognition to Indigenous languages in Australia, we are also walking the path of reconciliation by giving attention and proper recognition to Indigenous cultures and identities.<sup>2</sup>*

The Chair of the Committee responsible for overseeing the inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities, Mr Shayne Neumann MP, was reported by the ABC as saying:

---

<sup>2</sup> *Language learning in Indigenous communities* Media Alert, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, accessed 8 July 2011 at: <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/atsia/languages/media/media01.pdf>

*In those communities where culture was strengthened, where language was proficient, where there was capacity to speak English and write English, employment prospects were better for people.*

*But also, they felt better about themselves and they felt more connected to their culture.<sup>3</sup>*

In 2009, Alfred Michael Dockery, Curtin Business School, Curtin University, undertook research to establish an evidentiary link between culture and education and training outcomes. Whilst his use of the descriptor of “Cultural Attachment” as a measure is somewhat limited, it does argue that: *‘Language is a high indicator of Cultural attachment’*.

The research found that:

*Culture has a pervasive effect upon VET participation and outcomes. The results strongly suggest that Indigenous people with a stronger attachment to their traditional culture achieve higher levels of educational attainment and are more likely to have participated in a vocational training course in the year prior to the survey than those with weaker attachment.<sup>4</sup>*

#### **The Review of Aboriginal Education 2003:**

The Review of Aboriginal Education, undertaken in NSW in 2003, found that:

*Aboriginal students and communities see the teaching of an Aboriginal language as a school demonstrating an acknowledgement of and respect for Aboriginal people and their culture by the school system and by the school.<sup>5</sup>*

And that:

*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 languages provide an important gateway to Aboriginal culture, this process also ensures that the school staff and community understand and respect their students’ heritage. It is important that students are increasingly given access to the study of Aboriginal languages as an option to satisfy the mandatory language requirements for the School Certificate.<sup>6</sup>*

---

<sup>3</sup><http://www.abc.net.au/news/2011-07-20/inquiry-to-consider-indigenous-language-benefits/2802244> , accessed 8 July 2011

<sup>4</sup> *Cultural dimensions of Indigenous participation in education and training*, Alfred Michael Dockery, Curtin Business School, Curtin University, NCVET MONOGRAPH SERIES 02/2009, p.37

<sup>5</sup> *Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education*, 2004, p.122

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.113

In relation to Aboriginal English, the Review identified that:

*As in primary school, the language differences between Aboriginal students and teachers can create difficulties in communication for both. When this cannot be overcome, Aboriginal students may lose interest in class activities, disengage from learning, possibly misbehave and eventually begin to truant. The legitimacy of Aboriginal English and the need to assist teachers to understand its use is important to many communities.<sup>7</sup>*

The *Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education* was published in 2004, detailing 71 recommendations emanating from the Review, six of which focused on Aboriginal languages:

8. *That DET develop a NSW DET Aboriginal Human Resource Development Plan which would include personnel planning, recruitment, career development, professional development, mentoring and the provision of support for Aboriginal employees...The plan should address ways in which Aboriginal people may be employed in targeted projects, e.g. **speakers of Aboriginal languages.***

12. *That as part of the quality teaching program for school teachers, the Department enhances the curriculum support to teachers by developing, in consultation with the Board of Studies, Aboriginal communities, Elders and the NSW AECG, an Aboriginal Education teaching framework for Aboriginal students that delivers:*

- a) protocols for the development and implementation of curriculum with Aboriginal communities*
- b) a P–12 framework for Aboriginal Studies (including the elective Aboriginal Studies course)*
- c) regional support material that identifies Aboriginal cultural knowledge, skills and expertise that can be accessed by schools*
- d) **regional plans that ensure that schools with high numbers of Aboriginal students have access to language and cultural education programs***
- e) regional reporting that demonstrates increased involvement and participation with Aboriginal communities in the development of culturally appropriate curriculum.*

26. *That **the teaching of Aboriginal languages in schools** be intensively supported by existing state and regional staff in partnership with the NSW and regional AECGs and be given highest priority in funding for languages programs commencing in schools with high Aboriginal student enrolments. (It is intended that these Aboriginal language programs will meet the BOS requirements for LOTE provision.)*

43. *That mandatory pre-service and in-service training in Aboriginal education, particularly in **Aboriginal cultures and cultural knowledge**, be developed in consultation with local communities and be provided for all teachers, school executives and principals (commencing in 2005 in schools with high proportions*

---

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.113

of Aboriginal students). This material would complement or be part of other professional development programs on Aboriginal education, e.g. Recommendation 10.

44. That this training include specific content in the following areas: **Aboriginal languages**, community partnerships, Aboriginal history and Aboriginal cultural knowledge, relationship between Aboriginal English and standard Australian English. This would complement Recommendation 12.

