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House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs
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Please find attached a submission by **Dr. Inge Kral** and myself to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, *Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities.*

We would be happy to provide additional evidence to the Committee if required.

Yours sincerely

Dr William Fogarty

Submission to the Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities.
The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

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Introduction

This submission concerns the *Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities* by the Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, with a specific focus on lessons we have learnt from working with Indigenous peoples in remote regions as both educators and researchers. Together we have a combined experience of over thirty years in remote contexts, specifically in working with Indigenous youth and communities on issues surrounding Indigenous languages, literacy, lifelong learning, education, enterprise, employment and development. While we are both employed at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) at The Australian National University, we make this submission as independent experts and are in no way representing a particular view of CAEPR, or our colleagues. With a mind to brevity and readability, we have kept our comments and referencing herein to a minimum, however, as noted in the cover letter, would be happy to provide further and more detailed evidence to the Inquiry if, or when required.

Before beginning our submission, we would like to note that we are aware that a number of submissions to the Inquiry will deal with the issues of bilingual education and in particular the bilingual education policy in the Northern Territory (NT). We are also aware that a number of submissions will concentrate on literacy acquisition in the early childhood years. Given this, we will not duplicate the work of these submissions, rather, we will focus on:

i. the role of Indigenous languages in emergent development activity in remote Australia and;
ii. the out-of-school language and literacy needs of Indigenous adolescents and young adults, with a focus on the digital economy.

However, we would like the Inquiry to note the following broad findings from our research experience in relation to bilingual education and the teaching of Indigenous languages in schools:

- The international research base is **clear** in determining that conceptual development in children is enhanced when students are taught in their first language.
- The research base is **clear** in showing that education of Indigenous students in their first language is a critical component of students well-being, self esteem and personal development at school
- Indigenous communities, parents and teachers **overwhelmingly** support the teaching of Indigenous languages Indigenous schools. In part because this is a crucial factor in the

engagement of Indigenous families in education generally and leads to improved school attendance.

- There is **no evidence** that learning in an Indigenous first language has a negative effect on English language acquisition.
- There is **no credible evidence** that **'**English only' remote schools perform better than bilingual schools.
- The evidence of the benefits of Indigenous language programs for Indigenous students **overwhelmingly** supports their continuation and development.

In this submission, we divide our contributions into Parts One and Two:

Part One is entitled **Indigenous knowledge, language and emergent development**. It deals specifically with the following Terms of Reference:

- *The benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages*
- *The contribution of Indigenous languages to Closing the Gap and strengthening Indigenous identity and culture*

Part Two is entitled **Young adults, new media, the digital economy and Indigenous language and literacy**. It deals specifically with the following Terms of Reference:

- The benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages.
- The contribution of Indigenous languages to Closing the Gap and strengthening Indigenous identity and culture.
- The educational and vocational benefits of ensuring English language competency amongst Indigenous communities.
- The effectiveness of the Commonwealth Government Indigenous languages policy in delivering its objectives and relevant policies of other Australian governments.

PART ONE

Indigenous knowledge, language and emergent development

Much of the more recent debate and discussion around the role of Indigenous languages in education has focused either on the role of education in the *maintenance* of Indigenous languages, or on the role of Indigenous languages in *English literacy and learning*. While both of these issues are critical to any policy formulation on Indigenous languages, there has been a paucity of discussion in public policy about the potential importance of Indigenous languages in the connecting schools and local development activity, particularly in remote Australia.

The link between education and local development aspirations and activity is clearly delineated in the research base. Much of the research in contemporary studies on education makes this point. For example, McRae (2000) cites the need for training and educational development to be linked with community aspirations and development goals, while Miller (2005), Ballati et al. (2004) and Catts and Gelade (2002) all concur. In their 2004 paper Gelade et al. make this point strongly, suggesting that location, student aspirations and contextual realities play an integral role in determining relative 'success' in education.

In the same vein, there is a plethora of research suggesting that one of the key the goals in policy and delivery must be to provide Indigenous people with the education and training they need in order to be able to raise their living standards on their own lands and in their own communities (Kral and Falk 2003). In line with this, much of the literature is unequivocal in stating that Indigenous knowledge and local development aspirations must form a central component of educational and pedagogic design (see Anderson 2003, Schwab 2006, Ball and Pence 2001, O'Callaghan 2005).

