

CHAPTER 2

BENEFITS FROM SPEAKING LANGUAGE



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KEY FINDINGS:



- Language is a fundamental part of Indigenous culture and identity, even for those who do not speak an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a range of different relationships to language – from those who speak an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language as their first language to those who are learning a language as part of revival efforts.
- All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, traditional and new, provide significant social and economic benefits to their speakers, including income-generating and employment opportunities.
- Speaking language has demonstrated benefits for individual well-being and health, particularly mental health. Speaking language is also beneficial in learning contexts.

ADDITIONAL FINDINGS:

Speakers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages both traditional and new:

Are more likely to earn an income from arts, crafts and cultural activities.

People speaking Indigenous languages as their main language are six to 11 percentage pointsⁱⁱ more likely to earn income from arts practice, crafts and cultural activities than English-only speakers.⁴⁹

Are more likely to report social connectedness and social efficacy.

Speaking an Indigenous language is associated with a 10 percentage point increase in the probability of people feeling like they have a say in their own community, and a 12 percentage point increase in the probability of frequent contact with family members and friends.⁵⁰

Are more likely to report having higher positive emotional well-being.

People speaking Indigenous languages are 11 percentage points more likely to feel happy, full of

life, calm and full of energy than those speaking only English.⁵¹

Are more likely to participate in other land and sea-based livelihood activities.

The probability of people engaging in activities that provide food to families, such as involvement in hunting, gathering and fishing is greater by 31 percentage points for speakers of Indigenous languages than English-only speakers.⁵²

Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages in communities has resulted in:

- Increased regard and trust for institutions that engage with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.⁵³
- Increased student confidence and engagement.⁵⁴
- Increased community pride in the local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander culture.⁵⁵

Harnessing language:

- Increases productivity and/or competitiveness for particular businesses in land management, tourism and hospitality, and service sectors.⁵⁶

ii In common usage, the number that is '10 per cent higher than 20 per cent' could be understood as referring either to 22 per cent or to 30 per cent. To avoid this ambiguity, in this Report the numerical difference between two percentages is always given in percentage points. For example, 30 per cent is 10 percentage points higher than 20 per cent; 50 per cent is 12 percentage points lower than 62 per cent.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people repeatedly assert that individuals, families and communities can achieve better life outcomes if they maintain or develop knowledge and use of their languages.⁵⁹ These assertions are supported by the research commissioned by the Australian Government and undertaken by the ANU for this Report, to clarify the relationship between the use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and well-being indicators, as well as by the findings of the NILS2 attitude survey.⁶⁰

This ANU research is the first study that quantifies the economic and social benefits associated with speaking Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. It also examines whether the various benefits differ by level of language proficiency. The study systematically recognises Australia's complex language landscape by using a framework that considers the social-cultural purposes of how language is used, together with the language ecology of particular areas.

For example, actively re-learning a language is a different activity compared with speaking a language spoken from childhood as an everyday means of communication, and they are likely to have different effects on individuals. Likewise, speaking or re-learning a language in a place where many people speak (or are re-learning) that language is likely to have a different effect on well-being compared with the effects of being one of a handful of people in an area who speaks that language.

By using a systematic ecology approach for recognising nuances in the language landscape, the ANU researchers were able to analyse the 2014–15 NATSISS,⁶¹ and draw on academic literature to provide rigorous quantitative and qualitative evidence that shows the benefits of speaking an Indigenous language, traditional or new (as these are not differentiated in the NATSISS data set). The findings of the study can be grouped in the interrelated categories of Economic and Social Capital (social, cultural and emotional).



MYTH: ONE LANGUAGE IS ALL WE NEED - ENGLISH

In many countries people are multilingual. Australia is no exception - according to the 2016 Census more than 20 per cent of Australians speak a language other than English at home.⁵⁷

In the past, as today, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people spoke more than one language. There is some evidence that knowing more than one language is not only useful in expanding the number of people an individual can talk with, it also seems to help with certain mental tasks, such as working memory tasks.⁵⁸

WELL-BEING INDICATORS

This Report acknowledges that these well-being categories do not necessarily correspond to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, which tend to conceptualise well-being in a more holistic manner, reflecting the social, cultural and emotional well-being of the whole community, and encompassing a broad range of issues including social justice, rights, traditional knowledge, and connection to Country.⁶² The well-being categories in Table 2.1 have been distinguished in this Report in the context of existing data collection methods, to help frame the discussion of the benefits of language.⁶³



