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Submission from the Australian Federation of Graduate Women (Inc) to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs re. Language Learning in Indigenous Communities

Introduction

The Australian Federation of Graduate Women (formerly the Australian Federation of University Women) is one of seventy-one national affiliates of the International Federation of University Women, the only education-based NGO with status with UNESCO. Founded in 1922, it pursues educational initiatives to advance the status and well-being of women and girls privately and publicly, nationally and internationally, and it attempts to further peace and international co-operation through the development of understanding and friendship between women of the world irrespective of race, nationality, religion or political opinion. Membership is open to any woman residing in Australia who holds a degree from a recognised university or college worldwide.

While concerned with general issues of education, AFGW has a particular commitment to supporting the education of Indigenous Australians. In 1998 it organised a conference, financed by DETYA, at the University of South Australia on 'Indigenous Education and Social Capital: Problems Facing Indigenous Students in Tertiary Education' and in 2002 made a submission to the Higher Education Consultative Process on Indigenous Australians and Higher Education. While AFGW understands that the difficulties confronting Indigenous university students are substantial, in many communities the school completion rates are so low that any discussion of progression to tertiary study is irrelevant and will continue to be irrelevant until the issues of language, literacy and numeracy are addressed. This submission complements earlier submissions made by the Australian Federation of Graduate Women on education in Indigenous communities.

Background to this submission by the Australian Federation of Graduate Women

In 1970 the Commonwealth Government officially rescinded the White Australia policy and adopted a policy of multiculturalism. This policy recognised the importance of language in the preservation of culture. Language is intrinsic to human development; it does more than allow us to communicate – it shapes our perception of the world, our understanding of human interaction, and our values. It provides the basis for our culture and identity, law and morality upon which cohesion as a people depends. Knowing this, the Australian government encouraged new immigrants to retain their languages and culture while learning English in a way that provided them with access to mainstream careers in Australia. Newspapers in languages other than English flourished alongside mainstream newspapers written in Standard Australian English. Later other media including radio and television were added to reflect the growing diversity of the Australian community. These postwar immigrants, and those who came later in the 1960s and 1970s settled into their new homeland, entered the professions, became entrepreneurs, marched in ANZAC parades at a time when the RSL did not admit former Aboriginal servicemen, and became respected and valued members of the community. The success of their integration was due, in large part, to the wisdom of the Whitlam

government's approach and the on-going support for multiculturalism by all mainstream Australia political parties.

The only peoples denied the right to retain their culture through their languages were Australia's Indigenous peoples. In the 1990s it was estimated that only 20 Indigenous languages were still passed from one generation to the next as a natal language: 50-60 were identified as seriously endangered in that they were used only by older speakers (Schmidt, 1993); it is likely that some of those have become extinct in the intervening years. Discrimination against Indigenous languages is deeply disturbing to Indigenous Australians as it not only represents a direct threat to the languages that survived the colonial period, but it represents a set of values that they find alien and repugnant. In an interview with members of AFGW-South Australia, Rebecca Richards, the first Indigenous Australian Rhodes Scholar, stressed the importance of language fluency in Indigenous culture, saying that those who speak many languages are highly respected, that they know that cultural diversity matters, and they have the intelligence to realise that connections between different nations and groups are enhanced when they have made the effort to learn each others' languages - to insist that others should give up their language in favour of yours betokens both arrogance and a lack of intellectual capacity.

AFGW submits that significant benefits will accrue to the whole of the Australian community from the recognition and maintenance of Indigenous languages.

The value of Indigenous languages is not immediately evident to many Australians, particularly those who are monolingual and who regard any form of language diversity as a threat. However the extinction of a language represents the loss of an insight into the workings of the human mind (Crawford, 1992), and reduces the sum total of human experience and knowledge. Languages do not simply reflect the ways in which a people think about the world, they shape the ways in which a people think (Bever, 1970). Losing a language means losing a culture and its stores of accumulated knowledge, and diminishes the intellectual diversity of humanity (Crawford, 1995). The Secretary of the United Nations, Ban Ki Moon stated that no country could afford to overlook or ignore alternative perspectives in the search for solutions to environmental problems that we do not fully understand at present (Ban, 2011). Mr. Ban was referring to the importance of including women from a range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds in the scientific community, but his remarks are equally applicable to this issue.

AFGW submits that Indigenous communities and individuals will benefit from the inclusion of Indigenous languages in early education.

