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Potholes in the road to an initial teacher training degree for Australian revival languages

Abstract

Despite an evident and growing need, no university has thus far taken significant steps towards implementing an initial teacher training degree for Indigenous Australians, seeking to revive their languages through schools or other formal educational settings. There have been instead a series of unconnected, stopgap measures to provide much-needed training in the vocational sector, by education departments or as postgraduate professional development. While each of these serves a very useful purpose and is to be commended for its positive contribution, there remains an apparent reluctance on the part of universities to respond to this significant national training need.

This contribution examines some of the concerns that currently appear to be obstructing progress or will need to be addressed along the way, including financial sustainability, learner distribution, linguistic diversity, program parity, standards of proficiency, community attitudes to professionalisation and learner readiness. It also seeks to respond to these in the hope of smoothing the road ahead so that significant progress might finally be made.

1. Introduction

The history of Australia has resulted in the wide-scale dispersal and demise of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and, consequently, languages. From an estimated pre-European total of over 250 languages subsuming 600-700 dialects, current estimates suggest less than 20 remain as vital tongues, that is, they are spoken daily by all generations and being transmitted to children as their first language (Zuckerman and Walsh 2011). Many are not fully functional for everyday communication and are represented by only partial records. Heritage populations may now be widely scattered and single locations commonly contain representatives of multiple language groups. But, even in the face of such devastating loss, many groups have sought to revive their languages over recent decades and more are currently hoping to.

While it is sometimes suggested that speakers of Indigenous Australian languages should not be required to possess formal qualifications in order to teach them, it has been argued elsewhere (e.g. Hobson 2006) that this ideologically-grounded position is generally not well-supported in terms of quality educational outcomes and that increasingly candidates recognise that they require training in order to teach effectively and are actively seeking it. However, at this point in time,

training opportunities for Indigenous Australians who are aspiring to teach their own languages in schools as accredited teachers are extremely limited. For those intending to teach in first language programs, the apparent assumption is that they will simply undertake a standard teacher-training course and provide classroom delivery in their language by virtue of their bilingualism. These are largely restricted to remote area bilingual schools where an Indigenous language is the first language of the community and, as this contribution is solely concerned with training for second language teaching in revival contexts, first language teaching and teacher training are not discussed further herein. For those who hope to or, increasingly, already teach, their heritage language as a second language in school—the dominant context for revival languages in Australia—there are some options currently available, although none are at the level of an initial teacher training degree and this will be the focus of this contribution.

The Muurrbay Aboriginal Language and Culture Co-operative on the north coast of New South Wales (NSW) has, over several years and subject to demand, offered its Certificate IV in Teaching Language and Cultural Maintenance, a Vocational Education and Training (VET) accredited course that equips Gumbaynggirr speakers to teach their own language in Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges or act as a community language tutor in NSW schools. In 2012, TAFE South Australia implemented the Certificate IV in Teaching an Endangered Aboriginal Language, a similar but linguistically-generic VET course, designed to train speakers of diverse Aboriginal languages how to teach them to others. While the value and quality of these courses is certainly not under question, neither, however, leads to registration as a teacher in any jurisdiction; graduates teaching in school classrooms are only permitted to deliver lessons under a qualified teacher's supervision and graduates' remuneration is consequently likely to be at a significantly lower level than qualified teachers' (Queensland Indigenous Languages Advisory Committee 2011; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, 2012a, 2012b).[1]

By contrast, the Western Australian Department of Education (WA DET), through its Professional Learning Institute, provides an in-house professional development Aboriginal Languages Teacher Training course for staff aspiring to teach their language in its schools. On successful completion of the course, graduates can apply to the WA College of Teaching for Limited Authority to Teach (LAT) registration. Registered graduates are then eligible for appointment as an Aboriginal language teacher in WA DET schools. While this initiative provides an elegant and pragmatic response to the need for trained Aboriginal languages teachers, it also suffers from its own limitations: the course and consequent LAT are not recognised outside WA DET schools; its graduates are permitted to teach their language, but not in other learning areas; and although their salary is at a level commensurate with that of a new teacher, it remains fixed at that level unless they subsequently obtain full registration (Western Australian Department of Education [WA DET] 2011).