Table 2.1: Well-being indicators in NATSISS 2014–15 data

WELL-BEING INDICATORS	NATSISS 2014–15 data
Spiritual well-being and cultural identity	Whether identifies with clan tribal or language group
	Whether participated in cultural activities in the past 12 months
	Whether involved in selected cultural activities in the past 12 months
Land-based well-being	Whether lives on homeland/traditional Country
	Frequency of visiting homeland/traditional Country
	Whether involved in fishing, gathering and hunting in the past 12 months
Emotional well-being	Positive emotional feelings (felt calm, happy and full of life and had a lot of energy)
	The Kessler-5 measure of psychological distress
	Self-rated overall life satisfaction
	Whether has been diagnosed with mental health condition
Social well-being	Frequency of contact with family or friends outside of the household
	Whether feels able to have a say within community on important issues all of the time or most of the time
	Whether gets support in times of crisis from someone outside of the household
	Whether experienced unfair treatment in last 12 months because of Aboriginal and or/Torres Strait Islander identity
Economic well-being	Whether earns income from sale of arts and crafts
	Whether earns income from involvement/participating in cultural activities
	Whether currently employed
	Whether employed in food, accommodation, arts or recreational services industries
	Personal gross weekly income
Safety	Whether experienced physical violence in last 12 months
Access to services	Whether faced problems accessing public services
	Whether has problems accessing any of the following: housing services, power, water or gas providers, phone or internet companies
	Whether has problems accessing any of the following: doctors, dentists, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander hospitals, mental health services, alcohol and drug services and disability services
	Whether used legal services in the last 12 months

LANGUAGE PROVIDES ECONOMIC BENEFITS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people receive different types of economic benefits when they have knowledge of language, whether traditional or new. Language is important in every aspect of human life, and so recognising and using languages provides a wide range of economic benefits for a wide range of people. These benefits occur in at least the seven economic sectors shown in Table 2.2.⁶⁴

Personal benefits

The primary economic benefit of language is to the individual. Individuals who speak language may experience an increased quality of life, due in part to income from cultural activities.⁷⁰

As noted previously, speakers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages have a higher likelihood of earning an income from arts, crafts and cultural activities. People speaking Indigenous languages as their main language are also six to 11 percentage points more likely to earn income from the arts, crafts and cultural activities than English-only speakers.⁷¹

Table 2.2: Economic sectors in which the benefits of language occur

Arts and culture	There is clear evidence that speakers of an Indigenous language, traditional or new, are more likely to receive an income from the sale of arts and crafts and doing cultural activities.
Translation and interpreting	The establishment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander interpreting and translation services has provided opportunities for employment for people who speak an Indigenous language as their first language and have high levels of English too. ⁶⁵
Living off the lands and seas	There is clear evidence that speakers of language, traditional or new, are more likely to participate in customary harvesting activities that provide food to families.
Languages in education	For many years, schools have been major employers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who speak Indigenous languages, traditional or new. This has provided not only employment, but also an enrichment of local Indigenous languages, playing an important role in language maintenance, revitalisation and revival. ⁶⁶
Broadcasting	Broadcasting in an Indigenous language more effectively informs communities of news and information such as public health advice, or emergency warnings, while also bringing Indigenous talent to the fore. ⁶⁷
Indigenous cultural tourism	The connection between language and tourism has many benefits, to visitors, locals and the economy. ⁶⁸ For tourists, their experience is enhanced; for the local communities there is employment and access to training; and economically, experiences involving language provide a key point of difference in a competitive market.
Land and sea management	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people possess traditional knowledge of the environment, developed over thousands of years of interacting with land, sea, waterways and ecosystems. By extension, Indigenous languages contain ecologically significant concepts. ⁶⁹

Arts and culture

In areas where an Indigenous language is the first language for the majority of the population, there is evidence that people who are strong in language are more likely to receive income from the sale of arts and crafts and doing cultural activities than those with higher proficiency in English.⁷² This suggests that these activities provide a means of generating income for people who may be excluded from participating in other economic activity due to lower levels of English proficiency, or due to limited opportunities for income generation. In addition to the economic benefits of language, we know that where language is strong, culture and the arts are also more likely to be strong. The ANU also found that heightened Indigenous language proficiency increases the likelihood of people reaping professional economic benefits from arts, crafts and cultural activities.⁷³

Arts and culture programs have increasingly tapped into the important connection between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and stories and works of art and performances. Language increases the value of the artwork by putting the work in context, and by securing its provenance.⁷⁴

Results in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory (NT) illustrate this. The 2019 National Survey of Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Artists found that the use of traditional language by artists is very high in Arnhem Land.⁷⁵ Ninety one per cent of artists use their traditional language the most, eight per cent mostly use English, and the remainder mostly use Aboriginal English. The research estimates that the median annual income of artists in the region is around \$26,000 per annum, significantly higher than the \$12,453 median annual income for Aboriginal adults in remote areas of the NT (as derived from 2016 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census data, and adjusted for wage price index).

