

# Mobile Language Team Submission to Australia's National Cultural Policy

## Overview

The Mobile Language Team (MLT) is an Indigenous co-managed language centre dedicated to the revival and maintenance of 47 Aboriginal languages across South Australia. At the foundation of the work the MLT undertakes is the principle that language is central to culture. The MLT would like to see the National Cultural Policy reflect, recognise and reinforce the integral role of language to express and strengthen cultural identity, particularly for First Nations peoples.

Drawing upon over 16 years of experience engaging with local communities, the MLT knows that across South Australia today, only 4 languages remain *strong*. 8 languages are *severely endangered*. 11 languages are currently undergoing *revitalisation/renewal*. The remaining 23 languages are *sleeping*.<sup>1</sup>

- **Strong languages:** A language is considered *strong* if it is being spoken fluently across all generations of a community and is being transmitted to children.
- **Severely endangered languages:** A language is classified as *severely endangered* if only older generations (people aged 60 and above) are fluent speakers. Younger generations are likely to have passive knowledge (ability to understand some/all the language) but are not active speakers of the language.
- **Language renewal:** Language renewal applies in contexts where members of the community, often the older generations, are considered partial speakers. That is, they retain some knowledge of the words in their language but are unable to speak it fluently. Younger generations are unlikely to have any passive knowledge of the language.
- **Sleeping languages:** A language is *sleeping* if there are no longer any fluent or partial speakers of the language. As such, any reclamation work undertaken with community relies on historical sources.

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<sup>1</sup> See website: <https://aiatsis.gov.au/research/current-projects/third-national-indigenous-languages-survey/NILS3-online>

Recognising the important role language has in improving the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in all areas, including health and education, Target 16 of Closing the Gap states that:

*By 2031, there is a sustained increase in number and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages being spoken.<sup>2</sup>*

From the MLT's extensive experience working in this area for over 15 years, the MLT has identified several barriers which are currently preventing this target from being realised successfully.

- Funding for language programmes supporting Indigenous languages is provided on an ad hoc basis and is short-term and competitive.
- The current funding available for Indigenous languages is not sufficient to meet the needs of every community.
- Efforts towards developing a workforce with adequate knowledge and skills in teaching Aboriginal languages are currently hampered by a lack of sustainable funding and clear pathways into long-term employment in the languages sector.
- There is a lack of formal recognition at the state and federal level around the importance and cultural significance of Indigenous languages.
- There are no formal protections to preserve the status of Indigenous languages at the state or federal level.

In the following sections, we expand on the importance of language for First Nations people as a means for expressing, maintaining and celebrating their culture, as well as proposing several solutions to the challenges outlined here which we would like to see the new National Cultural Policy act upon.

## Language is not separate from culture

For Aboriginal peoples the ancestral languages are inseparable from culture, land and kinship. From this rich fabric arises the capacity to learn, interact and shape identity. Languages have intrinsic value as regulators of social systems and tools of environmental management, such that wellbeing of land and family depends on wellbeing of languages, and vice versa. In South Australia this is

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<sup>2</sup> See website: <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/targets>

conspicuously so for Anangu communities, whose languages remain strong, whether on traditional country or living in cities, but it is also true for communities throughout the State where traditional culture carries vital perspectives, social rules, values and knowledge of the natural world. The following quote from the Chair of the MLT's Aboriginal Advisory Committee, Uncle Trevor Buzzacott OAM, encapsulates the inseparability of language from culture:

*We must be able to retain our languages, our heritage, and the messages we heard from our teachers in the past. The old people were tied into the land and this connection told them about which language they can speak, which groups you could marry into, and about your spiritual beliefs. The cultural strength of knowing where you come from then leads to linkages to other groups, it leads you to be open to other groups around the place. It's important to support all the language groups in South Australia and to reach out to them all. It's important too to reach out to the broader Australian nation, with all the people from different backgrounds and to share with them the strength of land, language and identity.*

The loss of any language entails the loss of a distinctive world view and knowledge of the biosphere, loss of philosophy and unique artistic practices. In Australia, the virtues of linguistic diversity have only begun to be properly understood in recent decades. Being denied ancestral language and culture can negatively affect an individual's wellbeing and life prospects. The social and financial costs to families, society and governments which arise from this are well known. Conversely, promoting Indigenous language and culture at an early stage will negate the types of social ills, disconnection from the mainstream and personal alienation, that arose in the past when only 'the whiteman's history' was taught. Furthermore, being bilingual and bicultural enhances empathy with members of other cultures, ensuring any policy which promotes greater linguistic diversity also supports social unity – surely a key consideration for any National Cultural Policy.