The problems besetting many Indigenous communities have been well-documented and the solutions continue to evade policymakers at both state and federal levels. The preservation and promotion of Indigenous languages can assist in finding sustainable and long term solutions. The extinction of their natal language humiliates the people concerned; it can destroy their sense of self-worth, limit their capacity for action to address other problems such as poverty and family disruption. It is an ongoing reminder of their powerlessness, since language extinction does not happen to dominant communities (Crawford, 1995). At the recent national conference of the Australian College of Educators held in Sydney, Professor Lester-Irrabinna Rigney, Dean of Aboriginal Education: Wilto Yerlo at the University of Adelaide made very clear how denial of a people's language undermines their self-respect, while reclaiming and strengthening one's language has the opposite effect – it increases pride and confidence, it empowers people to deal with problems in their communities.

There is abundant evidence from the United States and New Zealand attesting to the benefit associated with teaching Indigenous languages in early childhood. Typically such "language nests" partner elders with preschool age children to teach language and culture in an informal setting. In some cases the mothers (who may themselves be very young) also join, and information on health and childcare may be included. The benefits are obvious and immediate – the children are cared for in a supportive environment, they learn their language and culture from an authentic source and additional services can be provided easily. According to John McCaffery, Senior Lecturer in Education at Auckland University, children who are confident and

secure in their cultural identity adapt more easily to mainstream education, are more likely to complete secondary schooling and proceed to tertiary education and employment.

AFGW notes that UNESCO, an organisation with which we have very close ties, has encouraged mother tongue instruction in early childhood and primary education since 1953. When children are offered opportunities to learn in their mother tongue, they are more likely to enrol and succeed in school and their parents are more likely to communicate with teachers and participate in their children's learning (Ball, 2010)

AFGW submits that culturally sensitive education will improve the educational outcomes in those Indigenous communities where English is a second language.

School participation rates for Indigenous children and young people remain problematic. The human capital investment model of education (Becker, 1975) suggests that the level of education a person decides to attain is an investment decision, where the costs are balanced against the rewards. The difficulty here is that conventional educational outcomes, such as completing Year 12 and progressing to further education, may not be regarded as desirable rewards. Increasing Indigenous content in the form of language and knowledge may make school more relevant and attractive to some young Indigenous people, but care also needs to be taken to ensure that the procedures and practices adopted by a school are appropriate.

Policymakers must acknowledge that no single model of Indigenous education will be appropriate in all circumstances; there is a wide variety of cultural practices and pedagogical practices among Indigenous communities and they must be engaged in developing and delivering education that suits their particular needs. The current policy which advocates withdrawing financial support from isolated communities and promoting key centres for development has the potential to exacerbate language loss, since it will be difficult to teach different Indigenous languages in one school. Separating children into language groups risks creating divisions with the school and community that could exacerbate existing problems.

The number of teachers with appropriate training must be increased as a matter of urgency. Ideally, many of the teachers in Indigenous communities would be members of those communities, however all teachers working with Indigenous students require the highest levels of training in cross-cultural communication and culturally responsive pedagogy (Dunn, 2001; Harris, 1990; McCaffery, 201). Teachers in all schools, including urban schools, need expertise in Australian Indigenous history and cultures and language as well as training in teaching English as a second, or foreign, language. Indigenous students are enrolled at many urban and suburban mainstream schools; their needs are not the same as those of Indigenous students in remote areas, but they also require teaching that accommodates their cultural and language backgrounds. AFGW notes that many preservice teacher education programs now contain compulsory units in Aboriginal studies and we would urge the Commonwealth and state authorities to make such programs a compulsory part of teacher education.

Ways also need to be found to encourage teachers to remain in communities for extended periods of time: it takes time for students and teachers to develop trusting and productive relationships; 'churning' staff on short term contracts - particularly when they are recent graduates who lack experience and specialised knowledge - is inefficient and counter-productive.

When taught well, bilingual education and two-way education in preschools and primary schools fosters recognition of the culture epitomised in the mother tongue, and enables students to retain a strong connection with their culture while having access to further education and careers. The primary goal of bilingual education and two-way immersion programs is excellence in both languages (McCaffery, 2011). There was a move to develop bilingual education in the Northern Territory in the late 1980s; there is anecdotal evidence that bilingual curriculum materials developed by schools were either sold to other countries that saw value in them or, in one case, burnt.

AFGW submits that a review of teaching strategies is required to ensure English language competency in Indigenous individuals and communities.

Indigenous education policy has evolved alongside an awareness of the need to improve Indigenous employment in order to secure the future of young Indigenous people and their communities. There have

been many policy reviews and reports dealing with Indigenous education (e.g., Aboriginal Consultative Group, 1975; Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1988; National Review, 1995). The inter-related themes of access, participation, outcomes, and employment re-occur in each of these reports. Proficiency in English is necessary for employment, but employment opportunities must be created in proximity to Indigenous communities to act as an incentive. It is not reasonable to expect young people to exert themselves to continue their education if they cannot see a connection between their efforts and future employment. Schools in Indigenous communities must promote competency in English, but the Commonwealth and state government must also address related problems of employment and infrastructure to provide real opportunities for people to use their education.

