



10 September 2021

Employment Branch
National Indigenous Australians Agency
Charles Perkins House
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Re: Indigenous Skills, Engagement and Employment Program (ISEP)

To Whom it May Concern

I am writing in response to the Discussion Paper in relation to the new ISEP and to share NAATI's views on the potential value to the Commonwealth of targeted investment in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander interpreting and translating professions.

NAATI is the national standards and certifying authority for translators and interpreters in Australia. It is the only organisation to issue certification to practitioners who wish to work in this profession in Australia. Since 2012, NAATI has been working with Australian governments and Indigenous organisations to develop the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander interpreting profession so it can meet the need that exists for highly skilled Indigenous language interpreters. This year we have started to scope how the support we currently offer interpreters might also be valuable for translators.

This submission is not seeking to attract greater investment in NAATI or our current work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language practitioners. Rather we seek to highlight several characteristics of the Indigenous language interpreting and translating professions that are worth close examination from the ISEP review, as specific and targeted investment in these industries has the potential to create meaningful and sustainable economic opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with Language skills.

1. Demand for highly skilled Indigenous language interpreters and translators currently outstrips supply.
2. Interpreting and translating offer flexible career opportunities for people with Language skills.
3. Interpreters and translators allow people to continue to speak their first language and influence better service delivery outcomes.
4. High quality interpreting and translating requires the development of specific skills through training.
5. The primary barrier to increasing the supply of highly skilled interpreters and translators is the availability of training.
6. There are existing organisations and models that investment in training could be directed to.

These factors are outlined in more detail on the following pages. NAATI welcomes the opportunity for further consultation, either independently or through the [National Indigenous Language Interpreting Advisory Committee \(NILIAC\)](#) – an advisory group currently convened by NAATI.

Kind regards

CEO

National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI)



NAATI and the Indigenous Interpreting Project

NAATI is the national standards and certifying authority for translators and interpreters in Australia. It is the only organisation to issue certification to practitioners who wish to work in this profession in Australia.

NAATI-certified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language practitioners are highly skilled professionals that have demonstrated they have the skills needed to practice as an interpreter or translator in Australia.

Since 2012, NAATI has been working with Australian governments and Indigenous organisations to develop the Indigenous interpreting industry so it can meet the immediate need that exists for highly skilled Indigenous language interpreters.

The objectives of the [Indigenous Interpreting Project](#) are to:

- Increase the number of certified Indigenous interpreters
- Increase the range of Indigenous languages for which there are certified Indigenous interpreters
- Increase the accessibility of interpreting resources for Indigenous interpreters and organisations
- Collaborate with training providers to support Indigenous language interpreters to meet requirements to sit certification testing (additional objective under new agreement).

Across Australia, there are currently 161 NAATI-certified interpreters and translators holding credentials in 38 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. You can see the full range of languages with certified practitioners [here](#).

NAATI's current focus for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages is interpreting because the need for certified interpreters is more immediate. For this reason, it should be noted that we have greater knowledge and networks in the interpreting industry than the translation industry.

However, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language services, communication policies and channels of communication evolve and adapt, NAATI has undertaken to consult with stakeholders on the application of the NAATI system to certify individual translators.

In the following responses, translation is mentioned where appropriate, but NAATI should not be considered as an authoritative source regarding how translation services are delivered for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.

1. Demand for highly skilled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language interpreters and translators currently outstrips supply

Nationally, there is more demand for the services of interpreters and translators in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages than there are people who have the appropriate skills to do the work. The gap between supply and demand is even more pronounced when talking about demand for NAATI-certified interpreters.

Many of the factors that contribute to this were discussed in the 2016 Commonwealth Ombudsman Report "*Accessibility of Indigenous Language Interpreters¹*" and continue to be present today.

Understanding the specific barriers in areas of greatest demand or usage would be a worthwhile way of prioritising investment. NAATI is not a language service provider, meaning we do not employ interpreters or translators, and are therefore unable to provide any data on interpreter and translator usage or demand.