The Master of Indigenous Languages Education (MILE), implemented and co-ordinated by the author, is a linguistically-generic, professional development degree offered at the University of Sydney to Indigenous graduate teachers who wish to add teaching their language as a subject. Although the program also entails a nested graduate certificate and diploma, it is only the MILE that is recognised by the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities (NSW DEC) for appointment to designated language teacher positions in its schools, positions that have traditionally been occupied by teachers of classical, European, Asian or other community languages. While this program has gone some way towards providing fully-qualified Indigenous languages teachers, it too has a number of limitations. Notwithstanding the successful appointment, or return, of a number of MILE graduates to schools interstate in order to teach their languages, it remains only in NSW that the qualification is formally recognised and linked to a specialist languages teacher role. Most importantly, it is only able to produce qualified teachers as graduates because candidates must already be qualified as teachers at entry.[2]

None of these programs overcome the need for initial teacher training for Indigenous Australians who wish to teach their own languages in schools. They must either be already qualified (and prepared to be restricted by state, licence and income) or be prepared to act under the supervision of a registered teacher. While these options may be satisfactory for some, they are not likely to be so for many others.

The remainder of this contribution attempts to explain, especially in terms of factors known to influence the decision-making processes of local universities, why there is currently no such qualification and how the concerns preventing such an innovation might yet be overcome. In this, the author has an unashamed goal to overcome these concerns.

The discussion is premised on the assumption that an, as yet, unquantified demand exists. Much of what follows must also remain necessarily unsourced as it is based on internal discussions, closed meetings or casual comments that are undocumented, as well as the simple observation of routine institutional processes. However, in that context, it should not be presumed solely reflective of the author's present or past affiliations but represents a broader base, as indicated by widely distributed colleagues' affirmations: It is a national problem.

2. Financial sustainability

In the corporatised mindset that currently pervades Australian higher education, the initial response to any suggestion of a new or expanded course is usually whether or not it will be financially sustainable – will it pay for itself or, better still, make a profit and how many fee-paying and international students can be expected to enrol? Not surprisingly, the advice that potentially none of these conditions might apply is rarely met with enthusiasm and the discussion can quickly find itself redirected to ways in which such a course might be 'enhanced' to make it attractive to foreigners or debating why large numbers of non-Indigenous enrolments should be neither

anticipated nor encouraged.[3] Considerations of the principal purpose of the proposed innovation can be rapidly lost to mainstream priorities where undergraduate course numbers are habitually reckoned in terms of hundreds, rather than tens, of students.

Mainstream assumptions are also usually inherent in the costing models that are applied, if the discussion is allowed to progress to that point. Income is invariably calculated on the basis of broad disciplinary funding clusters, without regard to unit-based ASCED (Australian Standard Classification of Education) codes that further differentiate Commonwealth funding, such that language learning units attract an 18% higher rate than education units and 118% more than general humanities units (Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education 2013a). An assumed rate, not amenable to such nuanced differentiation, is usually embedded in any planning template and arbitrary enrolment thresholds are likely to be relied on instead.

Similarly, the effects of Commonwealth-targeted schemes are not normally included in costing deliberations. The fact that every Indigenous enrolment attracts substantial additional funds under the Indigenous Support Program and may be eligible for further supplementary funds under the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program for students of low socio-economic status (Commonwealth of Australia 2012), seem to be far too irregular to be taken into account in most planning offices.

Alongside these (often disregarded) financial considerations, it is even more pertinent to emphasise the prospective benefits to the academy of undertaking potentially low return, Indigenous enclave courses. These include: an increased Indigenous participation profile; enhanced standing within Indigenous communities as a responsive and welcoming institution, in turn likely to act as an attractor to yet more Indigenous candidates; increased prestige internationally, especially in the broader language revival movement; and, consequently, a likely attractor to research collaboration and funds. Ideally the potential benefits of an institutional contribution to the advancement of social justice for Indigenous Australians might also be assigned some value.