Wallace et al. (2005) make this point succinctly, noting:

> Developing innovative and successful approaches to education and training in remote and regional contexts with Indigenous people necessitates effective partnership and the recognition of diverse knowledge systems as they relate to the worlds of work, community engagement and learning (Wallace et al. 2005:9).

Yet, in Australia, there has been very little acknowledgement of the importance of Indigenous languages in the connection between school, community development and employment.

Indigenous Knowledge, Language and Development

In Australia, there is a growing interest in the role that Indigenous Knowledge (IK), and especially, Indigenous Ecological Knowledge (IEK) can play in the in the generation of economic and social development activity in remote regions. What is often *not* explicitly recognised is that Indigenous languages are the repositories of IK, and as such are the bedrock upon which IK (and IEK) are built. Indigenous systems of knowledge and practice are embedded within language and institutionalized by language. What is known, how knowledge is gained, and even how knowledge is defined and expressed is, to a large extent, determined by language and its use in context. In

other words, language *is* knowledge. The use of IK or IEK in development, therefore, depends upon the continued intergenerational availability of Indigenous languages to support such knowledge aqusition.

The 'value' of IK and the Indigenous languages that underpin it, has long been recognised in the fields of agriculture and medicine (Sillitoe 1998), as well as in bio-prospecting and in conservation, wildlife management, tourism and art. Internationally, The World Bank, The UN and the IMF have all formally recognized the economic value of Indigenous knowledge in the alleviation of poverty, the creation of sustainable development and in the provision of localized employment pathways. The teaching and learning of Indigenous languages, there fore, should also be seen as a mechanism for improving Indigenous livelihoods and for the generation of sustainable development options in Australia.

A good example of emergent development that relies on Indigenous knowledge and language is Indigenous Land and Sea Management (ILSM) in remote Australia. Over the last two decades, there has been an increasing growth in community-based development activity that falls under the 'catch all' phrase of Indigenous land and sea management. Putnis et.al. (2007) provide a broad definition of this form of development which includes:

> ...a range of employment, economic development, training, community and cultural activities in the areas of natural and cultural resource management, land and sea monitoring and reporting for border protection, active participation in the sustainable economic use of land and sea in industry sectors such as mining, pastoralism, forestry, tourism, fisheries, aquaculture, horticulture, wildlife utilisation and the commercial provision of environmental services; and practical maintenance of Indigenous knowledge, culture and heritage. (Putnis et al. 2007:5)[1]

ILSM is emerging as a significant 'industry' for Indigenous people, especially in remote regions. The importance of this type of development activity can be seen in the context of Indigenous employment in the NT. If one were to separate ILSM as an industry of employment from the Census data, it would comprise the fifth largest industry of employment for Indigenous people in the NT. In very remote areas, a conservative estimation of approximately 500 Indigenous workers demonstrates the importance of this form of employment. This form of activity also provides benefits in conservation and bio-diversity to large tracts of the Australian continent and should be seen as having a strong role in the 'national interest'. Such activity also provides opportunity for continued customary forms of social and economic production. For further information on this type of activity and its benefits and challenges we would direct the inquiry to the *People on Country* project currently being run at CAEPR, which analyses ILSM activity across seven remote field sites (see http://caepr.anu.edu.au/poc/index.php). Our point here, however, is that ILSM and its associated employment and development outcomes depend directly on the continued strength and availability of Indigenous language and associated Indigenous knowledge.

[1] We also include in this definition the term Indigenous Cultural and Natural Resource Management (ICNRM) as defined by May (2010:2)

The importance of Indigenous languages and knowledge to ILSM is just one example of the role that languages can play in localized development and employment activity. Unless education in local Indigenous languages is supported, IK and IEK can be lost over a relatively short time period, as exhibited by language extinguishment in many parts of Australia. With the further loss of languages, pathways to potentially viable Indigenous livelihood options and related careers will also be lost. This will invariably have a negative impact on the goal of 'Closing the Gap'.

Recommendation 1:

That the new National Indigenous Languages policy explicitly recognise the current and potential benefit and contribution of Indigenous languages to development options, livelihood options and employment pathways for Indigenous people.

In the same way that Indigenous languages are playing a role in development and employment in remote areas, there is emergent evidence that the teaching of Indigenous language and knowledge, in concert with such development, is playing a role in re-engaging Indigenous youth in education (Fordham et al 2010).