There is no doubt that programs seeking to maintain, renew and revive Indigenous languages have an almost immediate impact within the fields of personal, group and cultural identity. The ability to speak a heritage language has undergone a process of revalorisation over the past 30 years, following in many areas a loss of interest in or an active discouragement of speaking Indigenous Languages. Many language projects do contribute to a strengthening and re-flowering of traditional knowledge and cultural practices in hybridised or re-imagined forms.

Any policy which seeks to put the culture of “First Nations First”<sup>3</sup> must necessarily look to support Aboriginal languages which convey, express and underpin this culture. We acknowledge that the current Revive National Cultural Policy recognises the role language has in “support[ing] the transmission of cultures, customs, inventions, innovations and history for future generations.”<sup>4</sup> Yet the actions which have been outlined in the policy, including the establishment of a directions group to guide Australia’s participation for UNESCO’s International Decade of Indigenous Languages, have so far not had a tangible impact in addressing the challenges faced by the individuals, communities and language workers involved in supporting and sustaining Australia’s Indigenous languages. The following sections put forward proposals as to how the new National Cultural Policy can address these challenges.

## Languages need to be funded

The Mobile Language Team is dedicated to the revival and maintenance of 47 Aboriginal languages across South Australia and to promoting the use of Indigenous languages to Close the Gap in health, education and employment outcomes for Indigenous people. Language loss in Aboriginal communities has not been voluntary. It has been forced upon people by geographic dislocation, cultural suppression and monolingual assimilation strategies that are now widely discredited. Maintaining and reviving languages is seen by South Australian Aboriginal communities as an important part of social healing. The MLT’s vision is to reverse the decline in Aboriginal language use in South Australia that began in the mid-nineteenth century with colonisation, dispossession, and language shift to English. We aim to do this by working to revive and maintain all of South Australia’s Aboriginal languages and to stimulate their use in everyday life. A key part of this vision is to ensure that every Aboriginal child in South Australia has the opportunity to undergo meaningful experiences with their heritage language that strengthen language skills, enhance cultural connections to country, and reinforce social and personal identities.

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<sup>3</sup> See website: <https://www.arts.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/national-culturalpolicy-8february2023.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> See page 28: <https://www.arts.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/national-culturalpolicy-8february2023.pdf>.

All Aboriginal languages in South Australia are in danger of being lost. This is so even for the ‘strong’ languages Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara. But up to fifteen Aboriginal languages in South Australia have a real chance of being sustained if they are supported now and throughout the lives of the current generation of children. This is an achievable goal. Successful models (language nests, master-apprentice teaching, family language policies) are well known from maintenance and renewal of Indigenous languages in New Zealand, Isle of Man, Hawai’i and regions of North America, and some of these have already been applied usefully in Australia. Home-grown initiatives have shown their efficacy. For example, with regard to community based training, the MLT has pioneered ‘family language policies’ in South Australia, helped communities to plan and run language immersion camps or regular workshops using resources tailored to local need, trained language workers in fieldwork, and designed electronic repositories that benefit speakers of a given language who are geographically scattered.

The challenge facing those communities and individuals hoping to implement these language revival models and reverse language loss is how to secure funding to establish and, more crucially, maintain these programmes so that they have a reasonable chance of delivering on their promise to allow current generations of children to reclaim and reconnect with their heritage language. After all, how can something intangible like language be monetised? Artists, musicians and other cultural practitioners might reasonably expect that some revenue will flow from the sale of their artwork and attendance at their performances, enough in some cases to sustain a livelihood. Indeed, we note that the current National Cultural Policy recognises that the demand for Indigenous art is increasing and takes steps to secure this income stream for Indigenous artists, including strengthening protections around First Nations traditional knowledge and cultural expressions to ensure revenue generated from this demand goes to the appropriate people.<sup>5</sup> While we applaud these steps, this avenue of funding is not available to those who work in the languages sector. Language does not belong to one individual, but rather to a community who are its guardians and protectors. Although works incorporating language may be sold, language itself is not for sale.

