



Overview of educational and language issues

An intervention by ATSIC Commissioner

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Madame Chair; delegates —

Thank you for this opportunity to speak.

In the few minutes available to me, I will confine my comments to those that are relevant to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission.

Others in the delegation will speak about specific educational issues.

ATSIC's role is to advocate and represent indigenous perspectives on all issues affecting indigenous Australians.

Education and language preservation are among the most important of these.

On a related issue, I want to say that the education of non-indigenous Australians about indigenous issues is also of fundamental importance.

Advances in such social issues as reconciliation, the elimination of racism, constitutional reform and the recognition and acceptance of indigenous rights depend upon it.

Education is the means for maintaining and developing our cultural identity — our language, knowledge, traditions and heritage.

The profound loss of indigenous languages in Australia is one stark symptom of the threat to our cultures and the transmission of our cultural identities across generations.

It is estimated that at least 250 separate indigenous Australian languages and many more dialects existed at the time of European settlement.

Today, only 90 indigenous languages are spoken.

Only 30 of these are actively used and can be passed down to the next generation.

ATSIC developed the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages Initiatives Program to counter this situation.

ATSIC funds Regional Language Centres and Regional Language Management Committees to undertake language activities and support local community projects.

These cover community language classes, oral history production, and language programs for radio.

The task of preserving languages throws up challenges in three areas:

- 1) Language Maintenance (where language is still spoken as a first language);
- 2) Language Retrieval (where there is only a handful of speakers left); and
- 3) Language Heritage (where there are no speakers but extensive archival material not currently accessible to the community).

ATSIC has committed additional funding for these purposes over the next three years.

Meanwhile, the task of improving educational levels among Australia's indigenous populations is itself very challenging.

The indigenous population is much younger than the general population — in 1996, the median age of our people was 20 years compared with 34 years for the total population.

In simple terms, this means that there is almost twice the demand for educational, training and employment opportunities among our young people.

In a speech earlier this year, the ATSIC Chairman, Gatjil Djerrkura, said:

There are alarming implications in having a large body of able workers who are left without the chance to develop skills and find employment. Our young people are growing in number and they will need something productive and meaningful to do.²

We continue to face a considerable gap between indigenous and non-indigenous achievements in education.

At the same time, Australia is undergoing a lengthy period of economic restructuring.

On the one hand, industry is demanding more specialised skills.

On the other, there is a decline in employment in many traditional industries.

But the growing demand for higher education and more technical skills leaves most indigenous workers at the shrinking, unskilled end of the market.

Failure to adapt to the new economic environment will mean we fall even further behind other Australians in social and economic life.

ATSIC's own research shows that by the year 2006 indigenous people of working age will increase by almost 30 per cent.³

Unless we find new jobs for indigenous people over this period, we will see indigenous unemployment figures rise from 23 per cent as it is now to 47 per cent in 2006.

In Australia, one of the primary tools for increasing education among indigenous people is the Aboriginal Study Assistance Scheme — known as ABSTUDY.

It provides financial assistance to indigenous students involved in secondary and higher education.

ATSIC commissioned a review of ABSTUDY last year.⁴

Governments have regarded the ABSTUDY scheme as a major factor in encouraging indigenous students to participate in education.

But while education has been one of the most successful areas of indigenous development over the past 30 years, the rate of improved outcomes has started to falter.

Clearly, mainstream education systems are still failing indigenous Australians.

The ABSTUDY review found that the outcomes are failing to meet the targets set by all Australian governments — federal and state — in 1989 and again in 1995.

The ATSIC review of ABSTUDY makes a number of recommendations, including that the federal government recognises the importance of specific educational programs for indigenous people.

This in turn must be supported with appropriate financial commitment to ensure that students are able to access and participate in such programs.

From ATSIC's point of view, improved educational outcomes and economic development are inseparable.

The Australian government has committed itself to economic development as one of its major priorities in indigenous affairs.

ATSIC will do all in its power to ensure that governments recognise the importance of effective indigenous education programs — programs that both attract and hold the increasing number of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

All indigenous peoples have a duty to do what we can to avoid such problems — problems that will take generations to correct.

Thank you.

² Gatjil Djerrkura, *Economic development — the broader picture*, a speech to the conference *Doing Business with Aboriginal Communities*, Alice Springs, February 1998

³ John Taylor and Jon Altman (Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research), *The Job Ahead: escalating economic costs of indigenous employment disparity*, ATSIC, Canberra, March 1997

⁴ Owen Stanley and Geoff Hansen, *ABSTUDY: An Investment for Tomorrow's Employment*, ATSIC, Canberra, 1998