

Submission to the Productivity Commission Indigenous Evaluation Strategy

Jane Simpson and Gillian Wigglesworth

The ARC Centre of Excellence for the Dynamics of Language

The ARC Centre of Excellence for the Dynamics of Language is a research centre which emphasises working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people about their languages. We support the focus on language in evaluation in other submissions to the Productivity Commission (e.g. from ACTA, and from Angelo, Hudson and Macqueen).

An essential component for the success of the program is good communication with the people that a program is directed towards. Good communication requires an understanding of the language repertoires of the program stakeholders. We cannot assume that they speak the same English as the policy designers and the program implementers, or that they read English with the same level of proficiency. In our view, evaluation frameworks should consider the effectiveness of the communication with the program participants.

More than 60,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people speak a language other than English as their first language, whether a traditional language or a new language like Kriol or Torres Strait Creole. Some people do not speak or understand or read Standard Australian English well. Unfortunately, national census data does not report accurately on which areas have a majority of people speaking a language other than English, but the tendency is for these areas to be in remote Australia, where remoteness presents other challenges for policy implementation.

Working out a communication strategy is an essential part of any program addressing the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in areas where Standard Australian English is not the normal means of communication. A communication strategy needs to include both the local languages and plain English, and to recognise the relatively low levels of literacy in many areas.

Communication and recognition of the importance of language has not generally been part of evaluation practice, as shown in an examination of "evaluation frameworks for and evaluations of Australian Government programs" (Blackwell 2019). The author concludes that in a few cases, evaluations included discussion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and found them valuable both for communication and for achieving program goals. She argues that recognising language as an enabler to better outcomes is a more fruitful approach than treating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's first languages as an obstacle for program implementation. However, she found that language is rarely mentioned as an important factor in evaluation, and in particular that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are missing from the important Indigenous Advancement Strategy Evaluation Framework for evaluating most Federal Government programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Our experience in remote Australia strongly points to the value of recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's home languages as an enabler to better outcomes across policy development, program design, program implementation, and program evaluation.

REFERENCES

- Blackwell, Katharine. 2019. Indigenous languages and government service delivery: what do evaluations tell us? Unpublished research paper. School of Literature, Languages and Linguistics. Australian National University
- Department of Communication and the Arts. forthcoming. National Indigenous Languages Report. Canberra.
- Simpson, Jane, Denise Angelo, Emma Clare Browne, Inge Kral, Francis Markham, Carmel O'Shannessy & Danielle Venn. 2018. Census data on Australian Languages. Endangered languages and the land: Mapping landscapes of multilingualism (Proceedings of the 22nd Annual Conference of the Foundation for Endangered Languages (FEL XXII / 2018), ed. by S. Drude, N. Ostler & M. Moser, 115-20. London: FEL & EL Publishing.