



Northern  
Territory  
Government

## Aboriginal Interpreter Service

Ground Floor RCG House • 83-85 Smith St Darwin NT • GPO Box 4450 • Darwin NT 0801

Tel 8999 8353 • Fax 8999 8855 • Email [ais@nt.gov.au](mailto:ais@nt.gov.au) • [www.dlghs.nt.gov.au](http://www.dlghs.nt.gov.au) Ground Floor RCG House • 83-85 Smith St Darwin NT • GPO Box 4450 • Darwin NT 0801

# Report of the Professional Aboriginal Interpreter Accreditation Project Piloted in the Djambarrpuyngu Language.

**Sponsored by the  
Rotary Club of Hampton, Victoria**

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Jenny Blokland, Northern Territory Chief Magistrate  
Priscilla Collins CEO of North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency NAAJA  
Northern Territory Legal Aid Commission

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## Background

The Aboriginal Interpreter Service (AIS) was approached by the President of the Rotary Club of Hampton in Victoria, Ms Lorraine Huddle in July of 2007, stating that their club was very interested in assisting Indigenous women become qualified as professional interpreters and asked for our thoughts on whether this would be something that the AIS was interested in discussing further.

The AIS submitted a proposal with 3 options of which the development and delivery of a pilot professional level accreditation test was one. The AIS was keen to work in collaboration with Rotary Club of Hampton to develop a professional level accreditation test as no National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) test for Aboriginal languages exist beyond the paraprofessional level and no education institutions or agencies offer courses/training leading to professional level interpreting which is the required level to interpret in the justice system (courts) or the medical profession.

From the outset of AIS commencing its operations in April of 2000, the service has been faced with the lack of trained competent interpreters to undertake interpreting assignments in ever increasing complex matters. The AIS has endeavoured to provide training in legal interpreting, health interpreting, interpreter ethics and accreditation at the para-professional level.

The AIS thanks the Rotary Club of Hampton in Victoria and its supporters for providing the opportunity for indigenous language interpreters to achieve their potential in financially assisting the AIS to make this important milestone of ours a reality. It is a first for Indigenous Language interpreters in Australia.

## Issues

The finalisation of the Agreement to fund this project took longer than anticipated due to the different organisational, legal and financial disbursement requirements of the donors with a government identity. It was also made complex because there had to be several agreements negotiated between the Rotary Club of Hampton and the Arnhem Land Progress Association (ALPA); ALPA with the AIS; AIS with Charles Darwin University (CDU).

Procurement arrangements between AIS and CDU caused the project to be delayed by 2-3mths as the AIS required an exemption from the full 3 quote tender procurement process as normally required by government.

This delay then meant that the CDU course writers were not available due to other commitments which put the project back a further 2mths.

The **NAATI approval process** was onerous due to the fact that everyone involved with developing the test, the examiners of the test and the AIS Training Coordinator/Project Manager were new to this process. Some of the challenges were:

- understanding the NAATI requirements of how the test needed to be developed and conducted;
- Securing the services of a NAATI approved Djambarrpuyngu examiner was onerous because all of them were sitting the test. This meant extensive consultations had to take place with



linguists who were proficient in this language to try to determine who had the best English and Djambarrpuyngu language skills to meet the criteria to be an examiner. The other consideration was that the examiner had to be culturally accepted and respected as they were going to be assessing not only the language skills but the social and cultural knowledge of senior law people and custodians of country. Several people were approached but were put off by the NAATI application and approval process. Sadly we had no choice but to approach one of the best language interpreters to stand down from the test to be the examiner. NAATI were very good in processing her application and approved her to be a NAATI examiner within a 3 day timeframe. The upside of this was that she became the first to be an examiner at this level. AIS will have her sit the test in the New Year and have one of the participants who passed this test become an examiner.

- Identifying and securing the services of skilled Djambarrpuyngu readers to record all the audio components of the test where the dialogues were in spoken language.
- book radio/studio to record readings;
- Engaging the services of a NAATI approved moderator took some time to secure as the Darwin based moderator was in Europe for 3mths so all tapes and result sheets had to be sent to Alice Springs.

### Logistics

Delivering services and training to remote Indigenous Australia is challenging logistically and a costly exercise. For Rotary members and future AIS staff to have an appreciation of what was required to prepare participants to sit the exam, the following are some of the logistical issues we had to deal with.

- Participants came into Darwin from 5 different communities from as far away as 1000kms and due to the absence of a regular flight service several participants had to come in on a charter. We also had to allow for the inclusion of a family member on the charter to look after a breast fed baby while the mother was attending training.
- Some participants had left their medications at the community and needed to be taken to the medical service and chemist to fill prescriptions. Negotiations had to be undertaken with employers, as interpreters needed to be released from duties to attend training. To assist the Interpreters to manage their travel allowance all monies were distributed and signed for on a weekly basis.
- So that Interpreters would receive relevant training in preparation for the accreditation test, a second set of training materials modelled on the format of the exam, had to be developed. Examiners and the AIS training coordinator then spent a day familiarising themselves with the NAATI marking and assessment criteria so that the examiners used the same marking scale.
- The ordering and delivery of lunch, morning and afternoon teas for 10 days had to be coordinated and payment equivalent to loss of salaries to attend the course and exam paid to those in employment.

### Lessons Learnt



AIS and CDU test developers have met to discuss:

- How to improve the test and delivery of preparation course material so that participants understand the marking system and requirements.
- The need to develop an examiners course.
- And the need to develop training modules in note-taking, reading and listening skills for the Interpreters.

### Outcomes

Agreement was sought to fund 6 people to prepare and sit the exam. However, the AIS identified 14 interpreters who had the skills to sit the exam. These candidates were approached and accepted our invitation.

One of the interpreters failed to catch the plane, so 13 undertook the 8 day preparation course. Two (2) of these decided they would not sit the test after completing the preparation course.

Of the remaining 11 who finally sat the test, two (2) withdrew during the test and therefore did not complete the exam. Of the remaining 9, **three (3) were passed** and another three (3) came within 2-4 points of the pass mark which is set at 70 per cent.

When we embarked on this project we knew how difficult the test would be and we were concerned that no one would pass at their first attempt. We knew that the Northern Territory Interpreters and Translator Service, (The migrant/refugee service) which has been operating for 30 years with funding and training assistance from NAATI) in the NT, has only managed to have six (6) of their interpreters accredited at the professional level during this time

We are extremely proud and excited that three (3) have achieved this remarkable milestone and that another three were very close to achieving a pass.

### Official Accreditation

The examination results were sent to NAATI in December 2008. On the 30 March 2009, NAATI notified AIS that the 3 candidates who passed the examination were officially accredited as Professional Level 1 Interpreters in the **Djambarrpuyngu Language**.

### Cost of Project

#### PROFESSIONAL ABORIGINAL INTERPRETER ACCREDITATION ROTARY PROJECT SUMMARY PROJECT EXPENSES

| INTERPRETER<br>Fees | INTERPRETER<br>Travel/Accom/TA | MODERATOR<br>Fees | COURSE DEVELOPMENT<br>Charles Darwin University | EXAMINERS<br>Fees | NAATI PROCESSING<br>Fees | INCIDENTALS<br>Course materials | AIS STAFF<br>Admin |
|---------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------|---|-------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------|
| 19,617              | 25,081                         | 1,050             | 12,735  | 3,772             | 579                      | 2,320                           | 10,500             |

|              |               |
|--------------|---------------|
| <b>TOTAL</b> | <b>75,654</b> |
|--------------|---------------|