51. That DET negotiate agreements with universities and industries within New South Wales to further engage their expertise to improve the outcomes for Aboriginal students. Such engagement could include:

- a) identifying the implications of the NSW Quality Teaching Framework for teaching Aboriginal students
- b) conducting case studies in schools where the framework is being implemented in classrooms with significant Aboriginal populations
- c) mentoring of students, gifted and talented programs, research, project work with remote locations, **languages**, distance or on-line enrichment programs, collegial support for classroom teachers.

The large majority of the Report's 71 recommendations, and all six of those which make reference to the learning and teaching of Aboriginal languages and cultures and to the training support needs and employment of Aboriginal people involved in this endeavour, have been actioned as part of NSW Department of Education and Communities' commitment to ensuring that Aboriginal student outcomes will match or better those of their peers. In short, the learning and teaching of Aboriginal languages and cultures is seen as a means of improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal students, and as a means of facilitating reconciliation and cross-cultural understanding and respect. The significance, to this process, of working with community on the design and delivery of Aboriginal language and cultural programs is unequivocal.

### ***Bringing them home: the 'Stolen Children' Report, 1997 and the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Report, 1991***

Apart from the *Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education*, a number of landmark reports such as, *Bringing them home: the 'Stolen Children' Report* by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, and the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody*, drew attention to the link between education policies and practices which were exclusionary or marginalising, in relation to Aboriginal children and young people, and poor Aboriginal student outcomes. A failure to value and respect Aboriginal peoples, their histories, cultures (including languages), and contexts – systematically, up until quite recently in Australian education, resulted, more often than not, in the inadequate, inappropriate and irrelevant design and delivery of Aboriginal education and training.

The *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* and *Bringing them home* reports both emphasise the significance of language to Aboriginal peoples and communities and to how deeply cultural 'well being' is linked to language:

*11.12.30 The maintenance and revitalization of Aboriginal culture has been critical in giving support to many Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people want*

*their culture respected but, also, they want it to be understood. Throughout Australia museums and culture centres are being opened to the public. I believe that these processes will do much to improve relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and will also play a part in restoring pride and confidence to those Aboriginal people who have found the oppression of the broader society difficult to bear. The preservation of Aboriginal languages is an important aspect of the retention and revitalization of culture.*

## **The Constitutional imperative**

The NSW Constitution now recognises Aboriginal people as the first people and nations of NSW; as the traditional custodians and occupants of the land in NSW. This constitutional acknowledgment of the strong spiritual, social, cultural and economic relationships which Aboriginal people have with their traditional lands and waters, and the unique contribution that their ancestors have made, and that Aboriginal people and communities continue to make, to the identity of NSW, is significant. It signals a mind-shift in government thinking and governmental intent in relation to Aboriginal peoples in NSW.

## **Preventing further language loss**

Throughout millennia, Aboriginal people have maintained connection to country through their language. Despite a modern history often marked by bloody and brutal dispossession and removal from country, by systematic suppression of culture and of language, Aboriginal people have striven to keep their languages alive. Sadly, many languages have been lost forever. There were once more than seventy Aboriginal languages used throughout the area that is now known as NSW. Today, with those surviving Aboriginal languages in danger of also being lost, there is overwhelming support in Aboriginal communities for not only language revival, but loss prevention. The process of reviving, retaining and preserving Aboriginal languages is seen by many as part of a path to reconciliation, restoration of pride and strengthening of connection to people and country.

The potential negative impacts of loss of language are reflected in the statement by the Australian Human Rights Commission in its Social Justice Report for 2009 which stated:

*In terms of cultural heritage, the loss of Indigenous languages in Australia is a loss for all Australians. For the Indigenous peoples whose languages are affected, the loss has wide ranging impacts on culture, identity and health. Cultural knowledge and concepts are carried through languages. Where languages are eroded and lost, so too is the cultural knowledge. This in turn has potential to impact on the health and well-being of Indigenous peoples. There is now significant research which demonstrates that strong culture and identity are protective factors for Indigenous people, assisting us to develop resilience.<sup>8</sup>*

In 2004, the NSW Government adopted the Aboriginal Languages Policy and since then, in partnership with Aboriginal communities, significant steps in language revival have been

---

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social\\_justice/sj\\_report/sjreport09/pdf/sjr\\_ch3.pdf](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/sj_report/sjreport09/pdf/sjr_ch3.pdf)



made. The emphasis has been on Aboriginal language teaching and learning, particularly through the formal education system. Revitalising Aboriginal languages by focussing on greater language use in communities and by establishing community based language support networks is seen as essential to preventing further language loss.

To this end, the Department of Education and Communities is working closely with the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc.<sup>9</sup> to ensure that community participation is maximised in order to have effective delivery of community-based programs, such as language programs.