Nationally there are several key organisations that provide these services in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. NAATI has relationships with these organisations and understands anecdotally that they frequently receive requests for interpreting and translation services that they are unable to fill. Key organisations include:

Northern Territory:

- Aboriginal Interpreting Service, Northern Territory (AIS NT) - interpreting only

Western Australia:

- Aboriginal Interpreting, Western Australia (AIWA)

South Australia:

- Aboriginal Language Interpreting Service, South Australia (ALIS)
- ABC Multilingua

Queensland:

- 2M Language Services

In some areas, independent NAATI-certified interpreters offer their services operating under ABNs. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language centres also often offer translation services.

It is also worth pointing out that the demand for interpreting and translating services may not be reflective of the true need. In recent years much progress has been made in building awareness of the crucial role interpreters and translators play in facilitating access to services, information and participation.

As this awareness grows, so does demand for these services from communities and service providers. Presumably, over time, demand for these services will grow further to match the need that exists for these services, meaning that efforts to increase the supply of highly skilled and certified interpreters and translators will also need to be accelerated.

2. Interpreting and translating offer flexible career opportunities for people with Language skills

The interpreting and translating professions offer a variety of career pathways for people who speak an Indigenous language as their first language and have high levels of English.²

- Translation or interpreting: Interpreters listen to a message in one language and say it in another, while translators read a document and write it in the other language. There are a variety of opportunities in both these disciplines for people with these skills.
- Employed or self-employed: as mentioned in section 1, there are organisations in each state that employ people with interpreting and translation skills to provide services. Many people are also self-employed and access work opportunities through established client bases, word of mouth, panels or the NAATI online directory.
- Remote or face-to-face: both interpreting and translation work can be undertaken flexibly. Whilst face-to-face interpreting is required for various interactions, the use of phone (and video) interpreting services is increasing, allowing interpreters to work from anywhere. Translation work can be completed anywhere, however tends to occur where teams of translators are able to work together. These opportunities are significant because they offer one of the few career pathways that draw on the language and cultural skills of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, particularly in remote areas where culturally aligned economic development opportunities are less available.

² D Angelo, C O'Shannessy, J Simpson, I Kral, H Smith, and E Browne, Australian National University, *Wellbeing and Indigenous language ecologies (WILE): A strengths-based approach*, 2019, The ANU: Canberra.



Anecdotal evidence from NAATI-certified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language interpreters indicates that they are driven to give back to community and see what they do as an intrinsic part of continuing their language and culture. They are driven by a commitment to ensuring their community are getting accurate information and avoiding misunderstandings that can increase socio-economic disadvantage and marginalisation. Similar motivations are likely to exist for translators.

This level of commitment to the profession indicates the potential long-term sustainability of interpreting and translating as career pathways for adequately skilled individuals.

The availability of multiple career pathways in these professions also points to the sustainability of these opportunities. NAATI certification is an industry recognised acknowledgement that an interpreter has the training and skills needed to practice as an interpreter in Australia, and assures professionals and people requiring an interpreter that the interpreting will be to a high standard. Once an interpreter or translator has been awarded a NAATI certification, there are further career opportunities for individuals to become trainers, mentors and NAATI examiners. In FY20/21, NAATI engaged Indigenous language professionals for over 1100 hours of paid specialist work.

3. Interpreters and translators allow people to continue to speak their first language and are fundamental to better service delivery outcomes

There are several recent publications that indicate the significant impact of interpreters and translators on maintaining and strengthening threatened Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, and improved service delivery outcomes for those who access their services.

- In August 2020, the third National Indigenous Languages Report (NILR) was released, which includes the findings of the National Indigenous Languages Survey, the most comprehensive analysis of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language use in Australia. Two key findings in this report were that:
 - Indigenous language interpreters and translators support language maintenance (page 60)
 - Indigenous language interpreters and translators are fundamental to good service delivery outcomes (page 73)
- Since 2015, The Menzies School of Health Research and Royal Darwin Hospital have been seeking to improve the experience of care and health outcomes for Aboriginal people at Royal Darwin Hospital by improving the quality of communication, through the [Communicate Study](#). In 2020, an intervention aimed at increasing patient access to interpreters was associated with an immediate increase in Aboriginal interpreter bookings and a decline in self-discharge numbers³.
- In June 2020, the Centre of Excellence for the Dynamics of Language (CoEDL) based at the Australian National University (ANU) released a statement highlighting that translating COVID messages are vital for Indigenous health, emphasising the importance of ensuring that translations are 'culturally appropriate and delivered by the right people'⁴