All this suggests the need to apply a relevant and specific method in assessing the prospective costs and benefits of any such course, which takes a pragmatic approach and assigns value to intangibles like prestige and consequent potential income.

There is also a need to at least attempt to quantify potential demand, although such a task is certain to be hindered by some practical difficulties. The experience of establishing the MILE and observing subsequent enrolment patterns over the years suggests that estimates of prospective numbers prior to establishment are likely to be unreliable. The stated intentions of many individuals will fail to be realised and organisational estimates of regional numbers are likely to be optimistically overstated, both because of local enthusiasm for the cause and the learned benefits of inflated statements of need. Conversely, unforeseen sources of significant numbers of candidates can be expected to manifest. Estimates of prospective enrolment will not

become reliable until patterns have been established over several years of operation and, even then, substantial annual variation should be anticipated.

While an attempt to obtain indicative figures must still be undertaken, in these circumstances the safest and therefore most easily defended approach might be to undertake the expansion of an existing degree to add the option of Indigenous languages as a teaching subject. The costs and risks inherent in adding to an established program would be significantly lower than for mounting a completely new one and the increase in student numbers necessary to sustain it not as great, especially given that costs for core elements of the course could thus be amortised further, offsetting any increase, at least in part.

The incorporation of an embedded qualification, such as a two-year diploma for language educators who did not wish to teach in school contexts but, rather, only in VET or community settings, might also be feasible, as might qualifications in Indigenous language revival that share substantial core content. In this way an existing Bachelor of Education could be expanded to allow for an array of qualifications to meet different but related needs in the growing revival movement. Similarly, advanced standing might be reasonably afforded to those who hold qualifications such as the South Australian certificate and the WA DET course. Needless to say, all this would also have the potential to afford Australian language revival a great leap forward.

To maximise enrolments—and therefore financial sustainability—and respond to national demand, any such program(s) would ideally draw from a national pool. However, given the target group, issues of learner distribution and linguistic diversity immediately arise.

3. Learner distribution

Although the majority (75%) of Indigenous Australians live in cities or regional areas and NSW is the most well-represented state (being home to 30% of the Indigenous Australian population (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2012, figures from 2006), language revival projects are distributed nationally. And, even though NSW is also one of the states most active in the field in terms of school-based programs, its languages are dispersed widely across its considerable area, the typical pattern nationally. A significant distance is therefore likely to exist between prospective students and any provider institution, especially given that most Australian universities are located in cities.

Any expectation that large numbers of Indigenous candidates would uproot themselves and abandon family, community and possible employment for a minimum of four years would be both unrealistic and culturally insensitive. The probability that candidates might also already be key drivers of local revival efforts would additionally render it quite counter-productive. The only realistic solution would be to offer a course by mixed mode, known colloquially in Indigenous Australian education as *block release*, whereby students periodically visit the campus for intensive residential

blocks of instruction and complete the remainder of course content by distance methods.

Fortunately, the costs of student travel, accommodation and incidentals for Indigenous block release students in Australia are eligible for funding under the provisions of the 'Away from Base Program' (Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education 2013b) such that there is minimal financial disincentive to either students or institution. However, the establishment of new block courses authorised under this already well-subscribed program can be difficult and so the aforementioned notion of expanding an existing course could again be the optimum solution.

A course unlimited by geography in this way would ideally be able to draw on a national pool of prospective candidates, thereby maximising its potential to achieve at least cost neutrality, if not profitability.

