

Ms Beth Howard  
Indigenous Telecommunications Section  
Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts  
GPO Box 2154  
Canberra Act 2601

Dear Beth Howard,

### BACKING INDIGENOUS ABILITY – DISCUSSION PAPER

Please find attached a response to this paper by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

AIATSIS is an Indigenous controlled organisation with a brief to support research in the area of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies, to maintain the research collections arising from such studies, and to support the dissemination of information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories. AIATSIS maintains the world's most important resource collection relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies. The organisation is also at the leading edge of Australian cultural institutions in respect to considerations of the technical, appropriate metadata description of collections, ethical, and legal issues associated with the provision of digital records of its collections. AIATSIS is well placed to share its expertise with others.

We note that a primary goal of the *Backing Indigenous Ability* program is to encourage and support the development and supply of Indigenous prepared and relevant content that contributes to community goals.

#### 3.3.6 Questions 27-30

AIATSIS maintains a program of digital copying of its collection materials in recognition that this is the most appropriate method to ensure long term preservation and continued access by communities (see p.1-2). Our current priorities for digitisation are those materials that are most at risk from decomposition of the recording medium (for example magnetic audio tape, film and video tape) and those at risk through the obsolescence of the analogue technologies used to read the information. These issues should be of concern for all Australian cultural institutions and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations.

Digitisation also provides exciting new opportunities for access to collections and the organisation has noted an increasing number of requests from major cultural institutions and local communities for digital copies of important cultural and historical materials. Many local community museums and Knowledge Centres particularly in the Northern Territory are being developed on a digital archive model. AIATSIS is currently working with a number of these centres to assist them to build their collection. However the demand is more than can be met through AIATSIS's limited funding. For example a recent visit to Brewarrina in NSW led to

community requests worth \$30,000 in copying and copyright clearance costs met by AIATSIS.

AIATSIS maintains a major research grant program for supporting original research undertaken for and within communities, but these grants do not extend to the provision of copies of pre-existing materials. Projects which seek to assemble copies of existing research about a community cannot be supported as original research. While AIATSIS has some limited capacity to provide copies to communities for free, as in the Brewarrina case above, in the majority of cases we must charge applicants for copying activity.

It is well established that many communities wish to develop archives of materials produced locally and additionally by means of acquiring copies of materials held in other major institutions. Local schools often encourage students to complete some research time in these centres and generally they contribute greatly to community pride in local cultures and histories. We believe that a grant program should be developed within *Backing Indigenous Ability* for this purpose. The expansion of the opportunity for communities to develop local cultural centres through *Backing Indigenous Ability* could also be seen as an important means of developing what is at present an incipient cultural tourism/ culture industry and employment opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

So long as the increased resource requirements are met, AIATSIS would welcome the opportunity to join with DCITA or other partners to create a more systematic means of developing local digital archives in communities. For example the major infrastructure needs of communities could be identified in agreements (Q.39) while a grant system for facilitating the acquisition of collection copies by communities could support local recording initiatives and the purchase of copy materials for local archives (Q.28).

In as much as AIATSIS runs a research grant system that supports research within communities and that we employ experts to assess applicant expertise in relation to processes of recording of cultural matters, we would be happy to assist DCITA in the development of the community grant program or to collaborate in ensuring complementarities.

AIATSIS is experienced at conducting the arms length survey research that might be required to identify Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community needs in this cultural area. For example AIATSIS worked with the peak body FATSIL in the *National Indigenous Language Survey* used to inform DCITA's language funding framework. AIATSIS also has long term experience helping communities to establish local archives and has expertise in identifying the major infrastructure needs discussed above.

In terms of potentially innovative means of assisting communities to access collections, I draw your attention to the possibility of developing an Australian map style interface to searching the collections of Australian institutions which we feel could be developed with modest funding (p.3 and Appendix C).

#### Section 3.3.4 Question 19, 20

With the increasing creation of digital materials it is important to note that the unregulated provision of Indigenous records on public media such as the Internet can cause major distress.

For this reason, AIATSIS invests considerable resources to ensure that communities are consulted in relation to restrictions on access to materials and that such restrictions are respected in the management of collections. Australian copyright laws also create restrictions on the unregulated copying of digital material. However the implications of these laws are not well understood at a community level.

AIATSIS is keen to work with other agencies to encourage best practice in this area and has developed an important intellectual property research project (see p.4) to identify the need for better understanding of issues relating to collection access by major cultural institutions and by communities. The products of this research will be disseminated as protocol documents; one suitable for major cultural institutions and the other for community organisations.

AIATSIS has also developed a pilot training program for community members who wish to develop local archives (see p.3). The training addresses the use of digital recording equipment, the documentation, appropriate storage and management of collections. The grant model identified above could also make provision for the staff of such community archives to travel to Canberra to purchase the training. Alternatively AIATSIS could partner with appropriate training organizations in the design of the training package and run a pilot study of the effectiveness of such training. However it is managed, it must be acknowledged that resources should be made available for this training to develop the sector.

AIATSIS has recently conducted a major research project called the Indigenous Facilitation and Mediation Project (IFaMP) considering the question of dispute resolution and agreement making in the native title sector (p.5 and Appendix B). This project has made important recommendations in respect to training requirements in this particular sector that are also relevant to broader agreement making processes. Their submission attached here specifically addresses questions such as appropriate practice for ensuring sustainability of agreements between government agencies and communities relevant to *Backing Indigenous Ability*.

I attach more developed materials relating to AIATSIS programs mentioned above and documents prepared by AIATSIS programs that specifically address questions raised in the discussion paper.

We would be happy to provide more information about any of these issues or to join with DCITA and other agencies in the design of more targeted programs that might assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Dr Luke Taylor, Deputy Principal – Research, will be the primary contact and his number is 02 62461159.

Yours sincerely,

Steve Larkin  
Principal

30 June 2006