
Further understanding of Australian Indigenous cultures, past and present through undertaking and publishing research, and providing access to print and audiovisual collections

Budget blow: AIATSIS Chairperson expresses grave concerns

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Speaking on behalf of its governing Council, AIATSIS Chairperson, Professor Mick Dodson AM, today expressed grave concerns over the future financial capacity of the organisation to effectively manage and preserve its priceless collections.

AIATSIS – the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies - is the world's leading research, collecting and publishing institution in the field of Australian Indigenous studies.

The Canberra-based Institute had unsuccessfully sought an additional \$3.5m per annum over four years from the Federal Budget to continue the urgent digital preservation of its priceless audio-visual archives of film, sound recordings, photographs and print materials.

“Our digitisation program, which was previously funded by the Federal Government over the last few years as a non-ongoing program will expire on 30 June 2011. The continuation of this program was the number one priority of the Institute,” Professor Dodson said.

In order to maintain a digitisation program beyond June 30, AIATSIS has received agreement from the Minister for Finance and Deregulation to carry an operational loss of \$3.2m next financial year.

“However, this planned operational loss only provides temporary respite to AIATSIS’s funding crisis and in order to meet its ongoing statutory requirements AIATSIS will be forced to cut several of its services and programs.”

“There will be unavoidable negative impacts on the services that AIATSIS can offer external users and clients next year as we seek to divert available internal resources towards our digitisation effort.”

The Institute has reluctantly curtailed some of its planned regional activities including cancellation of its highly successful *NAIDOC on the Peninsula* celebrations held in Canberra in July and which last year attracted some 4500 people.

“This was a very difficult decision because our annual *NAIDOC on the Peninsula* event has become the biggest Indigenous community activity in the ACT and incorporates the official ACT NAIDOC Family Day and Official NAIDOC Flag raising ceremony.”

Other services and programs identified to be cut include the Institute’s very popular community access activities as well as placing restrictions on services available to clients under AIATSIS’ Return of Materials to Indigenous Communities (ROMTIC) program.

Professor Dodson said that cuts in services and activities were necessary in order maintain the Institute’s digitisation capacity of its archives – some of which are at significant risk of being lost forever.

“Sadly we know that reduction in these services will significantly affect our relationship with a diverse range of clients - including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, organisations and families as well as researchers, mainstream publishers and broadcasters.”

Of particular concern to the former Australian of the Year was the ongoing employment for over 30 staff – a third of AIATSIS’ workforce - predominately from the Institute’s Audiovisual Archive.

“While we are able to carry this operational loss, the failure to secure additional long term digitisation funding means that these contracted staff – 7 of whom are Indigenous employees – continue to face an uncertain future,” he said.

“These valued staff are specialists in the area of digitisation of audio, visual and print materials and are integral to the processes involved in the sustainable access, maintenance and preservation of our collections.”

A loss of our digitisation program will have serious impacts on access to Indigenous cultural heritage and could result in the permanent loss or serious degradation of unique and priceless audio and videotape, motion picture and film records of Indigenous peoples’ ceremony, culture, lifestyles, art, music, languages, and oral history.

“The permanent loss of such a priceless audiovisual archive will impoverish the memory of all of humanity,” he concluded.

Professor Dodson stated that AIATSIS will now develop revised submissions to Government for consideration in context of the next 2012/13 budget processes and deliberations.

Further information: Peter Windsor 0400 554 603