While these outcomes are not necessarily what is sought by the Indigenous Skills, Engagement and Employment Program (ISEP), they highlight the compounding value that investing in interpreting and translation pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people creates. In addition to the impact on employment targets in remote and regional communities, interpreters and translators also contribute

³ Communicate Study group*. *Improving communication with Aboriginal hospital inpatients: a quasi-experimental interventional study*. Med J Aust. 2020 Aug;213(4):180-181. doi: 10.5694/mja2.50700. Epub 2020 Jul 25. PMID: 32710454.

⁴ Centre of Excellence for the Dynamics of Language (CoEDL). *Translating COVID messages vital for Indigenous health*. Published 3 June 2020, accessed 6 September 2021. <https://www.anu.edu.au/news/all-news/translating-covid-messages-vital-for-indigenous-health>



towards other Closing the Gap targets and outcomes in health, justice, social and emotional wellbeing, and language.

4. High quality interpreting and translating requires the development of specific skills through training

Interpreting and translation work is complex and challenging. There can be serious consequences if unskilled people are involved. Translating and interpreting competency requires skills that are developed through training and professional experience.

A lot of work for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language interpreting and translation is in the health, social service, and legal areas, all of which have specialised language, concepts, and systems. For interpreting particularly, interactions are often emotionally charged and involve power imbalances, cultural obligations, and community politics.

Often there is a misconception that someone who is bilingual can interpret or translate, and bilingual people are engaged to do this work without any training or support. In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities this happens often, either because people wanting to engage an interpreter or translator don't understand the role or skills required of an interpreter or translator, or they are unable to access someone who is trained.

The reality is that being bilingual should be a prerequisite for beginning to train as an interpreter or translator, not work as one. Training involves developing and practicing the skills to interpret or translate accurately, objectively, and according to the [AUSIT Code of Ethics](#) that governs the interpreting and translation professions.

In Australia, NAATI certification confirms that an interpreter or translator has the training and skills needed to provide the service and assures professionals and Indigenous language speakers that the interpreting will be to a high standard. All NAATI certification tests have an eligibility requirement of a minimum level of training.

5. A key barrier to increasing the supply of highly skilled (NAATI certified) interpreters and translators is the availability of training

Currently, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language interpreters and translators are unable to access contextualised accredited training, except for a full diploma being on offer at TAFE SA, funded only for SA residents. In some states, unaccredited training is available, in other states, there is no training available at all. This means that often Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language speakers, and those with Language literacy, are unable to develop the skills to convert their unique language and cultural skills to a professional career, despite having the desire to do so.

At NAATI, the lack of formal translating and interpreter training for Aboriginal and Torres Strait language speakers is the primary barrier in accessing a NAATI certification.

6. There are existing organisations and models that future investment in training could be directed to

NAATI suggests the first step to increasing the capacity of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander interpreting and translating professions is understanding the availability and gaps in the training space from state to state and considering how targeted investment might overcome some of the barriers to Aboriginal



and Torres Strait Islander people developing interpreting and translating careers. There is a history of effective training models that could be revisited.

Key stakeholders to engage in building a picture of the gaps in the training space for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander interpreters and translators and where future investment is best targeted are:

- The Language Service Providers mentioned under item 1.
- TAFESA – currently the only RTO offering Nationally Accredited training to Indigenous language interpreters with experience delivering training for this cohort.
- Batchelor Institute - the only First Nations dual sector tertiary education provider in Australia, have historically offered accredited training in interpreting and translation however currently do not.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Language Centres – primarily focus on language preservation, however many are involved in translation services, and some in interpreting. NAATI has been approached by and worked with various language centres over the last few years in SA, WA and QLD regarding interpreting certifications. NAATI is currently considering how we could work with language centres in assisting to professionalise the translation workforce and develop translation certification testing in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.
- First Languages Australia – an organisation established in 2013 that seeks to improve communication, advocate and educate in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language sector.
- Other organisations who have offered accredited training in applied language for Indigenous languages, such as Ripponlea Institute and Living Languages.