4. Linguistic diversity

While some of the strong languages are currently taught as second languages in schools (for example Arrernte, Western Desert and the Yolngu languages), the majority are now (potentially) revival languages that have long fallen from daily use, intergenerational transmission and first language status. Rhydwen, Parolin, Munro and Poetsch (2007) identified ten languages being taught in NSW schools, a number that is understood not to have changed, although the list of languages has. Western Australia currently has school programs in 16 languages (L. Jones, personal communication, 8 April 2013); South Australia in seven (G. Tunstill, personal communication, 9 April 2013); Victoria, five (K. Eira, personal communication, 10 April 2013); and Queensland, four (F. Baisden, personal communication, 9 April 2013).[4]

It would not be feasible for any institution to deliver teacher training using content explicitly tailored to over 40 languages. A regionally-constrained program could focus on only a local few but, in so doing, would eliminate its potential to achieve financial sustainability by meeting national demand and reinforce the advantage of the strongest over those only beginning their revival journey, possibly locking the latter out permanently. A generic and flexible approach that both maximises access and responsiveness to reviving languages is needed. Fortunately, models exist in most of the Indigenous languages teacher-training courses currently offered.

The South Australian certificate, WA DET course and University of Sydney degree all provide linguistically-generic programs that allow speakers of potentially any Australian language to participate. In each case, content is tailored to the languages represented in the classroom, sometimes relying on students to supply language-specific material where appropriate. Indigenous languages and their teaching can thus be dealt with typologically, incorporating relevant content as required.

Applying such a model to an initial degree program would both allow for a national pool of prospective students and afford a dynamic response to the constantly evolving revival movement. Of course, this is a marked deviation from current

practice in training teachers for European and Asian languages and has implications for program parity and teacher proficiency.

5. Program parity

While mainstream language teacher registration and training program requirements vary from state to state, the typical Australian qualification for a fully-licensed, specialist languages teacher includes a major of some 216 hours (six 36 hour units) in the language to be taught and a coherent study in languages pedagogy, together with theoretical and professional education units (see, for example, NSW Institute of Teachers 2013). This would normally be achieved through a degree in Arts and a diploma in Education or Masters of Teaching or a double degree in Education and Arts or similar. For those content to teach a language as their second subject a similar, non-specialist registration can usually be achieved with a minor of 144 hours (four units).

This would not be possible for any Australian revival language today and is unlikely to change within the next decade. Few languages are routinely taught to Year 12 outside Western Australia. Far fewer are being taught in universities and only the strongest have ever been represented in comprehensive tertiary programs, although this shows hopeful signs of expansion (Giacon and Simpson 2013). As Gale (2011: 208) notes, "university language courses tend to offer the stronger languages to non-Indigenous students, while TAFE courses tend to serve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who are seeking vocational training in their own languages". Thus, for many languages, the highest level of study available may be school or TAFE rather than university and it can easily be the case that the most advanced curriculum for school, TAFE and university, in a given language, is essentially the same.

In short, parity between university training in Australian revival languages and others routinely offered in local schools cannot be achieved now nor is it likely to be feasible in the near future. A much more flexible model is required if meaningful progress is to be made.

The Master of Indigenous Languages Education was able to achieve NSW DEC recognition as a professional development qualification suitable for appointment as a specialist languages teacher, not by offering study in specific languages but by providing three units (118 hours) in linguistics for Australian languages, although not without some pain (Hobson 2008a; 2008b).[5] NSW DEC staff and NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group personnel were initially adamant that either a sequence of three units in a specific language or a combination of units in three different languages be taught within the degree. It was only after protracted discussions, lobbying by graduates and other interested parties and in the face of a successfully operating program, that demands to deliver the impossible were finally dropped in favour of the more pragmatic solution.

For an initial teacher training program the accreditation process would be different and necessitate the satisfaction of the standards of a regulatory institute or

college of teachers. Again, this would require a pragmatic approach, in recognition that parity with other languages is not currently attainable. Without attempting to open those negotiations here, it is to be hoped that some combination of language learning and linguistics for Australian languages could be used to satisfy those requirements. The combination of multiple related languages to achieve an acceptable volume of learning is a departure from the norm that would also require authorisation.