Translation and interpreting

The ability to communicate in local Indigenous languages at a deep level with local people is an advantage for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working in industries such as health, early childhood, aged care, Land Councils, government departments, and as liaisons for industries such as mining and tourism.⁷⁶

Translation and interpreting services also provides access to learning English at a higher level, such as engagement in creating resources like legal dictionaries, health information and grammars, or in cross-cultural awareness training for non-Indigenous people. For example, the Northern Territory Aboriginal Interpreter Service employs bilingual speakers of Indigenous languages – traditional or new – and English, for interpreting work in many fields in person, by phone or video link, and has diversified to broadcasting and assistance with Aboriginal language recording projects.⁷⁷

Living off the land and seas

The ANU study also found that the likelihood of people reaping benefits from livelihood activities that provide food to the family increases with Indigenous language proficiency. The probability of involvement in hunting, gathering and fishing is greater by 31 percentage points for speakers of Indigenous languages than English-only speakers.⁷⁸ The strength of this finding may vary with geographic distribution, and to some extent may be associated with the higher proportion of language speakers living in remote and very remote areas.⁷⁹

Community and livelihood benefits

Economic benefits flow through families and communities in several ways. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, having a family member employed because of their Indigenous language skills may mean that the family as a whole is better off. Communities also gain indirect economic benefits from language based employment that brings about better access to information (e.g. receiving emergency warnings in languages they understand), better communication (e.g. better liaison with businesses in negotiating uses of their land such as for mining and tourism) and better education and training (e.g. employing teachers who speak the local language makes it more likely that children will be engaged at school).

Languages in education

Where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children come to school speaking Indigenous languages, traditional or new, the employment of adults who speak their languages provides a vital bridge to classroom learning. Through employment in schools, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have had opportunities to engage in research projects in areas such as science and mathematics⁸⁰ and gain professional development.⁸¹ School-based language renewal programs are a further source of employment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Australia. For example, in New South Wales (NSW), Language and Culture Nests have been initiated in Bundjalung, Gamilaraay/Yuwaalaraay/Yuwaalaay, Gumbaynggirr, Wiradjuri and Paakantji. The Nests are firmly focussed on Aboriginal employment, with a coordinator, a head language teacher and Aboriginal language tutors.⁸²

Language teaching is a specialised branch of teaching, but nationally, few programs accredit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages teachers: the Western Australian Aboriginal Languages Traineeship, a three-year program delivered by the Western Australian Department of Education; and the Master of Indigenous Languages Education offered by the University of Sydney to Indigenous people who already have an undergraduate teaching degree.⁸³

Business related benefits

Harnessing language has increased productivity and/or competitiveness benefits for particular businesses in land management, tourism and hospitality, and other service sectors.

An organisation or sector may derive economic benefit from employing Indigenous-language speaking people. A language carries with it cultural understandings and practices, which can mean that organisations employing Indigenous language-speaking people may be able to offer a competitive edge in comparison with other organisations in the field, such as in broadcasting or tourism.⁸⁴

Broadcasting

The Indigenous broadcasting industry showcases the rich diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, languages and talent. National Indigenous Television (NITV) now reaches over two million unique views per month.⁸⁵ Some of the content is delivered using an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language, while other programs showcase Indigenous languages. Further, wherever local talent is engaged in local media for local audiences, local ways of speaking are used. Radio 4MW in the Torres Strait, for example, estimates that 80 per cent of broadcast time is in Yumplatok (Torres Strait Creole).⁸⁶

Indigenous cultural tourism

For tourists, their experience is enhanced by having guides who speak an Indigenous language, by interpretive signage which brings in language, and above all by interacting with and learning from Indigenous people.⁸⁷

For community members, an Indigenous language is not only an advantage in this employment area, but also gives entry to other opportunities through language awareness, training and certification for working with tourists, as well as having greater access to learning English and other languages.⁸⁸

Emerging cultural tourism enterprises fit well with the way that in some communities, people shift between sectors of the economy, e.g. part-time work and traditional activities, a model that has been described as a 'hybrid economy'.⁸⁹

For the economy, Australia's Indigenous cultures are a key point of differentiation in the highly competitive international tourism market.