The Department's *Aboriginal Education and Training Strategy, 2009-2012* states under the "Ongoing Learning for staff and students focus area":

*Acknowledge the connections between identity, Aboriginal Culture and wellbeing in professional learning and leadership development programs."*

To assist in realising the Department's stated strategic and policy objectives, the Aboriginal Education and Training Directorate has a language program with committed funds and personnel in order to contribute to the outcomes for Aboriginal language education, in both the TAFE NSW and School portfolios.

There are a number of Aboriginal teachers who have approval to deliver Aboriginal language courses. This approval is essentially community based. Aboriginal teachers are also able to apply for sponsorship from the Department's Aboriginal Education and Training Directorate, for HECS contributions and relief payments, to attend study blocks in order to complete the postgraduate Master of Indigenous Language Education program (details provided later in this submission).

In addition, under the Aboriginal Languages Program, funds are made available on a submission basis for the delivery of language programs. Crucial and central to these programs is the employment of local Aboriginal language speakers.

The *Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century 1999*, espoused 'A Model Of More Culturally Inclusive and Educationally Effective Schools' which has the stated goal of:

*The school community acknowledges the close relationship between low levels of Indigenous educational outcomes and poverty, health, housing and access to government services and infrastructure by developing cross-portfolio mechanisms to address these issues.*

---

<sup>9</sup> The NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc. – NSW Department of Education and Communities' foremost partner in matters relating to Aboriginal education and training in NSW.

As a signatory to that statement, the NSW Department of Education and Communities is committed to continuing its efforts to improving the overall individual and collective educational and vocational outcomes for Aboriginal peoples and communities in NSW.

## **2: The contribution of Indigenous languages to Closing the Gap and strengthening Indigenous identity and culture**

The NSW Department of Education and Communities is committed to *Closing the Gap* in education outcomes between Aboriginal and other students and is keenly aware that to improve Aboriginal student: participation in prior-to-school and early childhood learning programs; school engagement; school attendance, retention and completion; literacy and numeracy outcomes; transitions to further education and training; and, economic and employment outcomes – an emphasis on quality teaching is essential.

The Department acknowledges that if Aboriginal students are engaged by quality teaching in a culturally appropriate, relevant and meaningful learning process, then a Closing of the Gap will occur. Ensuring students have access to Aboriginal languages programs is an essential element of this learning process.

The NSW *Aboriginal Education and Training Policy* defines the NSW Department of Education and Communities' strong commitments to Aboriginal education and training across all areas of public education in NSW. In particular, with regard to Aboriginal languages and culture, the Policy states:

- 1.1 Commitments
  - 1.1.5 The strength, diversity, ownership and richness of Aboriginal cultures and Custodianship of Country are respected, valued and promoted.
- 1.5 The Department in partnership with the NSW AECG Inc and Aboriginal communities and organisations will:
  - 1.5.4 implement:
    - Aboriginal studies programs
    - Aboriginal languages programs
    - Aboriginal cross-curriculum content within schools
  - 1.5.5 incorporate the cultural contexts, values and practices of local Aboriginal communities in to the mainstream delivery of education and training
- 1.6 The Department will consult with local Aboriginal communities and support teachers to:
  - 1.6.6 provide all students with opportunities to develop deeper understandings of Aboriginal histories, cultures and languages through:
    - Aboriginal studies
    - Aboriginal languages
    - Aboriginal cross-curriculum content within schools

The NSW Department of Education and Communities' policy position regarding Aboriginal languages programs is thus clearly indicated. In putting this policy into practice, the Department is taking action, both independently and as part of a broader whole of government agenda to Close the Gap and overcome Indigenous disadvantage, in both the School and TAFE NSW portfolios, and the broader Vocational Education and Training sector.

*Recommendation 20:*

*That the NSW Government provide ongoing support and resources for continuing Indigenous language programs, recording of oral histories and the compilation of Indigenous dictionaries. The Premier should take ownership of this opportunity to raise the profile of Indigenous issues and emphasise the importance placed on Indigenous languages and culture by the NSW Government.<sup>10</sup>*

### Schooling

Aboriginal languages programs operate in NSW public schools to enable Aboriginal communities to preserve, teach and utilise their community languages and to provide opportunities for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students from Kindergarten to Year 12 to learn an Aboriginal language. In 2010, Aboriginal community members were employed as Aboriginal language tutors to deliver the following languages: Bundjalung, Wiradjuri, Dhurga, Dharug, Dharawal, Gumbaynggir, Yuwaalaraay/Gamilaraay, Ngiyampaa, Thunghutti/Dunghutti, Paakantji/Barkandji, Wangkumarra and Ngemba.

In 2010, funding was provided to 36 schools to support the continued implementation of Aboriginal language programs featuring thirteen Aboriginal languages. In total, 7986 students participated in Aboriginal language programs, including 1571 Aboriginal learners and 6415 non-Aboriginal learners, whilst at the same time providing casual employment to 44 Aboriginal language speakers.