However, given the state of revival of most languages likely to be involved, there will still be issues. The advanced study of literature, for example, typically expected of students of French and Mandarin in universities, is not possible for any Australian language, let alone those in revival. And each language that is under revival, or likely to become so, presents a different level of documentation, use and available instruction. The maximum number of hours and complexity of language that may be studied by way of formal courses will differ not only between languages but for the same language over time. Fixed, mandatory, minimum standards will not work. There needs to be some capacity to respond to different languages that are at different stages of revival, yet still in need of teachers.

The obvious response, albeit certain to raise immediate concerns for accrediting bodies, would be to accept the volume of learning contemporaneously available for each language, and allow for the fact that it will necessarily change. A flexible program that allowed for a maximum of 108 hours of typological and revival linguistics for Australian languages, together with a minimum of 108 hours of Australian language learning (that could be in up to three different languages, or sequential in one and offered by university, TAFE, or other provider) could thus be a practical solution.

In order to ensure teacher (and program) development it might also be useful in this regard to consider providing an initial fixed-term LAT (Limited Authority to Teach) of, say, four years, requiring re-accreditation based on demonstrated language development through coursework, documented activity or independent certification.

6. Standards of proficiency

Requiring university training in a language to a specified volume of learning is evidently grounded in the intention to ensure uniform minimum proficiency of teachers. Regulatory authorities delegate responsibility to universities to apply minimum standards of achievement in their teaching and, most importantly, testing of students.

As the foregoing discussion has hopefully established, parity in teacher training with world languages for Australian revival ones is a regrettably distant prospect; arbitrary universal standards cannot currently be met and formal opportunities for prospective teachers to progress towards them are limited.

While possibly a revelation for some, these issues are not uniquely Australian; other jurisdictions have faced them and responded creatively. Hobson (2008a, 2008b) discusses at length the model developed and currently in use in British Columbia that

devolves responsibility for certifying native language teachers' linguistic proficiency to the relevant, autonomous, aboriginal language authority. These authorities, formally recognised by the British Columbia College of Teachers, are responsible for implementing their own testing and accreditation regimes. Inherent in this principled stance is the recognition that aboriginal communities are the owners of, and best judges of individuals' proficiency in, their language and its adequacy for teaching.

Seeding the establishment of Indigenous languages authorities locally would afford communities the opportunity to more formally engage in the revitalisation process. Recognising them as accreditation authorities would provide them with additional status, purpose and agency, furthering their capacity to lead the revival and development of languages (Hobson 2010).

7. Community attitudes to professionalisation

There is an interesting tension between the strong push to use schools as the primary vehicle for much Australian language revival,[6] and the oft-stated belief that the languages are best taught by traditional methods in traditional locations and by elder speakers.

While immersion in the language as a medium of meaningful communication in real world settings would be ideal for rapid acquisition and the development of oral proficiency, it is, by definition, currently out of reach for most Australian revival languages. The teaching of languages in schools is, by contrast, a very formal activity implicating standards, assessment and government oversight and ideally informed by a comprehensive understanding of human development, theories of acquisition and language teaching methodologies.

Although there might be some 'natural' language teachers out there and others who are held in high regard by their respective communities, anecdotal reports from educational authorities and qualified Indigenous languages educators suggest the quality of much of the teaching in the field is in need of radical improvement. Tales of schools, where all grades receive the same limited stock of lessons year in and year out and often of questionable efficacy, are disturbingly common. There is also no shortage of people currently engaged in the field who are aware of their own limitations and calling for training.

In this context, wider promulgation of the LAT model employed in Western Australia could be useful and contribute to the sustainability of any tertiary program. The initial two years of an Indigenous languages teaching degree could be structured as an embedded diploma that prepared community educators to teach only their language in schools. Following on from the British Columbia developmental model, continuation to completion of the degree could be incentivised such that a window for second year entry remained open for, say, two years. The prevailing insistence of Australian teachers' unions and education departments that levels of remuneration be tied to years of training would bolster such a strategy.