Tourism is Australia's largest services export industry, accounting for around 10 per cent of Australia's total exports. In the year ending June 2018, international visitor arrivals to Australia reached over nine million for the first time, while tourism spending exceeded \$42 billion.⁹⁰

The latest data from Tourism Research Australia shows that people are increasingly choosing to experience Australia through engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. Expenditure on Indigenous cultural tourism has been on the rise, up by 8 per cent per year, on average, since 2013.⁹¹

Indigenous tourism includes activities such as visiting an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander site or community, experiencing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art, craft or cultural displays, or attending musical or dance performances. The number of international tourists taking part in at least one of those activities has increased by over 40 per cent since 2013.⁹² In 2013, 679,000 visitors participated in an Indigenous tourism activity. By 2018 the number had grown to 963,000.⁹³

Internationally, language tourism is growing, where tourists visit to learn a different language, and more directly experience local cultures. This was a major feature of the Big hArt Ngapartji Ngapartji theatre program which introduced visitors to Pitjantjatjara language. Another example is the University of South Australia's summer intensive Pitjantjatjara courses and Charles Darwin University's online Yolŋu Matha course.⁹⁴

Land and sea management

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who speak languages have a potential career pathway to paid employment in land and sea management on country. In a time of increased environmental concerns, the value placed on maintaining this Indigenous knowledge is only likely to increase.⁹⁵

Knowledge of natural history, place and ecologies is embedded in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. It manifests in many ways through land and sea management, ecological knowledge, astronomy, weather cycles.

This understanding of environment and ecology can be incorporated into the school science curriculum and is also incorporated into many different types of government programs. A particularly strong application of this knowledge is through the Indigenous land and sea management programs. The *Our Land Our Languages* Report describes these programs as directly dependent "on the continued strength and availability of Indigenous language and associated Indigenous knowledge."⁹⁶

Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to use traditional knowledge to work on and manage Country has positive economic and social outcomes. This is highlighted by a number of long-term Australian Government programs, such as Indigenous Rangers, Indigenous Protected Areas and Learning on Country.

Ranger programs are major employers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, especially in remote Australia. Through ranger programs, Indigenous people are able to draw on their language and natural history knowledge to strengthen their participation in the workforce, while at the same time reinforcing their connections to Country. The benefits of this have been well documented in the Mayi Kuwayu survey.⁹⁷

Indigenous Protected Areas and associated Indigenous ranger programs can return up to \$3.40 for every \$1 invested.⁹⁸ Land and sea management programs also have flow on benefits to regional economies that are greater than those associated with other remote industries.⁹⁹

The United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity, signed at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit,¹⁰⁰ has a Working Group on Article 8 (j). This recognises the importance of preserving and maintaining the knowledge, innovations and practices of Indigenous and local communities relevant for the conservation of biological diversity, promoting their wider application with the approval of knowledge holders, and encouraging equitable sharing of benefits arising out of the use of biological diversity.

Organisations and industries derive economic benefit by engaging people from a diversity of experiences.¹⁰¹ This is true for indicators of culture, heritage, nationality, gender, socio-economic status, and numerous others. Nurturing multilingualism (the ability to speak more than one language) and linguistic

diversity reinforces cultural values and also enhances innovation, productivity and growth. If language is a marker of cultural identity, linguistic diversity is necessarily a part of cultural diversity. Greater cultural diversity is also associated with greater cognitive diversity, as people from different cultures tend to have different perspectives on addressing issues. Bringing these different perspectives together results in better solutions.¹⁰² Economic performance can be better in more diverse countries because of greater opportunity for an assortment of ideas, innovations, specialisation, competition and trade.¹⁰³

CASE STUDY:

Gumbaynggirr language, land, culture, community plus livelihood, income and employment¹⁰⁴

In Gumbaynggirr Country on the mid-northern NSW coast, the Gumbaynggirr language is being re-learned by adults as a second language, in a revival context. The Gumbaynggirr language has profound connections to Country, culture, community and spirituality for Gumbaynggirr people, which affirms identity and enhances well-being. In addition to these benefits, Gumbaynggirr language revival can also be associated directly and indirectly with the livelihoods of Gumbaynggirr people in terms of work opportunities, and cultural means of supporting families.

Gumbaynggirr language work has been primarily coordinated through Muurrbay Aboriginal Language and Culture Co-operative for a number of decades. Muurrbay has provided a source of employment and training for many Gumbaynggirr people over many years as resources have been rebuilt with Elders who remember Gumbaynggirr language and through historical archives. Gumbaynggirr people are employed in various directing, administration, research and teaching roles at Muurrbay.