Educational programs that link with local development, like ILSM, capitalize on the real application of skills and concepts *in situ*. The daily use of Indigenous languages in learning and employment that is connected to 'country' also has the potential to ameliorate some of the social, cultural and linguistic barriers associated with other forms of education and employment, as the learning can be intergenerational. Old people, young people, Indigenous people and expert non-Indigenous people(for example scientists), are all able to contribute to the learning process, in both English and in language, at the same time. This allows for the real engagement of Aboriginal people in the learning process, while simultaneously drawing upon high level scientific concepts- especially in the areas of biology and the environmental sciences. At the same time, the English literacy and numeracy skills needed in such work can be explicitly taught through a combination of experiential and classroom-based modes of instruction. In this way Indigenous language learning *and* English literacy and numeracy acquisition work side by side.

Schools and teachers in remote areas have been quick to realize this and education partnering students with rangers and associated ILSM activity is becoming a recognizable feature of many remote learning contexts. This has seen the growth of small and somewhat disparate pedagogic developments, variously called 'junior ranger programs', 'land and learning' programs or 'environmental science' programs. Collectively, we call these 'Learning through Country' (LtC) programs (Fogarty 2010). Importantly, research in 9 separate remote communities has consistently shown that the learning of Indigenous languages in LtC programs is cited as a key reason for increased outcomes in student participation and engagement. It is also given as one of the key reasons that community members get involved in such programs.

The potential link between Indigenous language learning, education and development or employment pathways is a grossly under researched area. There is an emergent evidence base that the opportunity

to engage in Indigenous language learning through school programs that connect to community development and employment may play a vital role in re-engaging Indigenous students. This is of vital importance in schools in remote areas where attendance levels are particularly low. Similarly, the connection between Indigenous language programs and development pathways to training and employment has never been explored. This is surprising given the level of attention the transition from school to work receives in education and Indigenous policy circles. This is an area in desperate need of research and policy development related to closing the gap in Education and Employment in remote areas.

Recommendation 2:

That the Inquiry recommend the commissioning of research and/or policy development exploring the correlation between Indigenous language programs, local development aspirations and school attendance.

Recommendation 3:

That the Inquiry recommend the commissioning of research and/or policy development exploring the connection between Indigenous language programs and development pathways to training and employment.

PART TWO

Young adults, new media, the digital economy and Indigenous language and literacy

All too often maintenance and revitalisation programs, and related policy and funding approaches, support institutional early childhood and school-based Indigenous language programs, while neglecting the important non-formal or out-of-school language and literacy needs of Indigenous adolescents and young adults.

The Commonwealth Government Indigenous Languages Policy seeks to:

- Increase use of new technology to broaden the impact of language maintenance and revival activities by local community Indigenous language centres.

While we applaud this approach we have observed that local community Indigenous language centres are few and far between and most do not engage with the Indigenous youth population in remote regions. We suggest that the Policy needs to look beyond Language Centres and embrace the other sites of new technology use and language revival, maintenance and transmission that Indigenous youth are engaging with.

We suggest that paying attention to the Indigenous (and English) language and literacy learning needs of young adults as they articulate into areas of specialist knowledge and expertise development will lead to:

- The strengthening of Indigenous identity and culture;
- The attainment of Closing the Gap targets through improving educational and vocational outcomes in Indigenous languages and English.

While early childhood and school-based initiatives are very important, such institutional approaches are not taking account of the profound changes in youth learning taking place in response to the introduction of new media, improved broadband and greater access to mobile telephony and digital technologies in remote Indigenous communities.[i]

International research suggests that digital technologies are enabling new kinds of agency in learning (Barron 2006) and that new technology practices are tied to a 'digital divide' between 'in-school and out-of-school' use of new technologies, multimodal literacies and learning styles (Buckingham 2007). This resonates in remote Indigenous Australian communities where youth, even those with minimal formal education, are acquiring technological expertise through engaging in new forms of media production often culminating in improved opportunities for enterprise generation and employment.

The Commonwealth Government Indigenous Languages Policy also seeks to strengthen pride in identity and culture through language revival:

- Through the Indigenous Contemporary Music Action Plan, support music in Indigenous languages to increase the transmission of languages across generations to younger speakers, utilising festivals and multimedia to strengthen the focus on Indigenous languages and increasing broadcasting content in Indigenous languages.

We also applaud this approach to Indigenous language revival, maintenance and transmission.