As such, language programmes remain reliant on securing funding, whether from governments or private businesses, to continue to operate. The need for secure, long-term funding for such initiatives cannot be emphasised enough. It takes the

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<sup>5</sup> See page 31: <https://www.arts.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/national-culturalpolicy-8february2023.pdf>.

sustained efforts of several generations to reverse language loss. Linguists, when asked by communities to help set up and implement language revival programmes, often ask communities to imagine where they would like their language to be in 50 years. Such questions remain academic at best when funding cycles do not extend beyond 5 or 10 years at most. For instance, while the current policy states that funding for Indigenous languages is provided under the Indigenous Languages and Arts program, funding cycles are short term and what funding is available is competitive.<sup>6</sup> Communities, linguists and language workers alike must divert time and resources into applying and re-applying for funding, rather than focusing their efforts on language activities. Furthermore, securing funding to undertake activities in one language may come at the expense of another. Establishing a long-term funding structure, whether through a trust or some other mechanism, would not only reduce the burden on communities and language workers by removing the need to re-apply for funding, but it would ensure that the resources available are directed to the areas which need them the most, not spent guaranteeing further funding.

Of course, the success or otherwise of these programmes relies upon the availability of those qualified to deliver specialised training in Indigenous languages, namely, linguists and language experts, whose services are needed for communities to set up, design and maintain these language programmes. The MLT currently employs a small team of 10 Aboriginal language workers, Aboriginal language trainees, linguists and applied linguists, all of whom are on casual or fixed term contracts and whose positions are funded through specific grants to undertake designated projects. In any given year, the MLT will work with up to 12 different language communities across South Australia, or around a quarter of the state's approximately 47 traditional Aboriginal languages. Therefore, in order to successfully provide services to all of South Australia's traditional languages, the MLT would need to quadruple its staff numbers and operations. This is simply impossible when the amount of funding available for language projects does not adequately meet the needs of communities. Moreover, it is unrealistic to expect that the MLT would be able to retain all its current staff in an environment where their positions are dependent on securing external funding.

While we acknowledge that the under-resourcing of the languages sector is not unique to Australia, with a similar challenge being experienced in Canada for

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<sup>6</sup> See page 30: <https://www.arts.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/national-culturalpolicy-8february2023.pdf>; see website: <https://www.arts.gov.au/funding-and-support/indigenous-languages-and-arts-program>.

example, where requests for funding for Indigenous language programmes exceeded the budget by \$45 million,<sup>7</sup> we can point to evidence which shows that providing adequate, long-term funding does have a direct impact on the success or otherwise of language programmes. The funding situation for Canada's heritage languages contrasts dramatically with the funding provided to its two official languages, English and French, with support for both languages being legally mandated through the Official Languages Act. This has resulted in official languages being given \$820 million annually for the period between 2023-2028.<sup>8</sup> The \$52.6 million of funding directed to Canada's 70 Indigenous languages or the \$48 million the Indigenous Languages and Arts program makes available to Australia's approximately 250 Indigenous languages for 2026-2027 scarcely compares to the amount of funding Canada's official languages receive.<sup>9</sup> This substantial funding, as well as a demonstrated commitment to ensuring this funding adequately sustains programmes dedicated to increasing competency for Canadians in the official languages has been effective. For example, enrolments in French immersion programmes increased 41% between 2010 and 2021.<sup>10</sup> Providing long term funding, which has sufficient breadth to ensure meeting the needs of one language does not come at the expense of another will help sustain vital language revival and maintenance programmes, which will have significant benefits for Aboriginal Australians, including improved health and education outcomes.

## Language workers need more support

Providing long term funding would also help with workforce development and retention, ensuring that there are stable pathways into language work for Indigenous Australians. The current National Cultural Policy reflects the need for more support to develop a workforce who can run language education programmes in schools, stating that the policy will:

*Support sixty primary schools around Australia to teach local First Nations languages and cultural knowledge in schools.*<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See: <https://afn.bynder.com/m/1fa00c203bb77e39/original/Languages-Funding-Factsheet-2023.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> See: <https://afn.bynder.com/m/1fa00c203bb77e39/original/Languages-Funding-Factsheet-2023.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> See website: <https://www.arts.gov.au/funding-and-support/indigenous-languages-and-arts-program>; see: <https://afn.bynder.com/m/1fa00c203bb77e39/original/Languages-Funding-Factsheet-2023.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> See website: <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/official-languages-bilingualism/publications/statistics.html>.

<sup>11</sup> See page 30: <https://www.arts.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/national-culturalpolicy-8february2023.pdf>.