The Gumbaynggirr Language and Culture Nest, a NSW Government initiative, has provided employment opportunities for Gumbaynggirr teachers/tutors in schools throughout the region since 2014. Adult education in Gumbaynggirr is available through Muurrbay's Certificate III course in Gumbaynggirr Language and Cultural Maintenance. A number of initiatives also focus on developing language and cultural capital for Gumbaynggirr people outside mainstream education options, such as Muurrbay's newly released online learning course, and the Goori Learning Centres, which offer after-school programs and community-based language revitalisation classes.

Gumbaynggirr language and culture are at the forefront of a number of Aboriginal tourism ventures. Promotional material, such as the Coffs Coast Gumbaynggirr Showcase, features Gumbaynggirr language, Country and culture. Sharing Gumbaynggirr language and culture is a highlight of many Aboriginal community organisation initiatives, such as the culture show at the Sealy Lookout each month.

LANGUAGE BUILDS SOCIAL CAPITAL

There is clear evidence that Indigenous language use is positively associated with social capital formation,¹⁰⁵ which in this Report is taken to mean the building of an environment of trust that facilitates cooperation.ⁱⁱⁱ For the purposes of this Report, social capital is explored through interrelated themes, as illustrated in Figure 2.3.

There is a wealth of evidence that supports the positive associations of health, education and employment outcomes, as well as general well-being, with language and culture. Aboriginal and Torres Strait languages are inseparable from culture and form the foundation for learning and interacting with others.¹⁰⁶

Taken together, the themes in Figure 2.3 build local environments that foster collective resilience, supportive networks and increased trust and access to scarce community-controlled resources.¹⁰⁷

Social capital generates numerous benefits in a number of ways. On an individual level, people with higher social capital often feel emotionally supported and 'healthy and happy'.

This has associated positive social gains such as reduced needs for health and welfare support.¹⁰⁸ By contrast, loss of language, and loss of social connectedness through language, has long been articulated as a source of grief for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.¹⁰⁹

On a community level, the social benefits of learning traditional language may include healing and enhanced family and community functionality. Thus, investment in language and culture is a sound approach for realising a range of social benefits.

Figure 2.3: Social capital formation



iii The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines social capital as "networks together with shared norms and values and understandings that facilitate cooperation within or among groups."

ADDITIONAL FINDINGS ABOUT SPEAKING INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES, TRADITIONAL AND NEW:¹¹⁰

Cultural identification and participation

Identification with homelands/Country

Analysis of the NATSISS shows that speakers of Indigenous language were:

- 35 percentage points more likely to identify with a language group
- 20 percentage points more likely to live on homelands, and
- 34 percentage points more likely to visit homelands at least once per year, if living elsewhere.

Participation in land-based activities

Participation in hunting, fishing and gathering increases compared with English-only speakers:

- Those who spoke only some Indigenous language as a second language were 15 percentage points more likely to participate
- Those who spoke an Indigenous language well as a second language were 25 percentage points more likely to participate
- Those who spoke an Indigenous language as their main language were 31 percentage points more likely to participate.

Participation in cultural activities and events

Participation in cultural activities such as arts, crafts, dance and music increases compared with English-only speakers:

- Those who spoke an Indigenous language as their first language were 90 percentage points more likely to participate in cultural activities and events
- Those who spoke an Indigenous language as their second language were 82 percentage points more likely to participate in cultural activities and events
- Those who spoke an Indigenous language to some extent were 79 percentage points more likely to participate in cultural activities and events

Connection with family and friends¹¹¹

Those who spoke an Indigenous language were 12 percentage points more likely to report having frequent contact with friends and family outside of their homes.

Those who had learned and spoke an Indigenous language as a second language were 10 percentage points more likely to report that they felt like they had a say in their community even though they lived in areas where English is the dominant language.

Positive emotional health¹¹²

Emotional Health

Analysis of the NATSISS found that:

- Indigenous language speakers were 11 percentage points more likely to report significantly higher positive emotional well-being (feeling happy, motivated, etc.) than English-only speakers. This is particularly pronounced in areas where Indigenous languages are widely spoken.
- Speaking Indigenous languages was also found to have a significant association with higher life satisfaction scores.^{iv}
- Indigenous language speakers were eight percentage points less likely to report having been diagnosed with a mental health condition.

