

AUSTRALIA'S GROWING LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY:

An opportunity for a strategic approach to
language services policy and practice

Executive summary

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This report provides an analysis of FECCA's consultation and research to develop an evidence base on language service provision in new and emerging languages, that is, languages spoken by individuals who came to Australia as humanitarian entrants over recent years.

Approximately 200,000 humanitarian entrants settled in Australia between 2000 and 2014. About 70 per cent of these arrivals speak the top 17 languages spoken by the cohort (3,000+ speakers each), and about 30 per cent speak over 200 other languages and dialects. The diverse range of languages spoken by Australia's recent humanitarian entrants are referred to as new and emerging languages.

The provision of language services, whether through interpreting, translating or bilingual work, can enhance access to social services for migrants, assist to alleviate isolation and lead to better connection with the community. Quality language services can also improve health outcomes and enable access to crucial rights, such as the right to a fair trial. The availability of well-trained, competent interpreters to work with individuals in complex circumstances, such as family and domestic violence situations, is critical to ensuring the safety and wellbeing of these individuals.

English language learning is an important feature of successful settlement, assisting migrants to fully participate in Australian society. However, learning English takes time, not all new arrivals are able to acquire English fluency, and many will only acquire a functional level of English that, while adequate for day-to-day activities, will not be sufficient for them to be informed patients in the health system or actors in legal situations.

Training options for interpreters in new and emerging languages are limited. The availability of tertiary courses in Australia's recent humanitarian intake languages remains low, which presents significant challenges for the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) accreditation at paraprofessional and professional levels and the subsequent provision of services in these languages. NAATI does not provide accreditation testing for many languages of low community demand, and new and emerging languages often fall within that category, which in turn often restricts access to credentials for interpreters in these languages to recognition only.

In new and emerging languages where NAATI testing is not available, language service providers recruit individuals to work as 'interpreters' without credentials. This results in an invisible cohort of un-credentialed 'interpreters' working in Australia, which potentially exposes agencies (including hospitals and courts) and their non-English speaking clients to significant risk.

The number of NAATI credentialed interpreters varies significantly between different new and emerging languages. However, there is currently no way of knowing how many of those interpreters who have been credentialed are practising in these languages, and how many 'interpreters' practise without credentials. The introduction of NAATI's revalidation scheme will assist to fill this knowledge gap.

There are unique supply and demand issues relating to the market for language services in new and emerging languages, due to thin or niche markets with relatively low numbers of speakers spread right across the country.

Enhancing demand

Low demand for language services does not necessarily imply low need; there may be under-utilisation of interpreters by agencies and/or a lack of awareness and knowledge of services among non-English speakers. There is an absence of compulsory, coordinated training on how to work with interpreters for judicial officers, legal professionals and health professionals. This affects the rate of utilisation of professional interpreting services.

The use of family and friends as 'interpreters' is not supported in policy because of problems associated with accuracy of interpreting, confidentiality and conflicts of interest. However, individuals who are not proficient in English may prefer to communicate through a relative or a friend, in view of the interpreter's gender or cultural background, the client's lack of understanding of the availability of services or of the risks associated with not engaging an interpreter. It is crucial that non-English speakers are informed and empowered to use language services.

There is significant potential for appropriate data collection to assist in developing policy and improving services for individuals, but this must be achieved through a coordinated effort, including consistency in data collection across agencies and jurisdictions.

Enhancing supply

The nature of the language services industry has significant implications for attracting, training and retaining highly capable interpreters and translators, including in new and emerging languages. These issues are exacerbated by an insufficient market for new and emerging language services, inhibiting the ability of interpreters to maintain full employment.

Language service providers draw on the same pool of interpreters, particularly in smaller languages; these interpreters are largely employed as casual employees or contractors, so contracting with multiple providers allows them to maximise their workload. Given professionals come from the same talent pool, there is a disincentive for language services agencies to train staff, as the benefit of any such investment will also be enjoyed by the company's competitors.

Given the limited financial capacity of many members of new and emerging communities, the cost of NAATI testing can influence whether interpreters in these languages upskill and seek higher credential levels, particularly given that they will not necessarily draw a higher wage for being accredited at a higher level. Costs may also be prohibitive to individuals undertaking training courses, particularly for asylum seekers who are not eligible to access funding through the Commonwealth government's FEE-HELP scheme.

Tertiary institutions who want to offer training for interpreting in new and emerging languages have difficulties attaining the appropriate staff to teach classes in particular languages, and forming a class that is large enough to justify running a course. A number of institutions, particularly TAFE SA and RMIT University, have developed innovative training models which fill an education gap for new and emerging languages where the Diploma of Interpreting is not available. Supporting professional development for interpreters is also important.

Bilingual workers—workers who do their ordinary job in two languages—are a valuable resource in particular situations such as filling simple communication gaps in provision of services. However, these workers are not, and should not be considered to be, interpreters. Without nationally consistent minimum standards and certification for bilingual workers, these workers, non-English speakers and service providers are exposed to risks, and the skills of the bilingual workforce will continue to go unrecognised and under-developed.