Aboriginal teachers are also able to apply to the Department of Education and Communities' Aboriginal Education and Training Directorate for sponsorship for HECS contributions and relief payments and to attend study blocks in order to complete the postgraduate Master of Indigenous Language Education course.

The Master of Indigenous Language Education course is a collaborative action between the Department of Education and Communities and the University of Sydney. The aim of the course is to sponsor eligible, qualified Aboriginal teachers, working in NSW schools, to undertake specialist language retraining in order to teach NSW Aboriginal languages in NSW public schools and support the learning needs of students in Aboriginal languages.

The course is delivered in an away-from-base mode over three one-week blocks each semester for one year. It is delivered flexibly through block release. Teachers remain in their work settings and carry out their usual teaching duties during the period of retraining. No language proficiency is required prior to undertaking the course.

---

<sup>10</sup> Standing Committee on Social Issues, *Overcoming Indigenous disadvantage in New South Wales, Final Report, 2008*

## TAFE NSW

Research undertaken by Alfred Michael Dockery, referred to earlier, who, as well as citing both the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision's *Overcoming Indigenous disadvantage: Key indicators 2007* report<sup>11</sup> and Miller, of the National Centre for Vocational Education Research<sup>12</sup>, supports TAFE NSW's analysis that Aboriginal Culture, and therefore language, are critical contributors to the vocational education and training outcomes of Aboriginal people and therefore warrant the investment of resources.

*Overall it must be said that the empirical analysis offers some positive results with respect to the appropriateness of the delivery of VET in Australia since, with the exception of remote and very remote Australia, people with stronger cultural attachment achieve higher levels of education, are more likely to participate in a VET training course and more likely to use that training.*<sup>13</sup>

*While Indigenous participation in post-secondary education has increased markedly in recent years, non-Indigenous people are still 1.6 times as likely to go to university. Indigenous people are actually more likely to undertake VET, but tend to enter lower-level courses (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2007, chapter 3; Miller 2005).*<sup>14</sup>

Dockery goes on to further cite Miller:

*Miller identifies community ownership and involvement, and the incorporation of Indigenous identities, cultures, knowledge and values as key factors leading to better outcomes from VET (2005, p.50).*<sup>15</sup>

The success of TAFE NSW in contributing to *Closing the Gap* and strengthening Aboriginal identity and culture in NSW is evident by the significant numbers of Aboriginal people choosing TAFE NSW as their training provider of choice.

Participation by Aboriginal students in TAFE NSW has increased significantly over the past five years. In 2010, there were 35,198 Aboriginal students enrolled in TAFE NSW courses, comprising 6.3 percent of all enrolments. This represents an increase of 51.4 per cent since 2006. In 2010, a total of 10,262 Aboriginal students enrolled in TAFE NSW courses at Certificate III level and above. This represents an increase of 72.9 per cent since 2006.

TAFE NSW has invested in establishing Aboriginal structures at Institute and central levels to ensure that the education and training needs of Aboriginal peoples are met and matched to industry and community outcomes by contributing to and building on the strength of

---

<sup>11</sup> Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision: *Overcoming Indigenous disadvantage: Key indicators 2007*, Productivity Commission, Canberra

<sup>12</sup> *Aspects of training that meet Indigenous Australians' aspirations: A systematic review of research*, NCVET, 2005

<sup>13</sup> *Cultural dimensions of Indigenous participation in education and training*, Alfred Michael Dockery, Curtin Business School, Curtin University, NCVET MONOGRAPH SERIES 02/2009, p.38

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.16

Aboriginal identity and culture. TAFE NSW's contribution to supporting the revitalisation of Aboriginal Languages in NSW is a significant component of this work.

The NSW Department of Education and Communities' Aboriginal Education and Training Directorate, in partnership with TAFE NSW Training and Education Support - Social Inclusion and Vocational Access Skills Unit, conducted a need and demand investigation for the development of an Aboriginal Language(s) program. The need and demand study clearly identified the need to develop and deliver a course in Aboriginal Language.

In 2007, TAFE NSW developed three nationally-recognised qualifications in Aboriginal Language/s at Certificate I, II and III levels. Each of the qualifications can be customised to deliver training in any Aboriginal language, following consultation with and appropriate permission from Elders and/or knowledge-holders in the local community. The Certificate III in Aboriginal Language/s provides advanced standing to several degree courses at the University of Sydney.

As at 31 December 2010, Aboriginal course enrolments totalled 532 across all three qualifications for Aboriginal Languages such as, Kamilaroi and Wiradjuri.

<b>Aboriginal Enrolments TAFE NSW</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>
17411 Aboriginal Language/s - Certificate I (NRT)	25	78	160	131
17412 Aboriginal Language/s - Certificate II (NRT)	0	18	36	32
17413 Aboriginal Language/s - Certificate III (NRT)	0	14	31	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>227</b>	<b>170</b>

Source: Datawarehouse 25 July 2011

In 2011, the Aboriginal Education and Training Directorate granted funding for TAFE NSW Institutes to further support the development of customised language resources for the Certificate I in Aboriginal Language.