Indigenous youth in remote communities are engaging with new digital technologies at a rapid rate. They are demonstrating their competence in this domain, particularly by engaging in creative cultural theatre, festival, multimedia and music production or digital cultural heritage projects. Such activities commonly incorporate Indigenous languages (e.g. recording songs in language on *GarageBand* or *ProTools* computer software, or translating and transcribing language subtitles in film or other audiovisual recordings). Youth with computer and media skills are also taking on roles archiving and documenting local community knowledge in databases of heritage materials where repatriated items are enriched with annotations often in Indigenous languages.[2]

By participating in projects and activities requiring oral and written Indigenous language competence young adults are exhibiting pride in Indigenous language and culture and modeling a purpose for mother tongue (and English) literacy for the next generation.

Young people are acquiring the complex technological skills needed to undertake these activities. They commonly work independently or with elders to record, transcribe and translate texts in local vernaculars and English.

In many cases youth initiate or are called upon to engage in projects specifically because of their assumed cultural knowledge and oral language competence (in the Indigenous mother tongue and English). However many Indigenous youth do not understand the grammatical intricacies of the language spoken by elders, nor have they acquired high levels of competence in either English or Indigenous language literacy. While young people are involved in digital archiving activities or in generating music and multimedia productions for broadcasting, festivals and enterprise generation; the development of the sophisticated linguistic skills required to perform tasks in these domains has not been supported or addressed.

It is therefore imperative that language and literacy support is provided for youth in non-formal or out-of-school contexts to improve their oral and written Indigenous language and English competence.

While it is recognised that,

The learning of English is a fundamental skill that all Australians, including Indigenous Australians, must have in order to maximise their learning opportunities and life chances.

The prevalence of English language in global youth culture is penetrating remote communities at an alarming rate. With the convergence of broadcast media with Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs), the coming Digital TV Switchover, and the rollout of the National Broadband Network young people will increasingly access television broadcasts, online resources (e.g. YouTube) and computer mediated communications through social networking sites (e.g. Facebook) and mobile phone communications (i.e. text messaging) *predominantly in English.* While this represents a fertile site for English language development and practice, it also means that leisure and recreation activities for remote Indigenous youth will be conducted primarily in English, rather than the Indigenous mother tongue. Furthermore, concerns are being expressed regarding the impact of the switchover to the potentially English-centric monolingual/monocultural format of 'Direct to Home' Digital TV (IRCA 2010).

These changes will have profound consequences for Indigenous language maintenance and transmission.

Recommendation 4:

That the Commonwealth Maintenance of Indigenous Languages and Records (MILR) program (administered by the Office for the Arts) fund Indigenous language and literacy support for youth through remote Indigenous media organisations, youth centres, arts and digital archiving projects, etc.

Recommendation 5:

That the role of youth-oriented organisations, arts projects and remote Indigenous media organisations be recognised as supporting the use of new technologies to broaden the impact of language maintenance and revival activities.

Many Indigenous youth are embarking on training, employment and enterprise generation pathways in the growing digital economy and the burgeoning creative industries and broadcasting sectors.[3]

Remote Indigenous youth are playing a growing role as the producers of broadcast media. The majority of films and videos produced by remote youth are in local Indigenous vernacular/s and incorporate translated subtitles in English. Such productions are an important vehicle for language and culture revival, maintenance and transmission. While some avenues exist for the broadcasting of youth productions in local languages (e.g. through NITV; ABC Open; and Yarning Up), there remains a strong need for local community broadcasting services (e.g. Indigenous Community Television or ICTV).[4]

Recommendation 6:

That the Indigenous Broadcasting & Media sector be included as a key stakeholder in the planning and implementation of the new National Indigenous Languages Policy.[5]

Recommendation 7:

That ICTV be expanded in recognition of its role in supporting Indigenous language maintenance activities in remote regions thereby providing a broadcasting platform for Indigenous youth media productions.

Recommendation 8:

That community broadcasting and narrowcasting licences continue after Digital TV switchover takes place in remote communities to allow for the broadcasting of media in local Indigenous languages.

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[i] See (Featherstone 2011;Kral 2010;Kral 2011 in press).

[2] For example in the 'Ourstory' database in the Northern Territory Library 'Libraries and Knowledge Centres' (Gibson et al. 2011) and the Ara Irititja heritage archive in the APY Lands in South Australia (Hughes and Dallwitz 2007).

[3] Statement on Key Issues identified at the AIATSIS Information Technologies and Indigenous Communities (ITIC) Symposium, Canberra 13-15 July 2010. Available at: http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/research/symposia/Digi10.html

[4] See (Rennie and Featherstone 2008).

[5] See (IRCA 2010)