The way forward

There is added complexity to addressing language services needs in view of the dynamics of the humanitarian intake in the recent years, and particularly the increased intake in response to the crisis in Syria and Iraq. However, the emergence of new languages is not unprecedented in Australia; in fact it is a common phenomenon. With the diversity of Australia's population only increasing, a solution to address language services needs for emerging languages must be sustainable, flexible and forward-looking; one that can be contextualised and applied to specific languages and the changing circumstances of supply and demand. Such a solution could also have a positive flow-on effect for addressing language services supply and demand gaps for other, more established languages, by developing evidence of good practice and innovative solutions.

In the context of the broad challenges of the language services sector, the unique gaps in supply and demand for new and emerging languages can be best addressed through a *sui generis* model positioned within a national, multi-jurisdictional framework underpinned by a number of elements with a view to achieving a dual purpose—concurrently increasing supply of interpreters in new and emerging languages and demand for language services in these languages. Consistent investment over a period of time by Commonwealth and State/Territory Governments, as major purchasers of language services, is needed to build the supply of quality interpreters in new and emerging languages. This approach will be able to respond to the changing demographics and emerging needs for language services.

The key element of any such framework must be **collaboration and coordination between Commonwealth and State/Territory Governments**, and with tertiary institutions, language service providers, professional associations, and the community sector. One way to achieve this would be through a permanent forum—as opposed to an *ad hoc* roundtable—convened annually by the Commonwealth Minister with responsibility for multicultural affairs and their State and Territory counterparts, with the participation of Commonwealth immigration and settlement agencies, relevant State/Territory agencies, interpreting and translating service providers, NAATI, tertiary bodies, professional associations, and community sector organisations working with new humanitarian migrants and refugees. This forum could assess and agree on priorities for targeting of language services, share evidence of challenges and successful models and promote further collaboration amongst all stakeholders.

Data collection is an important planning mechanism for meeting the language needs of new migrants, and particularly refugees. Review of language and dialect terminology across settlement, training and accreditation datasets and the creation of whole-of-government data collection standards would ensure more consistent datasets and enable better planning, response and collaboration. Data to assist with planning should also be collected on: client's preferred language and interpreting needs; availability of bilingual staff and in-house interpreters; and staff training needs to improve utilisation of language services.

A strategic element of the proposed framework would focus on **targeting high-need languages and high-risk settings**. Building a pool of professional interpreters in new and emerging languages will be most effective if it is structured to target the languages of most need; that is with the current lowest ratio of credentialed interpreters for the total number of speakers, further informed by any available data on the unmet demand across agencies and jurisdictions. In order to secure minimum prospective sustainability for the pool of professionals, it would also be strategic to focus on high-risk areas of expertise, such as health and legal.

It is important to establish **training, accreditation and professional development pathways**. Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments, including through the proposed national forum, should consider opportunities to collaborate among themselves, engage with relevant stakeholders to identify language services needs, and target individuals who are interested in completing interpreting courses in new and emerging languages. Utilising online classrooms and local support networks, courses could be conducted with students from across Australia.

Recognition of the bilingual workforce will allow for better stock-taking of language services demand, as well as better identification of the need for qualified interpreting. This will also address government agencies' concerns about meeting language services needs. Finally, a recognition process for bilingual workers will benefit the translating and interpreting industry by delineating the roles of interpreters and bilingual workers, clarifying the scope and limitations of the bilingual worker profession, and contributing to raising the interpreting industry standards.

The challenge of increasing demand can be addressed through **enhanced policy implementation**. Language policies are most effective when they and their mandatory implementation are communicated adequately to frontline staff and those engaging directly with non-English speakers. With policies establishing the agencies' responsibility to provide language services, this can be achieved through the development of practical guidelines, regularly updated

to reflect good practice, and informing staff of ways to determine the need for interpreting services, how to access those services, and what to do when interpreters in the requested language or at the requested level are not available—equally a critical consideration for developing agreed protocols with contracted language services providers.

Key to increasing demand for language services would be **building capacity of consumers of language services**. It is important to empower non-English speakers as confident and informed consumers of language services. A national communication strategy, in collaboration with the community sector, should address the lack of awareness among non-English speakers about the importance and benefits of engaging credentialed interpreters, the availability of fee-free interpreting, and the risks of not utilising professional language services and involving family members and friends. Strategies need to be in place to inform non-English speakers about the role of interpreters and benefits of using language services.

Optimal training and accreditation model

Based on the review of various models across jurisdictions, and the identification of good practice elements in the provision of language services, this report recommends the conceptualisation and implementation of a national, multi-jurisdictional training and credentialing program to increase the quantity and quality of language services in new and emerging languages.

The proposed model comprises a two-stage process. Stage one would involve a VET-delivered Skill Set program, made up of four units from the Diploma of Interpreting, complying with the Australian Qualifications Framework, and providing a pathway to completing the Diploma at a later date. Funding from State Governments for this training will reduce the financial burden on participants. In stage two, participants who have completed the Skill Set would be screened prior to moving on to attaining a NAATI credential. Commonwealth Government funding at this stage would assist participants to undertake NAATI testing, supplemented by a small investment by the participants and possibly NAATI.

The key benefits of such a model include effective national coordination, co-contributions from State and Commonwealth Governments to share costs, the provision of a pathway to further study for participants, and clear monitoring, reporting and impact assessment.