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

There are multiple benefits to be derived from including Indigenous languages in early education:

- The development of positive partnerships between the local community and schools/pre-schools. Studies have shown that students and the local community respond positively to schools that include Aboriginal cultural programs, including language programs, in the school setting.
- Involving community members and Elders in the teaching/learning process has positive impacts on Aboriginal children.
- By offering Aboriginal languages programs, schools/pre-schools actively reinforce Aboriginal student identity and self-esteem and, by valuing Aboriginal languages,

communicate to families and communities that their children will be nurtured and their cultures respected.

- By ensuring young Aboriginal children are exposed to learning about their own
- cultures, the likelihood of their engagement is increased and their attendance and retention outcomes improved.
- A positive way to involve local community members in the classroom to assist with the development of the resources.

Tom Calma, in his final Social Justice Report as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, focused on the need to preserve and teach Indigenous languages<sup>16</sup>. He proposed that doing so promotes resilience, leads to improved health and cognitive functioning, and increased employment options. He also wrote about the “intrinsic value” of Indigenous languages and how their loss impacts on the collective and individual psyche of Aboriginal peoples.

With specific reference to children, Calma cited the work of Lee<sup>17</sup>:

*When children lose productive as well as receptive knowledge of their native language, communication barriers result. Moreover, given a population of preschool-aged children, such barriers can be disastrous as parents are then limited in their ability to socialize and teach their children during a critical period of early childhood social, cognitive, and linguistic development. In such instances, parents are left unable to transmit knowledge, cultural values, and belief systems effectively.*

#### Recommendation:

With this in mind, the NSW Department of Education and Communities recommends that the Commonwealth funds a research project that focuses on the early years sector including what resource development is required, how the issue of Indigenous languages can be addressed in teacher training and, in practice, how communities can be involved in language education in the early years.

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

Aboriginal English is a recognised dialect of English and is used throughout Australia by Aboriginal people to communicate effectively in a broad range of contexts.

Standard Australian English is also a dialect of English. However, it is the dialect of schooling and formal communication within Australian society. It is essential for Aboriginal students to gain competence in using Standard Australian English in order to participate in the formal schooling process.

<sup>16</sup> *Social Justice Report 2009*, Australian Human Rights Commission, pp68-122

<sup>17</sup> Lee P., "Cognitive development in bilingual children: A case for bilingual instruction in early childhood education". *The Bilingual Research Journal*, Summer/Fall 1996, Vol. 20, Nos. 3 & 4, p.516

Many Aboriginal students in NSW's public schools use some form of Aboriginal English as their main language. Many Aboriginal students are bi-dialectal, meaning they use both Aboriginal English and Standard Australian English at home and at school.

Aboriginal students who are enrolling in school and who speak an Aboriginal language and require ESL assistance, are eligible for support under the English as a Second Language — Indigenous Language Speaking Students (ESL-ILSS) program.

Very few local NSW students access the ESL-ILSS program. Generally, it is only used when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students move from interstate (usually NT and QLD) and enrol in a NSW Public school. However, when an Aboriginal student is enrolled in a NSW public school, parents can nominate the Aboriginal language background other than English (LBOTE) that is spoken at home. Aboriginal English is one of the LBOTE categories which parents can choose.

Schools can include Aboriginal students in their ESL programs if the students need ESL support and if the students live in communities or homes in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are heard and spoken.

At this stage, many students who speak Aboriginal English are not seen by schools as requiring ESL support within the NSW school system. It is a school decision as to which students are identified as requiring ESL support.

Currently, the Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority (ACARA) is using the acronym EAL/D (English as an additional language or dialect) instead of ESL to describe those LBOTE students who are learning English as a second language.

If this use is adopted across the NSW school system, then there may be educational and systemic implications for Aboriginal students who speak Aboriginal English as a second dialect.

The NSW Department of Education and Communities' Aboriginal Education and Training Directorate provides professional learning and advice to teachers in developing bi-dialectal approaches to teaching Standard Australian English to Aboriginal students who speak Aboriginal English as their home dialect.

Based on 2010 data, 501 Aboriginal students have accessed ESL programs conducted through the Department's Multicultural Programs Unit.

The Department of Education and Communities offers the *Effective ESL Pedagogies for Aboriginal Students* program. This program provides teachers with the knowledge, skills and practical strategies for teaching Aboriginal students who use a non-standard dialect as their first home language. The two-day course supports the application of English as a Second Language pedagogies in delivering English literacy to Aboriginal students who speak Aboriginal English as their home dialect. The course is available to staff in eighty-eight strategically targeted NSW schools.

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

The *Closing the Gap* agenda, which has been given further impetus by the implementation, throughout Australia, of the new *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-2014*, is predicated upon the premise that, by supporting Aboriginal learners of all ages to succeed educationally, they will go on to also succeed vocationally.

