

Towards a new National Cultural Policy

Submission from the Research Unit for Indigenous Language, University of Melbourne

The Research Unit for Indigenous Language (RUIL) at the University of Melbourne welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of the Australian Government's new National Cultural Policy. RUIL's research team works with languages across Australia and the surrounding region. While focusing predominantly on research outputs, we also work with Indigenous community members to build their capacity to carry out linguistic work on their own languages. This includes partnering with communities to revive and maintain languages through documentation, archival research, resource creation and teaching and learning activities.

RUIL's submission to the new cultural policy focuses on the importance of language to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. While there is a need for increased investment for all Australian Indigenous languages, we seek to highlight the diversity of language situations across Australia and that languages will require different supports depending on their current status. We emphasise that support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages needs to be considered as an independent pillar within a broader cultural policy.

Support for Australia's Indigenous languages is timely as we are in the middle of the UNESCO Indigenous Languages Decade (2022-2032).

The measures we recommend are also in line with Australia's obligations under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which Australia has yet to implement in legislation. We particularly highlight Articles 8 and 13 as relevant to the issues we discuss:

- Article 8: "1. Indigenous peoples and individuals have the right not to be subjected to forced assimilation or destruction of their culture. 2. States shall provide effective mechanisms for prevention of, and redress for: (a) Any action which has the aim or effect of depriving them of their integrity as distinct peoples, or of their cultural values or ethnic identities ... (d) Any form of forced assimilation or integration."
- Article 13: "1. Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, 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. 2. States shall take effective measures to ensure that this right is protected".

Articles 14 and 16 also explicitly refer to language and establish the rights of Indigenous peoples to establish educational systems/institutions and media in their own languages, as well as establishing the obligation of States to take effective measures to protect these rights.

A **summary of our recommendations** can be found on page 4.

The current state of Australian Indigenous languages

Australia is home to more than 500 Indigenous languages, including sign languages and creoles (Bowern 2023 p.1). Devastatingly, the impacts of colonisation mean that only 12 languages continue to be learned by children as a first language (NILS 2020). The remaining languages range

from those that are still spoken by older community members to those that are being revived from written records. Australian Indigenous languages can be understood as falling into the following categories:

- Traditional Indigenous languages that are still being acquired by children as a first language.
- Traditional Indigenous languages that are still spoken but are no longer being acquired as a first language.
- Traditional Indigenous languages that are no longer spoken as a first language but may be being revived from available resources.
- New Indigenous languages such as Kriol and Yumplatok that are being acquired by children as a first language.

Every language requires increased investment and support. It is important that these supports are designed to meet the needs of each community and the current status of the language. For example, while a learner's guide may be a useful tool for a language being revived from written sources, these will not be as important for supporting language use in a community where all members of the community already speak the language. Even within these broad categories, community aspirations can vary significantly; some may prioritise having language visible and promoted in public places, while others may prioritise archival research, or training for early childhood educators, etc. Communities must be able to self-determine, under a common framework, the supports they require to strengthen and transmit their languages.

New Indigenous languages should also be included in programs related to Australian Indigenous languages as these are also considered strong carriers of culture and identity by speakers, as well as being the first language of many thousands of First Nations people. The current Indigenous Languages and Arts Program should be expanded to allow projects focused on Kriol, Yumplatok and other new Indigenous language varieties.

Need for increased investment in languages

There is great need for increased investment in Australian Indigenous languages as identified in First Languages Australia's Languages Sector Strengthening Plan. If languages are to flourish and be used regularly in the ways community want to, languages require stable long-term funding.

There is currently a network of language centres and community organisations across Australia working to revive and maintain their languages. However, for many language groups there is either no associated language centre, or their language centre is not adequately resourced to provide the required support. This is due to many language centres being tasked with supporting numerous languages, and these languages can have significant differences from each other, meaning it is not possible to easily transfer resources (including human resources) from one to another.

Outside of the language centre network, language groups may be able to access short term project funding. While this is beneficial, it is not adequate to support the revival and maintenance of Australian Indigenous languages. This is a long-term, multigenerational endeavour which requires sustained funding models. The government should work towards an adequately funded language centre network that supports all Australian Indigenous languages including new languages. This would include developing a transparent pathway for the establishment of new language centres in collaboration with First Languages Australia.

