11 December 2023

The Australian Bureau of Statistics
*Via email:* standards@abs.gov.au

To Whom It May Concern,

**Re: 2023 Major Review of Australian Standard Classification of Languages (ASCL)**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the above-mentioned Australian Standard Classification of Languages Framework ("**the Classification**").

The Aboriginal Languages Trust ("**ALT**") is an Aboriginal-led New South Wales ("**NSW**") Government agency established under the *Aboriginal Languages Act 2017* ("**the Act**") to provide a focused, coordinated, and sustained effort in relation to Aboriginal Languages activities at local, regional and State levels.

The functions of the ALT are defined in the Act. They include:

- promoting Language activity
- identifying priorities for Language activity
- managing the funding of, and investment in Language activity
- promoting education and employment opportunities in Language activities
- promoting the wider use and appreciation of Aboriginal Languages

The ALT is also the NSW Government lead agency for the National Agreement on Closing the Gap Target 16: By 2031, there is a sustained increase in number and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages being spoken.

In 2022, the ALT launched its inaugural five-year Strategic Plan, which was developed following consultation with 394 stakeholders, 81% of which identified as Aboriginal. The Strategic Plan outlines the ALT's vision and purpose:

*All NSW Aboriginal Languages are strong and healthy.*

*We aid in the growth and nurturing of NSW Aboriginal Languages by responding to the aspirations of Communities and participating in their self-determining work to reclaim and reawaken their Languages.*

Consultation on our Strategic Plan heard views from NSW Aboriginal Communities about determining the appropriate collection and use of data about their Languages.

Census data can offer important insights on the growth and revitalisation of NSW Aboriginal Languages and is key to monitoring progress toward Closing the Gap Target 16. As a user of census data, it is important to the ALT that data on Aboriginal Languages is recorded and reported accurately. According to

the 2016 census data, of the 5196 people in NSW who identified as speaking an Aboriginal Language, around 18% identified with a Language "not elsewhere classified", probably because their Language was not listed. A further 15% identified with a Language "not further defined", i.e., they did not specify which Language, possibly because their Language was not listed. This means we were unable to access accurate Language use data for a third of Aboriginal language speakers in NSW. We believe that the below recommendations will assist in improved Language data on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages at the next census.

*Table 1.3 Broad Group 8, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages*

In ASCL Tables 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3 of the ASCL Review Scope, it is recommended to rename Broad Group 8. "*Australian Indigenous Languages"* to "*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages".* This will ensure the use of appropriate terminology when referencing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People and their Languages.

There are various terms used to reference Aboriginal and Torres Islander people. Examples include Indigenous Australian People, Indigenous People, First Peoples and First Nations People. It should be noted that these terms are not cultural constructs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities. Today the term 'Indigenous Australian' is used as a combined reference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.

While both groups have some shared practices and values, Aboriginal People and Torres Strait Islander People consider themselves to be two culturally distinct groups. The use of blanket terminology like 'Indigenous Australians' has the effect of homogenising both groups and fails recognise the cultural significance of distinct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities.

Given the strong links that exist between Language and culture[1], this distinction also applies to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, Language is a core part of cultural identity. Renaming broad group 8 to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages indicates respect for these distinct cultural identities and extends Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People the right to identify with their own Language and cultural groups.   Use of the term Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages is consistent with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and Closing the Gap Target 16.

**Recommendation**

It is recommended to rename Broad Group 8. "*Australian Indigenous Languages"* to "*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages"* to ensure the use of appropriate terminology when referencing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

*Complete representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages*

Under the current classification the minimum number of speakers threshold for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages is three known speakers. As a result, only a portion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages are listed in the Classification.  Currently there are only 12 Aboriginal languages

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[1]

spoken in NSW that are captured in the classification. It is recommended that every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Language be included in the Classification regardless of the number of known speakers.

As a result of past Government policies, many Aboriginal Languages in NSW stopped being spoken. The revitalisation of those Languages is crucial to Aboriginal People's cultural identity and wellbeing and is key to achieving Closing the Gap Target 16. Work to revitalise Aboriginal Languages in NSW is currently underway in many Aboriginal Communities. To gain better and more accurate insights on the growth and revitalisation of Aboriginal Languages in NSW, it is important that the census tracks the number of speakers of every Language, including where the number of speakers is a zero value. This data offers insights on when an Aboriginal Language begins being spoken again through revitalisation efforts, when it stops being spoken if language loss is occurring and importantly, which languages need urgent revitalisation or preservation efforts. Additionally, the inclusion of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages in the Classification will support the potential for improved census questions on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages in the 2026 census.

Aboriginal People's culture and identity are directly linked to Language Groups and Traditional Country. Language is an important means by which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people reclaim and assert their identity. In NSW Language is at the centre of Aboriginal cultures, yet many NSW Aboriginal Languages have been overlooked in the data when it comes to Language being present and spoken. The exclusion of Aboriginal Languages with less than three known speakers from the Classification, denies Aboriginal People the right to identify with their Language Groups, which have real cultural significance.

The AIATSIS database AustLang provides information on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages across Australia, assembled from several data sources. AustLang holds information on 109 different Languages or dialects in NSW.  It is recommended that all Languages and dialects listed in the AustLang database be included in the Classification. For consistency it is recommended that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages and dialects listed in the Classification include the AustLang Language code.

Additionally, it is recommended that the census make provision for responses in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages to be typed into the answer field. This allows Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People to identify their own Languages and avoids limiting responses to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages classified in the Classification.

**Recommendations**

The minimum number of speakers threshold for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages be reduced to zero.

The Classification include all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages and dialects listed in the AIATSIS AustLang database.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Language names entered in the Classification include the corresponding AustLang Language code.

Census questions relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages allows for responses to be typed into an answer field.

*Classification reflects the various spellings of Language Groups*

Historically Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages were not written but passed down through oral traditions and practices over generations. It should be noted that only since colonisation has Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages been recorded or written. The orthographies used to document Aborignal and Torres Strait Islander Languages by non-Indigenous linguists and anthropologists varied from person to person. As a result, Aboriginal Languages in NSW have a variety of spellings, with a single Language name being spelt in many different orthographies. Aboriginal people may identify with different spelling of the same Language Group. For this reason, it is important that multiple spellings of each Aboriginal Language in NSW are represented in the Classification (e.g Barkantji/Paakantji, Gamilaraay/Gomeroi). The AustLang database provides information on common spellings used for each Language.

**Recommendations**

The Classification include all spelling variations of each Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Language listed in the Classification, as listed in the AustLang database**.**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments. Please reach out for further information.

Best Regards,

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