Submission No.44

Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities

Submission from: **Research Centre for Languages and Cultures (RCLC)**
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Members of the Research Centre for Languages and Cultures (RCLC) wish to highlight the crucial importance of ensuring the maintenance and strengthening of indigenous languages in both non-formal and formal education in Australia. Our involvement in multi-country studies focusing on research on indigenous languages and their use includes a wide set of experiences and expertise, including first- hand experience of indigenous education in at least 30 countries of the world, and experience and knowledge of indigenous languages in education in at least another 25 countries. The wide reach of our research activities and networks has given us access to the most recent and valid research findings on literacy and language education of indigenous language communities around the world and we are able to offer evidence which arises from these and our own research.

International research evidence of best policy and practice of languages in education for Indigenous Peoples

Large-scale data which are now available demonstrate the degrees of success of student achievement in numerous different language education programs where indigenous students are in non-formal and formal mainstream education systems. These data demonstrate the conditions under which the successful and less successful introduction, maintenance and strengthening of both the indigenous language and English is possible.

The findings of system-wide and multi-country studies in developing contexts have strong implications for Australian Indigenous Languages and education. In particular, these findings draw attention to the best approaches to:

- introducing both the indigenous language and English for early primary school level literacy and biliteracy; and
- facilitating a systematic continuum from 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn' in the language systems available to the school students.

Much of this research has been funded in other countries and in multi-country studies by UNESCO, UNICEF and a number of European development agencies, including the: Swedish International Co-

operation Development Agency (SIDA), Deutscher Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), Royal Netherlands Embassy, Irish Aid, Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA), Finnish International Development Agency (FINIDA), and the Norwegian Agency for Development Co-operation (NORAD).

A recent UNESCO Report, *Why and how Africa should invest in African languages and multilingual education. An evidence- and practice-based policy advocacy brief* (Ouane and Glanz 2010) draws on the most recent evidence which indicates why and how indigenous languages need to be used, maintained and strenghened in education. While this research has been directed towards Africa, the research data, theoretical underpinnings, and scenario-setting would be useful for Australian considerations (available at the following website: http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001886/188642e.pdf).

A summary of the recent research shows that:

- It is possible to introduce literacy in many indigenous languages within a single education system, even in very poor countries like Ethiopia, Nepal and Papua New Guinea.
- It is possible to teach children to read and write in up to three languages successfully in primary school, providing that the home language/language used in the immediate community is one of these languages.
- This community language needs to be the language through with the early primary school curriculum is taught.
- English needs to be taught by specialist English language teachers who understand bilingual pedagogy and who preferably are able to use (some) of the local community language.
- Depending upon the proximity to urban English dominant centres, the period of time which is required for learning through the home language before a switch to English medium can be made successfully is usually six to eight years; it is possibly in six years under well-resourced conditions, and this is likely to be the case in Australia.
- Learning two or three languages does not in any way impede academic success across the curriculum; it is shown to be advantageous for success in mathematics and science.[1]

[1] See the volume: Multilingual Education Works (Heugh and Skutnabb-Kangas 2010); and DVD, *New Directions in Linguistic and Cultural Diversity* (RCLC, UniSA 2011). A copy of each of these documents will be sent to the Canberra office.

Recommendations for the use of Indigenous languages in Australian education

Based on the current research, we emphasise that it is possible and desirable in Australia to ensure, encourage and promote the use of indigenous Australian and Torres Strait Islander community languages throughout primary school and as language subjects through secondary school. In particular, we strongly advise that there is clear evidence that the language of the home and immediate community is essential for student retention in school and successful student achievement/mother tongue/mother language. The use, maintenance and further development of the community language is not only affordable, but it results in lower repetition, higher rates of throughput to secondary, and ultimately increased opportunities for participation in the formal economy. Current language education policy and planning expertise at the international level is available at zero cost to the Australian government and may be traced through the UNESCO studies (see Ouane and Glanz 2010). This includes ten-point plans for timeframes, implementation, and training of trainers and educators. We recommend that research of the kind we describe be undertaken in Australia alongside policy development and implementation.

Possible contributions by the Research Centre for Languages and Cultures

We would be pleased to offer our assistance in the areas of literacy and language education in any way which the committee may think suitable.

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