Trust in, and engagement with, institutions and services¹¹³

Engagement with the education sector

As part of the ANU review of academic literature, it was found that the recognition and use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages in communities and schools have different benefits for children, including:

- increased student engagement and achievement
- increased cognitive flexibility, including learning and problem-solving, and
- increased community pride in the local Indigenous culture.

iv On a scale from 1 (completely unsatisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied), speaking an Indigenous language is associated with a 0.4 unit increase in the score of life satisfaction.

Cultural identification and participation

Australian governments at all levels have acknowledged that culture is fundamental to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' strength and identity.¹¹⁴ This Report demonstrates that traditional languages are part of culture, identity and connection to Country regardless of the extent to which they are spoken, and that traditional and new languages are mediums for effective communication where they are spoken proficiently. Language contributes to speaker identities and fulfils local social protocols. These different but significant roles for Indigenous languages – culture and communication – can be found across all Closing the Gap priorities.

The *Bringing them home* Report found that the loss of traditional languages is intimately connected with the loss of identity for those forcibly removed and their descendants.¹¹⁵ Further to this, the *My life my lead* Report by the Australian Government Department of Health found that there is strong evidence that language has a significant influence on well-being, self-worth and identity formation. It also found that for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, education in their first language not only helps children maintain their spoken language, and provides a good foundation for learning English, but also fosters respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture within the school.¹¹⁶

The ANU literature review confirmed that the centrality of language to culture is recognised both in Australia and overseas.¹¹⁷ In addition, the ANU analysis of the NATSISS shows that Indigenous language use is clearly associated with stronger cultural identification and participation.

Similar ideas are expressed in a Canadian study of Indigenous language and diabetes:¹¹⁸

The participants believed traditional culture and language to be one and the same... Language transmission is a particularly effective means of reinforcing culture and has the benefit of integrating most cultural and communal activities. Language is also an extremely efficient means of establishing membership or inclusion in a community. Studies that might disentangle language and culture are possible, but the approach argued for here takes it as a given that language is the most efficient means of transmitting, maintaining, and even reviving culture.

While culture encompasses many things, this Report focusses on the following cultural indicators that were available from the NATSISS data set:

- Identification with and connection to homelands/Country
- Participation in land-based activities; and
- Participation in cultural activities and events

Identification with homelands/Country

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, homelands or Country are more than just a geographical place; they also encompass spirit and identity. Culturally, each traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language has been associated with a particular tract of land, islands, waterways and seas.

Dharawal researcher Shayne Williams provides two reasons for the fundamental relationship between language and Country for Indigenous people in Australia:¹¹⁹

The first is ... the synthesis between language and knowledge which in the Indigenous context is bound to country. The second relates to how language literally signifies country for us; how it names the identity of our families and communities in relation to country and the boundaries of country typically thought of as cultural nationhood.

Language connects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to Country. Indeed, sometimes the name of a traditional language is the same as the name of the homeland that is connected to it. For this reason, in Australia many studies of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures tend to refer to 'clans' or 'tribes' or 'nations' as 'language groups'.¹²⁰

Participation in land-based activities

Indigenous people often place land management as a two-way interaction between people and Country, differing from a view of land management as a process where people take specific actions to affect the environment.¹²¹

Figure 2.4 Gulumoerrgin (Larrakia) seasons calendar

Larrakia, Darwin - Northern Territory.
Lorraine Williams, Judith Williams, Maureen Ogden, Keith Risk, Anne Risk and Emma Woodward. 2012.
Gulumoerrgin Seasons (calendar): CSIRO Ecosystem Sciences, Darwin, NT. © CSIRO Australia

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Language contribution and CMC. This publication has been approved and accepted with the informed and consent of contributors and the CSEQ.

There is a positive and statistically significant relationship between Indigenous language use and participation in land-based activities.¹²² Speakers of Indigenous languages, traditional and new, are more likely to participate in hunting, fishing and gathering activities, and this likelihood increases with the level of proficiency in an Indigenous language.

Hunting, fishing and gathering are highlighted because the NATSISS has data that connects language use and these activities. Given the importance of Country to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies, there are a number of other land-based activities carried out as part of customary obligations for management and use of lands – often termed as ‘caring for Country’. These activities are highly diverse and include customary land management (such as burning, threat abatement or revegetation).¹²³

Participation in cultural activities and events

The NATSISS data also included other cultural practices that are recognised by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as part of the connection to land and language. Cultural activities included arts, crafts, dance and music. Cultural events included ceremonies, funerals and/or sorry business, NAIDOC week activities, sports carnivals, festivals or being involved with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander organisations in the last 12 months (see Figure 2.5).