The MLT is currently in the second year of delivering a two-year pilot programme providing training and support to Aboriginal Community Education Officers (ACEOs), School Services Officers (SSOs) and community members as part of the First Nations Languages Education Program (FNLEP) which was established to achieve the goal outlined in this policy. The MLT's own experience in administering this project for four Aboriginal languages across five primary schools and early learning centres in South Australia has highlighted the challenges in upskilling and maintaining workers with sufficient knowledge, skills and confidence to deliver language classes for students. One challenge the MLT has encountered is that such capacity building does not happen overnight. It requires substantial commitment, time and resources from the individual learners, expert second language teachers and linguists, and the support of school leadership. It is simply not possible for the MLT to provide adequate training in both the language and language teaching approaches within the two-year period set by the current funding model.

A further challenge is that the individuals best placed within schools must balance the intensive language learning required of them with the existing demands of their current roles. While engaging with school partners, MLT staff experienced and reported numerous situations where ACEOs and SSOs, who had been identified as the staff most appropriate to deliver language learning sessions, and would therefore benefit the most from receiving targeted training, were directed by school leadership to attend to other duties in the school, such as disciplining Aboriginal students who had been removed from their class. This prevented these staff from attending the scheduled language learning and teaching training sessions MLT staff were holding. This occurred despite these sessions having been organised well in advance with the schools and MLT staff attending the school sites in person. In the case of the regional and remote schools participating in this project, this involved MLT staff travelling for over 8 hours to visit the school, meaning that rescheduling these training sessions is not straightforward. This issue demonstrates that the challenge of developing a workforce capable of delivering Aboriginal language lessons cannot be solved by linguists and language education experts alone. It also requires the commitment of schools and education departments more broadly, particularly in these initial phases, to ensure that those individuals who want to step into these roles are adequately supported to succeed.

Additionally, the amount of time invested by these individuals to acquire these language skills is not reinforced by a clear pathway into a stable employment position, given that the services of linguists and second language teachers who

contribute to the development of such programmes cannot be guaranteed beyond the initial short-term funding. It is thus unsurprising that the MLT found it impractical to engage with anyone who was not already employed in a school or as a language worker elsewhere, as there is currently no clear pathway into the position of 'Aboriginal language teacher' in South Australia's education system. Why would anyone, no matter how passionate they are about reviving and maintaining their language, devote so much of their time to learning their language and developing skills in language work if they perceive that their language is not valued beyond their immediate community? This perception would change, however, if funding could be guaranteed long term, as it would give these passionate individuals and communities the confidence to pursue increasing their language knowledge and competency, as there is a tangible investment in the language sector which would generate employment opportunities for Indigenous people in their own languages.

Despite the challenges the MLT has encountered while operating a project as part of FNLEP, the benefits of this programme to students, schools and the broader community cannot be emphasised enough. Students have enthusiastically received language learning opportunities and schools are seeing the benefits such programmes bring through better student engagement overall. Community members who have participated alongside MLT staff to provide expert language and cultural advice have also experienced joy, pride and fulfilment from seeing younger generations embrace their heritage language and culture. Other community members who attended some sessions told MLT staff that they were so grateful to see their children and grandchildren being given the opportunity to learn a traditional Aboriginal language, even if it is not the heritage language that they themselves most identify with, emphasising the importance of language to culture. The following quote from Ms Kirin Hoffmann, ACEO at Stirling North Primary School, who has also received dedicated one on one training in the Dieri language, is indicative of the overall positive response to the programme:

*I was so grateful for your visit to our school. It was great to see our students so engaged in learning some Dieri language. They really enjoyed learning more about their culture and connection to Country. A fantastic session...*

Without more funding, however, it is unclear how much more support can sustainably be provided to continue this programme. The MLT strongly advocates for extending the existing funding cycle to ensure that the momentum this project has created by building relationships between schools, language and

culture knowledge holders and communities continues to grow and deliver positive outcomes for students.

Beyond providing more funding in the immediate future to ensure this valuable project can continue, further measures could be explored to address the other challenges outlined above in developing a skilled workforce in this area. One possibility is implementing a similar programme to that provided for teachers who wanted to become Basque language educators in the Basque Autonomous Community (BAC) in Spain. Through this programme, teachers were partially or fully released from their teaching loads for up to three years, thus allowing them to devote the time necessary for learning the Basque language.<sup>12</sup> To further ensure that teachers would be able to commit their time and attention to studying the language, teachers in the programme continued to receive their full salary.<sup>13</sup> This programme has had the desired effect of increasing the numbers of teachers qualified to teach Basque with just under 90% of teachers in 2005 qualified in Basque compared to just over 20% in 1982 when the programme began.<sup>14</sup>