This will require standalone Indigenous Language policy in consultation with the Languages Policy Partnership, distinct from Arts and Cultural policy. Although initiatives to support Australian Indigenous languages may intersect with the arts, they necessarily require their own distinct funding and policy.

This policy must be evidence-based, recognising that language vitality is associated with community members having the opportunity to regularly learn, hear, speak, read, write and sign their languages across multiple domains (e.g. at home, in the workplace, in education). Creating, expanding and sustaining spaces where language can be learned and used will be more effective for reversing language loss than standalone technological initiatives, such as apps, though these also have their place.

Develop training pathways

While there is a need for greater investment in language centres and their staff, any increase in investment should necessarily be partnered with training initiatives and ongoing professional development opportunities to support the development of Indigenous language workers. Training is currently provided by a patchwork of providers. This includes:

- University of Melbourne, Research Unit for Indigenous Language – Language Worker Training Program
- University of Queensland – Graduate Certificate in Language Revitalisation
- Living Languages
- University of Sydney – Masters of Indigenous Language Education
- Various Providers – Certificate II, III & IV in Learning/Teaching an Australian First Nation's Language

The government should work with First Languages Australia and the tertiary sector to develop pathways for Indigenous language workers that respond to the needs of language groups.

Currently many of the training opportunities available are at an entry level. For example, while Certificates II and III in Learning an Australian First Nation's Language provide a preliminary understanding of language learning and language work, they do not provide the necessary skills to lead the revival or maintenance of a language. Consequently, Indigenous language policy should consider opportunities for ongoing professional development throughout a language worker's career.

Access to institutional archives

For those communities wanting to revive their languages this often means needing to access manuscripts, images and recordings from various holding institutions such as AIATSIS and State/National Libraries. Despite advancements in technology that should facilitate greater access as exemplified by the work of the Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures (PARADISEC), the experience of communities wishing to access materials is increasingly difficult due to what has been termed a 'new protectionism' which restricts access to Indigenous Knowledge (Thieberger et al. 2024). While well intentioned, access conditions that seek to protect Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) often limit access and discoverability of materials to the very people to whom the knowledge belongs. It places the institution as the arbiter of access rather than the community or cultural custodians. This

inevitably leads to circumstances where an Indigenous person is unable to access their communities' materials without gaining clearance from the holding institution.

We strongly suggest that the proposals put forward by Thieberger et al. (2024) be adopted in future policy concerning holding institutions including AIATSIS and State/National Libraries. This includes the digitisation of materials and building of digital platforms to increase accessibility so that communities can make informed decisions about how materials relating to their ICIP can be managed. Communities need to first know what information and materials exist before decisions regarding access can be made. We have led the development of Nyingarn (nyingarn.online), an online platform for transcribing manuscript materials of Australian Indigenous languages that assists in determining the content of manuscripts so that they can then be used in language programs.

Summary of Recommendations

- 1) Development of a standalone, national First Nations Languages policy under a rights-based framework, in line with UNDRIP.
- 2) Programs supporting Australian Indigenous languages be designed to reflect the diversity of language vitality and community aspirations.
- 3) Programs supporting Australian Indigenous languages be expanded to include new Australian Indigenous languages such as Kriol and Yumplatok.
- 4) The government work towards a language centre network which covers all Australian Indigenous languages.
 - a) The government, in consultation with First Languages Australia, develop a transparent pathway for the establishment of new language centres.
 - b) Language centres be adequately resourced, with stable, long-term funding to support all languages associated with them.
 - c) Language centres be periodically reviewed to ensure all designated languages are being supported. If designated languages are not being supported, then establish a process for removing these from the language centre's remit.
- 5) Develop and fund sustainable and appropriate training pathways for First Nations language workers at all career stages, in collaboration with First Languages Australia and the tertiary sector.
- 6) Invest in the digitisation, discoverability and accessibility of collections at holding institutions such as AIATSIS and the National Library of Australia in line with the recommendations of Thieberger et al (2024) including:
 - a) Err on the side of making material available to Indigenous people.
 - b) Fund digitisation of records for access alongside online accurate descriptions of content.
 - c) Build platforms for presentation of digital records.
 - d) Provide timely access to materials and an efficient takedown mechanism.
 - e) Have clear access conditions attached to items, based on informed consideration of their content (predicated on the earlier steps).

References

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