Indigenous language use, traditional or new, is associated with a statistically significantly higher likelihood of participating in cultural activities and events. Speakers of Indigenous languages – either as a main or second language – are substantially more likely to report participating in cultural activities such as arts, crafts, dance and music than English-only speakers.¹²⁴

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DID YOU KNOW?

Indigenous season calendars (collaborations between a number of Aboriginal language groups and organisations such as the CSIRO and the Bureau of Meteorology) depict not only seasonal ecological knowledge embedded in each of the languages but also commentary on culture and a diversity of land-based activities.

Connection with family and friends

In analysing the NATSISS, the ANU found that speakers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are more likely to report social connectedness and social efficacy.¹²⁵

“Language is a community – a group of people. Not only do you speak that language but generations upon generations of your families have also spoken it.”

[Amelia Turner, as part of her submission to Our Land, Our Languages]¹²⁶

In areas where an Indigenous language is the dominant language spoken by the community, speaking an Indigenous language as a first or second language is also associated with a small but significantly higher probability (10 percentage points) of being able to get support from outside the household at a time of crisis than English-only speakers.¹²⁷

The ANU literature review found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people see recognition of language in their local communities as an important act of reconciliation.¹²⁸

Figure 2.5: Participation in cultural activities

Probability of participating in cultural activities



Positive emotional health

The 2018 *Evidence review of Indigenous culture for health and well-being* suggests that across the world there is a positive relationship between health outcomes and Indigenous cultures.¹²⁹ The NATSISS study bore this out with respect to emotional health:¹³⁰

A finding was that people speaking Indigenous languages are 11 percentage points more likely to have felt happy, full of life, calm and full of energy than those speaking only English.

An apparent extension of the above finding is that fluent speakers of Indigenous languages are considerably less likely to report mental health diagnoses than English-only speakers: by six percentage points in remote areas where Indigenous languages are frequently spoken as a first language, and by 10 percentage points in parts of the country where English is the predominant mother tongue.¹³¹ However, whereas emotional well-being is experienced at an individual level and can be reported independently of health services, a mental health diagnosis requires access to specialised mental health services, which may not be offered in Indigenous languages. Factors other than language and access to mental health services could be involved here, including social connectedness or different ways of conceptualising mental illness.¹³²

There is a growing awareness that information about mental health should incorporate Indigenous languages and local knowledge. The Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara Women's Council 'Uti kulintjaku' project aims to use local languages for sharing knowledge around mental health literacy between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous people. Here, workshops are framed around developing language-based resources such as posters illustrating psychological states labelled with Pitjantjatjara expressions:¹³³

"Our group is about bringing things out in the open – talking about mental health and trauma. This is to help our families and communities see and understand what's happening... We've now got words to talk about these things with our children and grandchildren. We are bringing things out into the open and we really enjoy this work."

Uti Kulintjaku Project Participants 2014

In New Zealand, a 40-page booklet has been produced with a translation of mental health terms into Māori.¹³⁴ The introduction explains the benefits of having terminology in the Indigenous language (even though many users will probably be first language speakers of English):

The translation of English words into Māori will greatly increase understanding of mental health conditions, symptoms and consequences and in the process will lead to better engagement between whānau [family] and health services... the language of mental health becomes more aligned to the people most concerned rather than to those who provide treatment and care.

Suicide, and in particular youth suicide, disproportionately affects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities,¹³⁵ having devastating effects on families.

In 2017, suicide was the leading cause of death for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons between 15 and 34 years of age, with an age-specific death rate over three times that of non-Indigenous Australians.¹³⁶ Generally it accounted for a greater proportion of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander deaths (5.5 per cent) compared with deaths of non-Indigenous Australians (2.0 per cent)¹³⁷ and was ranked as the fifth leading cause of death for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, while it is ranked 13th for the non-Indigenous population.¹³⁸

In the Australian context, while it has been found that a sense of belonging and cultural heritage may be of benefit in reducing suicide,¹³⁹ there is insufficient nuance in current research about the use of Indigenous language as a preventative factor.

This relationship has been explored in an international context. For example, in Canada census data has been used to investigate the effects of community-level knowledge of Aboriginal language and youth suicide. Language knowledge had predictive power over and above that of six other 'cultural continuity' factors (self-government, land claims, education, health care, cultural facilities, policing and fire services). It also found that youth suicide rates were effectively at zero in those few communities in which at least half the people reported a conversational knowledge of their own 'Native' language.¹⁴⁰ In the US, an investigation on perceived discrimination, traditional practices, and depressive symptoms among American Indians found that language was one of three measures of participation in traditional practices.¹⁴¹ They found that those who engaged in powwows, speaking their traditional language, and carrying out traditional activities were less susceptible to depressive symptoms.¹⁴² This protective effect did not hold for people who reported engaging less often in cultural activities. These people were more likely to be depressed by perceived discrimination.