The emphasis on literacy (and numeracy) skill development underpins this success. Ensuring Aboriginal learners develop competency in English language is therefore fundamental to *Closing the Gap* and supporting Aboriginal people and communities to thrive and prosper.

There are three (3) *Closing the Gap* targets in education and training, namely:

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

The Department of Education and Communities has developed a suite of projects to address *Closing the Gap* and to address Aboriginal student literacy (and numeracy) needs both in schools and TAFE colleges. The initiatives include workshops for parents and community members to build capacity and strengthen engagement with schools and TAFE colleges.

These initiatives include the *Norta Norta* Program, the *Schools in Partnership* initiative and *Connecting to Country*.

The *Norta Norta* Program fund schools to:

- provide learning support for Aboriginal students in Years 4, 6, 8 and 10. In 2011, 682 schools and 2,213 Aboriginal students in Years 4, 6, 8 and 10 receive *Norta Norta* funding as they were either at or below the national minimum standards in all 5 of the 2010 National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) domains in Years 3, 5, 7 or 9;
- provide tutorial assistance for senior Aboriginal students. In 2011, around 2,664 Year 11 and 12 students receive *Norta Norta* funding;
- provide learning support for Kindergarten students in the *Wabinya* Early Year's pilot program in 45 schools in central western NSW. These students are identified through data from the 2011 Best Start Assessment;
- develop culturally inclusive literacy (and numeracy) assessment tools in order to provide intensive learning support for Aboriginal students in the education training units located in 8 Juvenile Justice Centres.

The *Schools in Partnership* initiative aids schools with significant Aboriginal student enrolments to improve student outcomes by implementing strategies developed in partnership with local



school communities. In 2011, Phase 3 of the initiative is being implemented in 89 schools (69 individual schools and 20 schools in 5 Communities of Schools). Each Partnership school receives between \$30,000 and \$240,000 yearly to

implement strategies to improve teaching and learning outcomes and strengthen Aboriginal community engagement.

*Connecting to Country* is a quality teaching initiative funded through the Australian Government's *Closing the Gap* initiative. It focuses on enhancing teacher quality and leadership by engaging teachers and principals in a learning journey which demonstrates a deep knowledge and understanding of the cultural, historical and socio-political contexts relating to Aboriginal peoples, locally and generally. This program provides direct input into the contextualising of knowledge about local Aboriginal communities by principals and teachers about communities' literacies including Aboriginal English and variations of localised dialects.

Research overwhelmingly supports the fact that having adequate literacy and English language skills is necessary to gain and maintain employment in the labour market.

*Within Australia, Chiswick, Lee and Miller (2003) used data from the survey<sup>18</sup> to examine the effects of literacy, numeracy and schooling on labour market outcomes. It was found that approximately half of the total effect of schooling on labour force participation and on unemployment can be attributed to literacy and numeracy skills.<sup>19</sup>*

Hartley and Horne go on to report that:

*...the impact of low school achievement in literacy and numeracy on unemployment has been measured using the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth dataset. Marks and Fleming (1998) found that low school achievement in literacy and numeracy was consistently associated with youth unemployment, with effects continuing through to the age of 33.<sup>20</sup>*

And that there is:

*...a significant relationship between investments in human capital (literacy levels) and a country's subsequent economic growth and labour productivity.<sup>21</sup>*

Whilst being competent in the use and understanding of English language is important if Aboriginal people are to attain successful educational and training outcomes, it is interesting to note that recent discussions emerging from partnerships between Industry and TAFE NSW

---

<sup>18</sup> The International Adult Literacy Survey is the main data source for international and national information on adult literacy proficiency. The survey was coordinated by the OECD and Human Resources Development Canada (1997) and conducted between 1994 and 1998 in 30 countries, including Australia. Australia had a sample of over 9000 people, the largest of any participating country, and Australian findings are reported in *Aspects of literacy: Assessed literacy skills* (ABS 1997a).

<sup>19</sup> *Social and economic benefits of improved adult literacy: Towards a better understanding*, Robyn Hartley, Jackie Horne, Australian Council for Adult Literacy, National Council for Vocational Educational Research, 2006, p.15

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15

point to the issue that English Language competency is not considered adequate to guarantee sustainable employment, whereas competency in workplace or Industry language is.

TAFE NSW provides Aboriginal people of NSW with the opportunity to strengthen their English language competency and, in partnership with Industry, to obtain workplace language competency. All courses in TAFE NSW have literacy development embedded. The level of literacy is equivalent to the level of the Australian Qualifications Framework level, that is, AQF level 1 courses have a different level of literacy to AQF level 4 courses. Workplace literacy is a separate but related issue and addressed through specific course development between TAFE NSW and industry.