Housing and health are also relevant to educational outcomes. Learning does not take place in a vacuum and success (or failure) depends greatly upon the quality of the environment in which a child is growing and developing. Commonwealth and state authorities should examine what those factors outside of education schooling are affecting children's capacities to learn, and how to improve the situation. Among the most salient and influential aspects of a child's early learning environment, parents or other primary caregivers are no doubt the most potent.

Having said that, English needs to be taught in an appropriate manner: teachers need to be deeply sensitive to the needs of their students and highly skilled in teaching language skills to people who may have radically different interpretations of what is normal in terms of language acquisition and pedagogy (Dunn, 2001). Many Indigenous cultures are oral; literacy does not come easily to children from these cultures and the strategies that need to be used are very different form strategies that are appropriate in other Indigenous cultures where literacy has a more prominent role. The impact of these differences extends far beyond the mechanics of learning to read and write; they have a profound impact on the dynamics of teaching and learning in the classroom and the community. We would direct the Standing Committee's attention to the recommendations made by John McCaffery concerning bilingual education for specific advice on designing programs and the preparation of teachers (McCaffery, 2011).

AFGW submits that the improvement of schools should not lead to the neglect of education in other areas.

Educational opportunities must be made available in the community as well as in schools and for young adults as well as for school age children, especially in remote communities. A effective program of capacity building must include adult and further education and training to cater for the needs of adults and young people who have not been able to complete secondary school for any reason. It must also accommodate young people who wish to progress to tertiary study. At present vocational and further education courses and programs are in short supply, under resourced and over regulated (Lawrence, 2005). We reiterate the importance of providing clear educational pathways leading to meaningful employment as a powerful motivation for participating in elementary education and recommend the Standing Committee examine Adult, Community and Further Education in Victoria as a possible model for Indigenous education in all states and territories.

AFGW submits that the digital revolution embodied in the National Broadband Network represents an unprecedented opportunity to make significant progress in closing the educational gap between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians.

Professor Rigney also made the point at the Australian College of Educators national conference that the digital revolution is vital for Indigenous people in regional and remote areas. The National Broadband Network is absolutely essential - access to on-line learning will improve their chances of gaining English language fluency and the knowledge they need. However use of this new technology must be accompanied by recognition of their language and culture. That kind of bicultural approach has been developed by Indigenous radio and television; it can equally be developed via the Internet. The roll-out of fibre-optic cable or provision of wireless and/or satellite communication devices must be accomplished quickly. Indigenous people must not be left to last, but it must be done in consultation with local elders and community leaders.

AFGW submits that the current Commonwealth Government Indigenous languages policy and relevant policies of other Australian governments have not been effective to date.

There is no evidence of which we are aware that any of the state departments of education opposed the Howard Government's decision as undermining the work that had been done to improve bilingual education in Indigenous communities. Until now there has been no evidence that the Labor governments that have held office since 2007 have realised the serious error of judgment made by the Coalition approach. This year, 2011, members of the Federal Department of Education reviewed the number of children in Australia speaking another language at home. The information was collected from teachers who reported on the languages spoken by their students. It was found that Australian children speak Chinese (Cantonese and Mandarin), Greek, Vietnamese, Arabic, Hindi, Bengali and a number of other languages, but children who spoke Indigenous languages were not found. This result tells us two things. First, the attitude of neglect and failure to value the cultures of Australia's Indigenous peoples so evident in the 1970s is still alive and at work in the policy-making Department of Education at a Federal level. Second, either the teachers did not think the Indigenous languages, and consequently cultures, mattered, and did not ask to have Indigenous languages included, or the questions were set so that Indigenous people were deliberately excluded.

In conclusion AFGW re-iterates that education for Indigenous Australians must be catered for with a generosity of spirit not evident in the past.

The Australian Federation of Graduate Women asks that the Standing Committee recognises the right of Australia's First Nations to their languages, supports bilingual education, ensures that the number of teachers, both non-Indigenous and Indigenous, educated to be Teachers of English as a Second Language increases, and recognises the role in the digital revolution in closing the educational gap between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians. English is the avenue to mainstream careers, but it must not be used to destroy the cultures of Australia's First Nations.

Submitted on behalf of the Australian Federation of Graduate Women and endorsed by Women in Adult & Vocational Education.

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