Trust in, and engagement with institutions and services

Trust in, and engagement with, institutions and services relies on the provision of services that consider Australian languages in their design, implementation and evaluation.¹⁴³ This includes institutions such as schools which recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages play a pivotal role in Indigenous students' engagement and achievement in education and training. In addition, academic literature suggests that multilingualism provides greater cognitive flexibility and endowment of cultural capital and improves a number of skills, including learning and problem-solving.¹⁴⁴

Planning effective and efficient service delivery requires a recognition of the local language situation. For clients, this requires people delivering services to recognise their repertoire of languages and their language preferences.¹⁴⁵ The Commonwealth Ombudsman recognised this in its 2012 submission to *Our Land Our Languages*:¹⁴⁶

In our experience, without interpreters and proper regard to the language barriers that Indigenous Australians face, service delivery can be misdirected and damaging, and people can be excluded from, and alienated by, the very programs designed to assist them.



CASE STUDY:

Foundations for Success

Foundations for Success¹⁴⁷ was developed as a set of guidelines for early childhood settings (preschool, pre-prep and/or kindergarten) in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Queensland. They explicitly state how early childhood educators should work with Indigenous children's first languages.

The independent evaluation by Charles Sturt University¹⁴⁸ of the Foundations for Success program found that it was an excellent example of how to develop curricula for young children in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.¹⁴⁹ In particular, language in the school setting was recognised as a key factor in children becoming socially, emotionally and spiritually resilient.

"Those parents who did come up to the door and they can hear the young kids say our traditional language greeting and it makes the parents feel really good about us. We didn't have that in our time ... But now little people are saying that in school, it's great."

[Indigenous teacher]

The independent evaluation of Foundations for Success notes the critical importance of languages for the development of young Indigenous children's personal and cultural identities. On-site visits and interviews showed that this was of 'particular relevance to Indigenous educators, who often had experienced quite the opposite in their own education.'¹⁵⁰

The honouring and celebration of both Home Language and Standard Australian English is not only educationally sound but is the single most important defining feature of a program informed by Foundations for Success.

Further matters around service delivery, including translation and interpreter services and education and curriculum, are explored in Chapter 5.

HOW ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL ACTIVITIES ENHANCE OVERALL BENEFITS

Meaningful employment is a social determinant of health for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, providing structure, purpose and connection, as well as nurturing self-esteem, social connections, and a sense of identity. Employment, be it full time or part time, paid or unpaid, can play a role in promoting positive health and well-being, and may make people less likely to engage in unhealthy behaviours.¹⁵¹

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, speaking language as a first language or as a second language widens opportunities for social connection and for employment.¹⁵²

Being employed in turn provides financial rewards, but also boosts confidence and self-esteem, provides greater independence, building social networks, enhancing civic engagement, creating greater access to health information and services, and discouraging anti-social behaviour.¹⁵³ The benefits of employment also go back to community.

The 2016 Census indicated that 52 per cent of Indigenous Australians aged 15 years or older were participating in the labour force,¹⁵⁴ compared with 60 per cent of non-Indigenous Australians.¹⁵⁵ For Indigenous Australians, there is a relationship between social inequities (including employment) and negative health outcomes.¹⁵⁶ Indigenous Australians are more likely than non-Indigenous Australians to have, and die from, health conditions such as cardiovascular disease, psychological distress and mental health disorders – health conditions that are positively affected by work and negatively affected by unemployment.¹⁵⁷

The effect of unemployment is intergenerational, with research indicating that children who live in households where the parents are unemployed are more likely to experience unemployment as adults, either for their entire life or for discrete periods of time.¹⁵⁸

Unemployment is considered to be one of four predictors of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's higher rate of offending.¹⁵⁹ Research indicates that people who are employed tend not to commit serious crimes, whereas the longer a person is unemployed the more likely it is that they will become involved in crime.¹⁶⁰

Languages provide numerous employment opportunities. Maximising the potential of these employment opportunities would capitalise on the demonstrated benefits of speaking language, and widely acknowledged benefits of employment.

This chapter has outlined the range of benefits and opportunities that speaking language affords, particularly for those speaking their mother tongue. The following chapter provides information on how few Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are currently able to reap these benefits.



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