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

There is no doubt that the maintenance and revitalisation of Aboriginal languages are critical: too many languages have been irretrievably lost.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics<sup>22</sup> records only some 800 Aboriginal people in NSW who indicate that they speak an Aboriginal language. This means that, of those surviving NSW Aboriginal languages, few have sufficient numbers of speakers, recordings or research materials that can support the speaking and teaching of these languages.<sup>23</sup> The NSW Department of Education and Communities then has two major roles in the Aboriginal languages discipline:

- the appropriate, invitational involvement in retaining and preserving those Aboriginal languages which have survived, including Wiradjuri, Bundjalung, Gumbaynggir, Kamilaroi, Paarkantji, Dharawal, Dharug and Dhurga
- working with communities in the revitalisation and reclamation of their languages. The Department's Aboriginal Education and Training Directorate supports Aboriginal language programs when requested by communities.

It must be emphasised that the NSW Government and the Department of Education and Communities acknowledge that Aboriginal communities have the primary responsibility for Aboriginal language transmission and, accordingly, have prime responsibility for leading language revitalisation and reclamation. The Department and the NSW Government will continue to support Aboriginal peoples and communities as they endeavour to do this.

To this end, the NSW Government has recently allocated funding to the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc. to establish the Centre for Aboriginal Languages Coordination and Development. The NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc. will work to establish the centre over the next three years and concentrate on efforts to reclaim, revitalise and maintain NSW Aboriginal languages.

*If a community wants to revive a language, then the community must gather information about that language. This information may be hard to find and*

<sup>22</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing 2006

<sup>23</sup> *Two Ways Together* Report on Indicators 2009, p.127

*community members may have to locate language information through a wide range of people and organisations. This process can be time-consuming*

*and challenging, but it can also be very rewarding, with the whole community sharing the rewards well into the future. (It's a hard road to hoe - Designing a Community Language Project, 2006)*

The Aboriginal Education and Training Directorate is in negotiation with the Centre for Aboriginal Languages Coordination and Development in order to bolster the language development and community participation in language education programs.

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

In August 2009, the Commonwealth announced the first national policy to focus exclusively on Indigenous languages: *Indigenous Languages – A National Approach 2009*.

The Australian Human Rights Commission's 2009 Social Justice Report posits this commentary on the National Approach:

*In August 2009 the Australian Government released the National Approach with the aim of preserving and promoting Indigenous languages. This policy comes at a crucial time. It reflects the will of the Government to take remedial action. However, the National Approach is not accompanied by an increase in funding and therefore can do little more than is currently being done to prevent the language decline.*

*The current situation regarding support and promotion of Indigenous languages is fraught by differing and contradictory policies across the Commonwealth, state and territory governments. On the one hand, the Commonwealth has a National Approach which acknowledges the value of Indigenous languages and supports their preservation and promotion. On the other hand, some state and territory governments have policies which ignore Indigenous languages or limit Indigenous language teaching in the interests of promoting English literacy. Current Indigenous language policy in Australia is inconsistent and in some cases contradictory.<sup>24</sup>*

The Commission comments further that:

*The centrepiece of Indigenous language **funding** in Australia is the Maintenance of Indigenous Languages and Records (MILR) program administered through the Department of Environment Heritage and the Arts. The MILR program funds a range of organisations to develop language databases, resources and programs through a grants application process. This program has been in operation for a number of years and is now the sole source of funding for the Commonwealth's new National Approach. No new money has been added to the MILR to meet the*

<sup>24</sup> *Social Justice Report 2009*, Australian Human Rights Commission, p 70.

*new obligations of the National Approach. The allocation of \$9.3 million to MILR for 2009–10 was*

*committed **prior** to the National Approach. This means that the Commonwealth has been unable to be responsive to situations that are new obligations. For example, the recent abolition of bilingual education funding by the Northern Territory Government now requires the attention of the Commonwealth Government if it is to implement the fifth element of its National Approach which is: “supporting the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages in Australian schools?”*

*Unless there is new money and mechanisms to regulate state and territory Indigenous languages policy, it is unlikely that the National Approach will change the status quo and reverse the language decline. The National Approach has so far been impotent in directing the states and territories to comply with its objectives. For example, the National Approach has not changed the education policy of the Northern Territory which aims to dismantle Indigenous bilingual education.*

***The divide between Commonwealth, state and territory policy is a large obstacle in the implementation of coherent direction in areas such as education. Cooperative federalism is a worthy aspiration, though it is rarely a straightforward process and it is often reliant on Commonwealth funding incentives and COAG agreements.***<sup>25</sup>

As the Report also comments:

*We know that school education is crucial in the preservation of Indigenous languages, and therefore the policies of the states and territories are very important.*<sup>26</sup>

It is difficult to argue with the perspective put forth in the Social Justice Report. While the Commonwealth has demonstrated that it values Indigenous languages and supports, in theory, the need to preserve and teach them, without increased funding to match the commitments implied by, and the objectives defined in, the National Approach, NSW and its like-minded counterparts can only continue to do the best they can with the resources they have available.

