Submission to the Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs in regard to Language Learning in Indigenous Communities

May 2012

VACL was established in 1994 to function as the Peak Body for Aboriginal Languages in Victoria. The corporation supports the operation of five Community Language Programs who work locally to research and develop language resources for the community. The organisation has grown over time to a level of employing approximately 12 staff and supporting more than 12 languages in Victoria in a regular capacity and other language groups on a 'needs' basis.

The State Language Centre's profile is continually increasing due to the promotion and distribution of activity throughout the state. Tools such as the VACL Website continue to receive many visits and generate large amounts of enquiries. VACL is ever increasingly being sought out by Victorian Government departments to provide advice on issues pertaining to language and implementation into strategic planning. VACL has played an instrumental role in the development of both the VCE Curriculum and the Prep to Yr10 Protocols & Framework for the teaching of language in Victorian Schools.

Whilst VACL is a growing organisation, we are somewhat limited in the work we can do due to funding. Aboriginal languages aren't given the same value as tangible culture which results in a much shorter list of funding opportunities. VACL has quite a few strengths in that we have an excellent Board of Directors, a Board that works well together, have the same aspirations and ideas and come from a diverse range of backgrounds. The Board are able to provide the 'right' advice and have strong connections back to their own communities. VACL is a community organisation and has over 75% staff from Aboriginal background and provides training to its staff to increase their own skills which are transferable to any other form of employment. Most recently, VACL was recognised by the Australian Tax Office as a Public Benevolent Institution which not only allows additional benefits to staff and makes VACL a more attractive employer, but also allows VACL to access a wide range of philanthropic funds and trusts to expand its programs and activities.

VACL has been presented with some challenges over its lifetime, mainly related to Native Title and the formation of Traditional Owner Groups. VACL is careful where to position itself as an organisation when working with 'other people's languages, therefore, it should remain as a resource to the community by way of program planning & support, provision of resources and potential access to funding. VACL has also been challenged by another layer of representation in Victoria being "Registered Aboriginal Parties" (RAP's). These groups have also caused confusion in the community as to right to language and cultural authority.

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Languages in Victoria

There are 38 Aboriginal languages identified in Victoria which can be linguistically grouped into 11 language 'families'. VACL has an enormous task in servicing all 38 languages in Victoria. Funding allows VACL to operate 5 Community Language Programs that in total work on approximately 12 individual languages. The rest are serviced by individual activities and projects run through the state language centre.

In order to gain a wider service area, VACL has built a strong relationship with the Victorian Education Department to see the development of language curriculum in schools to engage more communities in language & culture. Generally, VACL has good support from the community in recognition of the work undertaken over the past 15 years in collecting language records and materials. VACL is also recognised by the community for promotional activities, resource development and the aforementioned work getting language into schools.

Language is a very sensitive topic for many communities and its reclamation and revival raises many issues in regards to ownership, use, copyright, etc.

Community

Being a 'state-wide' organisation, VACL aims to undertake programs that can benefit the entire state such as schools curriculum. The community as a whole grapples with competing demands such as health, education, housing, etc, and as English is the first language of all the population, reclaiming Aboriginal Languages is a relatively new concept. Many communities are keen to re-introduce language back into the community and most are unsure as to how to go about it. Usually they look to VACL for guidance and/or funding.

There is massive potential to implement a full-time Community Language Program into all 11 language family groups in Victoria. This would enable a large amount of resource development, community engagement, community capacity building through training and cross departmental coordination in regards to education, national parks, and justice systems.

1. Learning revival languages has very particular benefits, processes, characteristics and requirements which makes it distinct from other types of language learning.
    - Revival languages present a unique language situation in that the language community are researching, developing and learning their language at one and the same time.
    - There is a severe shortage of materials for learning the language, and the process for developing materials is more complex than that for materials in a language which is fluently spoken.
    - Materials development is part and parcel of the language revival process. It involves research by and/or in close collaboration with the language community, and community-authorised decision-making, on issues such as spelling, approved word lists, aspects of grammar to prioritise and so on.
    - It is not possible to simply adopt curriculum for learning strong or maintenance languages for revival languages. Curriculum models for teaching revival languages in formal contexts are emerging, for example in Victoria and South Australia.

