



# INTRODUCTION

We would like to begin by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the lands that make up Australia, including the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Before European colonisation, this land was home to a rich tapestry of over 400 Indigenous languages spoken for more than 65,000 years. This living language legacy is an integral part of our nation's cultural richness that we carry proudly. We pay our respects to Elders past, present, and future and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. As we discuss the state and future of multilingualism in Australia, we do so with the profound understanding that this country has a long, enduring history of linguistic diversity.

At Multilingual Australia, we actively embrace and celebrate the richness of language diversity. With a legacy stretching back to 2002, our mission has been to build an inclusive community where over 400 languages spoken in Australia – including 183 Indigenous languages and AUSLAN – are treasured and valued.

Recently, our second roundtable discussion, "Voices from the Countryside: Multilingualism in Rural Areas," delved into the vibrant language tapestry in rural regions. Conducted online through videoconferencing, this insightful event brought together key community stakeholders and leaders from Port Headland, Karratha, and Katanning. The roundtable not only consulted with these experts but also gathered survey feedback from the broader community, allowing us to craft this issue paper rooted in the voices and experiences of real people.

Our participants shared compelling stories of working with diverse communities and illuminated the unique challenges of nurturing and sustaining languages in rural and remote parts of Australia. Yet, it's vital to acknowledge a significant limitation of the roundtable: the unfortunate exclusion of AUSLAN or language interpreters due to budget constraints, despite clear requests from the community. This glaring omission underscores the very challenges we seek to address, highlighting the urgent need for greater accessibility and inclusivity in our continued efforts to foster multilingualism across Australia.

# KEY CHALLENGES FOR MULTILINGUAL COMMUNITIES IN RURAL AUSTRALIA

Language is more than a mere tool for communication; it embodies the soul of a culture, tradition, and community. In the diverse and dynamic landscape of Western Australia (WA), many families and communities have roots in various linguistic traditions. However, regional areas of WA are experiencing a silent but profound struggle in preserving and maintaining languages, especially those not widely spoken in the broader community.

Libraries, as centres of learning and cultural exchange, have long played a pivotal role in supporting language preservation and enrichment. They offer books, resources, and a communal space where languages can be practised, celebrated, and passed down through generations. Yet, the reality is that many regional libraries lack the necessary resources to fulfil this essential role, especially when catering to multilingual families' needs.

This struggle is not just a concern for the families directly affected but resonates across the broader community. When a language is lost or its practice is stifled, an invaluable part of our shared cultural heritage is diminished. The ensuing ripple effect impacts intergenerational language transmission, continuity of cultural traditions, and our multicultural fabric's richness.

Simultaneously, the increasing reliance on digital platforms to compensate for the lack of localised support has its limitations and drawbacks. While digital resources may offer some solutions, they cannot replace the human touch and in-person interaction that are vital for nurturing language skills and cultural understanding.

The following sections will delve into the specific challenges and potential solutions, with the goal of charting a path forward that recognises the key roles libraries play in maintaining languages and how we can celebrate our linguistic diversity and strengthen our shared cultural heritage by enhancing their resources in rural and remote communities.

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# LIBRARIES: THE COMMON GROUND IN EVERY LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Libraries have always been the cornerstone of education, cultural exchange, and community engagement. In the multilingual context of regional WA, libraries are more than repositories of books; they are vital in preserving languages and providing tools for cultural connection. However, a stark reality is emerging in regional areas where there is a significant shortage of materials and resources to cater to the diverse linguistic needs of the community.



## No. 01 – Community's Desire for More Inclusive Resources

The community's cry for more diverse language resources has been loud and clear. The Taiwanese community leader expressed the collective wish: *"Even to start with the library, we just would like to have more books in other languages."*

Further adding to that, a Ukrainian-speaking community professional noted *"It's much harder in regional Australia, for example, speaking about the Ukrainian language... Practising [the language] here in regional towns like [location]. Yeah, it's much more difficult because we don't have that many [people],"* noted by the Ukrainian-speaking professional. A glaring void in multilingual resources, even in libraries, adds to the struggle. *"Even to start with the library, we would like to have more books in other languages... [It is] very difficult to [even] keep learning English because people don't have classes here in [location],"* she added.

However, when the capacity is there in the library, the outcomes can be significant for the families. A mother who requested Chinese storybooks for her child also shared, *"In our current local library, I requested Chinese storybooks for my child and received much support. While I have examined some online resources, I believe in-person interaction is superior to online browsing."*

Accessibility issues make the problem more multifaceted. As shared by a participant, *"There are Chinese language programs in Perth, but accessibility is a barrier... There was a sizable Chinese community in the local government areas where we previously resided, and the local library had story time in Chinese. It was excellent, but we don't live there anymore."*



## No. 02 – Limited Availability of Multilingual Materials

The libraries in regional WA often lack sufficient books, learning aids, and resources in languages other than English. This scarcity affects adults and children, depriving them of essential tools to learn and maintain their native language. A Ukrainian-speaking community professional lamented the situation: *"It's difficult to find even books in the language... they just had a few books in the library, had just a few books for children, and that's it."*



## No. 03 – Digital Solutions and Their Limitations

Some have turned to digital platforms to overcome these barriers, but these are not ideal solutions.

As the Ukrainian-speaking mother noted, *"If you live in a regional town, you rely on online resources a lot... and it comes the same to the language... So just online pretty much which is not ideal but... Just have to adjust."*

Digital resources can't replace the in-person experience of browsing through books and interacting with the language in a tangible way. Taiwanese community leader commented: *"People still prefer to go to school in person. With the physical materials and live conversations... it's not sustainable if they don't have the [right] environment."*

The shortage of language resources in regional libraries is not merely an administrative issue; it's a cultural crisis. Without immediate and thoughtful intervention, we risk losing invaluable linguistic diversity and the rich tapestry of cultural heritage that it represents. The voices from the community have spoken, and they underscore the urgent need for action, inclusivity, and a renewed commitment to our multilingual heritage.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## Recommendations for Strengthening Multilingual Support in Regional WA

The challenges faced by regional WA in supporting and maintaining multilingualism are multifaceted but can be addressed through comprehensive initiatives and systemic changes. The following recommendations are offered to the WA Ministers and Department Heads



### **Strengthen Library Support Systems**

Empower libraries to become central hubs for language resources and assistance in regional towns, being identified as the first point of contact in various cultures. Encourage libraries to foster environments where community members can comfortably request assistance, thereby nurturing linguistic diversity and inclusivity. Initiating training programs to equip library staff with the necessary skills and resources to address diverse linguistic needs effectively will be a pivotal step.



### **Foster Real-World Connections through Adequate Funding**

While the recent influx of funding is a positive step, it is imperative to ensure substantial and sustained financial support for community schools to foster real-world connections, not just online. Facilitating regional visits and creating resources in the region would foster deeper connections and reach communities more effectively, hence a recommendation for increased funding to enable this.



### **Amplify Community Voices**

Responding to the community's call for a greater say in matters affecting them, Multilingual Australia stands ready to spearhead collaborations and engage in meaningful dialogues. We are prepared to work hand in hand with all stakeholders willing to assist families in regional areas in preserving their language and culture. Let's work towards a future where every voice is heard, and every culture is represented and respected.



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Together, we aspire to enrich the linguistic landscape in regional Australian towns through strengthened library resources.



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