In the meantime, NSW strongly endorses the Recommendations made in the 2009 Social Justice Report:

*In order to implement Article 13 of The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and in recognition that the Australian Government has a strategic role in Indigenous language preservation, that the Australian Government commit to the following:*

---

<sup>25</sup> *Social Justice Report 2009*, Australian Human Rights Commission, pp. 80-81

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p.70

- *Immediately fund a national working group with the task of establishing a national Indigenous languages body as per the commitment of Indigenous Languages – A National Approach.*
- *Commit to the development of a national Indigenous languages body with functions and responsibilities similar to those of the Māori Language Commission.*
- *Utilise the expertise of the national body to assess the required resources for critically endangered languages and commit these resources immediately.*
- *Agree to resource an ongoing plan of action for the preservation and promotion of Indigenous languages as recommended by the national Indigenous languages body.*
- *Become a signatory to the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003).*
- *Through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), develop agreements with all governments to ensure consistency and compliance with Australia's Indigenous Languages – A National Approach.*
- *Commence a process to recognise Indigenous languages in the preamble of Australia's Constitution with a view to recognising Indigenous languages in the body of the Constitution in future.*

In 2004, the NSW Government developed an Aboriginal Languages Policy and a strategic action plan through the *Two Ways Together*, Aboriginal Affairs Plan 2003-2012. As the 2009 Social Justice Report indicates, 'NSW is the only jurisdiction to have a stand-alone Indigenous languages policy' that 'sits across different portfolio areas'<sup>27</sup>.

Community based language projects are being undertaken in NSW in a number of forms, and continue to develop in size and scope as the momentum for language revival grows. Some examples are:

- Recording oral histories from language speakers.
- Development of community based educational programs and curriculum coordination.
- Inclusion of Aboriginal language studies in education curriculums at local and state levels.
- Development and implementation of tertiary education programs.
- Development of the languages in written form.
- Diversification of schooling programs to combine study of local language and culture with English teaching systems.
- Development of print and digital publications and materials for both educational purposes and retail distribution.
- Incorporation of Aboriginal languages into art, entertainment, broadcasting and video production.
- Mobilisation of new technologies to record, store and share information.

---

<sup>27</sup> *Social Justice Report, 2009*, Australian Human Rights Commission, p.119

TAFE NSW has developed three qualifications to contribute to the revitalisation of Aboriginal languages in NSW. In 2011, the Aboriginal Education and Training Directorate provided funding for the continued revitalisation of Aboriginal languages in NSW.

However, the work being done in NSW, by government in partnership with community, is only the beginning of the work required to retain, preserve, promote and teach Aboriginal languages. Further work and resources will focus on:

- Increasing numbers of Aboriginal Language teachers.
- Increasing the range and number of resources to effectively deliver Aboriginal Languages programs.
- Developing stronger linkages between the school and vocational education and training sectors in terms of Aboriginal Language studies. This includes development of a Stage 6 Aboriginal Language syllabus and development of Aboriginal Languages courses beyond Certificate III. Of course, it also requires the continued cross-fertilisation of VET in Schools so that NSW public school students can readily access TAFE NSW courses.

## CONCLUSION

The NSW Department of Education and Communities remains fully committed to ensuring Aboriginal learners, within Schools and TAFE NSW portfolios, succeed so that they can access the benefits that flow from formal education including those relating to employment, socio-economic status and health. The role of Aboriginal Language education is significant in this process and will remain a key priority.

Of course, as with any program of this nature, there is always immense competition for available resources. There is obviously great demand for communities to access Aboriginal Languages programs conducted through the Department and any additional tied funding for the further implementation of Aboriginal Languages programs would be looked upon favourably.

It must be recognised that in the issue of Aboriginal Languages, there are four major stakeholders: local Communities and Speakers; the Commonwealth; the State; and, the Department of Education and Communities' Aboriginal Education and Training Directorate. All four stakeholders have independent, but related roles to play. The Commonwealth's role, in particular, is crucial, as the Commonwealth can provide strong leadership, direction and funding to ensure that communities can maintain their right to engage with their traditional languages. This is no less true in NSW where the demand for languages revitalisation, reclamation and maintenance is increasing due in part to the NSW Government's transfer of languages responsibility from a government department to a community based organisation, that is, in the establishment of the Centre for Aboriginal Languages Coordination and Development by the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc.

Given NSW's commitment to, and efforts in, building the strength of Aboriginal peoples and communities and ensuring the future of Aboriginal languages, it is appropriate that NSW receive a fair and reasonable proportion of any funding available from the Commonwealth for the retention, preservation, promotion and delivery of Aboriginal languages education programs. And more funding is, without doubt, needed if this work is to accelerate and be definitively meaningful. In this, the Social Justice Report of 2009 is unarguably correct.