2. Being able to learn their heritage language often has very significant and even life-changing effects for both adults and children.
    - For children, there are observable positive correlations between school attendance, engagement with learning, interaction with other children, and heritage language learning.
    - For adults, there are consistent reports of finding meaning, identity, understanding and purpose through access to their language. There are people for whom beginning to learn their language has been the turning point to a new and constructive phase of their lives.
    - Part of this is because learning their language validates people in aspects of their daily life. A good example is the structure of extended family relations – practised in various forms in contemporary culture, and revealed much more fully in the heritage language vocabulary. This gives people words and a context to understand what they already know. It helps them makes sense of and gives them pride in a diversity which has sometimes been a source of ridicule and shame.
    - These correlations, repeatedly referred to in many publications and reports, show clearly that language is a critical key in 'closing the gap' in individual and community health and well-being on many levels.

3. For children learning or maintaining a language which is currently in use in their community and/or home environment, the validation of the home culture in this way supports a stable family environment and emotional well-being.
    - While English is important to people in the outer spheres of their daily lives, it is the home language which is crucial for maintaining each person's inner sphere of life. It is interactions in the home, family and local community

which develop strength and stability in a vulnerable young person as they grow. To focus on English at the expense of the community language increases the risk of fragility in this core strength.

4. In the bigger picture, maintaining and reviving languages, which includes ongoing learning of the languages, maintains diversity of ways of knowing, which are expressed in the semantics and other structures of individual languages.
    - One application of this of obvious relevance to the whole nation is the knowledge of the Indigenous ecology expressed in and through the various languages, which can support national efforts to maintain the environment we rely on for our survival.

5. Measures of need for support and measures of success must be carefully thought through in relation to the demographic and linguistic situations presented.

6. Measures of need for support cannot be in terms of numbers of people. Even communities where the languages are relatively strong do not have many speakers, and this is likely to have been the case even prior to colonisation. Strong languages need not be languages with thousands of speakers.
    - The problem this presents for funding distribution and equality of access needs to be addressed with adequate consultation and consideration of all stakeholder groups. There is precedence for successful implementation of regionally based teachers, online learning, block release and other models.

7. Measures of success for language revival in particular need to be appropriate to what is actually happening in communities, as well as the goals, pathways and priorities of the communities.
    - These are not necessarily comparable to language learning goals and outcomes in other situations. Short-term, concrete results may not in the end work well towards revival of the language.
    - Outcomes may at times emphasise cultural aspects of language, for good reasons supported in the points above, so that even definitions of learning and using the language cannot be assumed to match those appropriate to, say, school-based LOTE .
    - A VACL/LaTrobe University project (funded by AIATSIS and the ARC) is currently investigating the actual pathways, priorities and outcomes of language revival. It will be important to draw on research such as this, as well as the essential direct consultation with stakeholders, to establish appropriate markers and measures of success in language revival and language revival teaching.
8. Given the cultural emphasis of language learning in Aboriginal communities, and the vital role language maintenance and revival play in the restoration of Aboriginal authority in Aboriginal business, learning the languages necessarily entails supporting, training and employing Aboriginal people to teach them.
    - This is at least as important for revival languages as for languages with many fluent speakers. Since revival language learning entails authorised language development and decision-making, involving authorised people in its

teaching is essential to the success of the program as well as to maintaining and strengthening the links between community and learning environments.

- In the case of language revival, language teaching is underpinned by more foundational language revival processes. For language learning to be possible in the long term then, support, training and employment of Aboriginal people in language revival is necessarily a parallel priority.
- This means that systems and funding for the support, training and employment of local Aboriginal teachers and researchers is a high priority for setting up learning opportunities.
- These systems will need to accommodate the fact that some key Aboriginal people are unlikely to undergo extensive formal training, but are still of great value for their knowledge and standing in their communities.

9. Formal teaching of language in schools is better taken slowly, with things set up adequately with an eye to the situation described above and by others, than being driven by inappropriate timelines with inadequate consideration and/or funding which ultimately set up a program to fail. At this stage in our mutual history, our nation as a whole cannot afford the implications of such failures, and Aboriginal communities themselves even less so.

10. Looking again at the bigger picture, it is essential in the interests of all of the above that the nation as a whole recognises Indigenous languages as the first languages of Australia, and recognises that in many communities maintenance and restoration of language is essential for reconnection to culture and identity, and for community well-being. This needs to be enshrined through official recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language rights.