The success of this programme in establishing Basque language capacity within the education sector demonstrates what is possible when teachers are given enough support to facilitate their ability to become proficient in another language. Learning a language requires time to focus – time which people rarely have due to needing to work to support themselves. The key element for success in the Basque programme is releasing teachers from their teaching duties and continuing to pay them their full salary while they undertake intensive language study. Such a policy does initially incur a large cost through needing to effectively pay two teachers to do the work of one, but it has proved effective in building sufficient capacity within the education sector to teach heritage languages. Implementing a similar policy in Australia would go a long way towards meeting the challenges of establishing a workforce capable of sustaining Aboriginal language lessons in at least 60 primary schools by allowing individuals who wish to pursue that career path the ability to make the most of the resources available to them, such as training from qualified linguists and language teaching experts, when undertaking their dedicated three years of language learning.

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<sup>12</sup> See: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.2167/lcc339.0>.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

## Languages need to be legislated

There is no current, state-wide language policy in South Australia to address the needs of communities to strengthen, revitalise, renew and reclaim their languages. Across Australia, only New South Wales has developed a strategic language plan as part of the Aboriginal Languages Trust. This is despite Article 13 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples stating that:

*Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalise, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures...*<sup>15</sup>

While Australia has endorsed this treaty, it has not yet been ratified into law, meaning that it is not legally binding. Ratifying this declaration as a legally binding treaty would ensure that the rights of Indigenous Australians are protected and guaranteed, including rights to speak their languages and practice their culture. There is evidence from overseas that affording languages the formal protection of legislation leads to drastically better outcomes for language, community and cultural diversity.

Nowhere is this demonstrated more clearly than in the Basque Country, an area which today includes parts of northern Spain and southern France. Basque's position as historically the main language of the Basque Country means its speakers have been subjected to language policies imposed by both the French and Spanish governments. The Spanish Constitution in 1978, which declared Spanish the official language of Spain, allowed other languages to become co-official in specific regions.<sup>16</sup> The newly-established Basque Autonomous Community (BAC) promptly seized upon this opportunity and made Basque the co-official language of the BAC in 1979.<sup>17</sup> This gave Basque official status in one part of the Basque Country.

In France, however, no such official recognition has been made for Basque. Indeed, until 2008, French was designated the only language of France by the

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<sup>15</sup> Available online here: [https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP\\_E\\_web.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> See: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01434632.2024.2326506>.

<sup>17</sup> See: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01434632.2024.2326506>.

constitution.<sup>18</sup> In 2008, an article was added to the French constitution recognising regional languages as being part of the “patrimony of France” but this article does not give the regional languages any legal status or protection.<sup>19</sup> This difference in official status is reflected in the numbers of people who can speak and understand Basque in the French regions of the Basque Country. Only around 74,500 were reported to have some knowledge of Basque in 2016 in comparison to over 700,000 in the Spanish part of the Basque Country.<sup>20</sup> The evidence from Basque therefore highlights the need for legislation to officially recognise languages to reverse the process of language decline and loss, as legislation affords languages protection and status, allowing communities to implement other initiatives to support their language.

A similar model to that adopted in Spain, where languages can be enshrined as co-official languages for designated regions, could be implemented in Australia and would effectively address the challenge presented by formally recognising the significance of Australian Indigenous languages through legislation when traditional Aboriginal languages are deeply tied to particular places and people. At the state level, Ms Karina Lester, Yankunytjatjara woman and MLT co-manager, is advocating for regional recognition for two South Australian languages: Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara. Expanding this recognition to the national level would give greater protections and status to all of Australia’s Indigenous heritage languages, ensuring that these languages can keep on being shared with and sustained by future generations, thereby continuing the vital role of Aboriginal languages in preserving and expressing the culture of First Nations people.

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<sup>18</sup> See: [https://www.mercator-research.eu/fileadmin/mercator/documents/regional\\_dossiers/basque\\_in\\_france\\_3ed\\_2023.pdf](https://www.mercator-research.eu/fileadmin/mercator/documents/regional_dossiers/basque_in_france_3ed_2023.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> See: [https://www.mercator-research.eu/fileadmin/mercator/documents/regional\\_dossiers/basque\\_in\\_france\\_3ed\\_2023.pdf](https://www.mercator-research.eu/fileadmin/mercator/documents/regional_dossiers/basque_in_france_3ed_2023.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> See: [https://www.mercator-research.eu/fileadmin/mercator/documents/regional\\_dossiers/basque\\_in\\_france\\_3ed\\_2023.pdf](https://www.mercator-research.eu/fileadmin/mercator/documents/regional_dossiers/basque_in_france_3ed_2023.pdf).