8. Learner readiness

Although the government is rightfully pleased with recent improvements in Indigenous school participation rates and Year 12 completions nationally (Garrett 2013), it is still regrettably the case that Indigenous educational achievements are broadly well below the national average. Indigenous participation in teacher training courses and higher education generally is similarly constrained, in large part as a direct consequence of the former (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2006).

At the same time, raised teacher training entry (and exit) standards have come to be seen as levers governments can operate to raise student outcomes, or constrain teacher supply. The NSW government has recently announced,

> Applicants wishing to enrol in ITE [initial teacher education] programs who do not achieve three HSC [Higher School Certificate] Band 5 results,[7] including in English, will need to enrol in a non-teaching degree and, if they graduate and meet specified subject content knowledge requirements, enrol in a graduate entry teaching program. …

> A new literacy and numeracy assessment will be designed to focus on personal literacy and numeracy and on areas of literacy and numeracy important for primary and secondary teaching. Successful completion of the assessment will be a requirement for graduation, and must be completed before the final-year professional experience placement. This will ensure that teacher education graduates have levels of literacy and numeracy at least equivalent to those of the top 30% of the population and relevant to teaching. (Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards NSW [BOSTES]. n.d.)

This state imperative complements the federal government's announced intention that " … teaching degrees will have to introduce an improved admissions process and aspiring teachers will need to pass a national literacy and numeracy test" (Garrett and Bowen 2013).

Such announcements do not augur well for Indigenous participation in teacher education for any discipline, although the NSW government has also flagged that, " …options to support pathways to teaching for entrants from low socio-economic backgrounds, Aboriginal students and students from rural and regional communities should be built in, including the development of bridging courses prior to entry" (BOSTES n.d.). In such an environment, access to LAT registration for languages teaching, if made available, might well become the preferred option for many.

9. Conclusion

The Indigenous Australian language revival movement is waiting for a university to provide an initial teacher training degree that will respond to and support its ambitions. This contribution has argued that it can (and should) be done; it simply requires relevant institutions to grasp the nettle and adopt a pragmatic, flexible approach that is responsive to a varied and developing field.

Models currently exist in the form of VET certificates, a professional development course and a graduate degree that evidence demand for this kind of training and the success of linguistically generic, flexibly-structured models for its delivery. While it is acknowledged that any such course is likely to be financially marginal, there is potential for cost neutrality to be achieved, especially if in-kind benefits are taken into account. Beyond mere money there are also significant prospective cultural rewards, both for the nation and any institution that steps up to the task.

It is suggested that the lowest risk option lies in the expansion of an existing teacher training program to produce one that is designed to be linguistically-generic and therefore national in its scope. Mixed 'block' mode is proposed as the most suitable delivery method for the prospective student cohort that will maximise enrolments and completions. The incorporation of embedded qualifications that afford training for non-school educators and other roles in the revival movement will boost not only prospective student numbers but improve outcomes for Indigenous communities. In this regard, the promulgation of the WA model of Limited Authority to Teach, possibly with developmental, limited terms that incentivise further training, is strongly recommended.

Any ambitions for program parity with existing languages teacher training courses will not be sustainable in the current environment or near future. Rather, a responsive program that combines revival linguistics with language learning and allows for multiple languages and functional variation between them (as well as within each language as its revival continues), is needed. Similarly, the determination of standards, assessment and accreditation processes for teachers' language proficiency appropriate to each reviving language should not be premised on a mainstream norm. The establishment and delegation of these tasks to Indigenous languages authorities will provide them with a reason for being at inception and allow for meaningful community capacity building in languages.

Finally, given prevailing educational outcome patterns for Indigenous Australians, provision of flexible entry for any such course would seem both obvious and necessary. Alarmingly, current government moves to improve student outcomes and limit teacher supply by tightening 'standards' may just be about to become the greatest obstacle to Indigenous Australians wishing to teach their languages in schools.

Notes

1. An earlier generic VET course for Aboriginal languages teaching is understood to have been accredited in Queensland, but appears to be no longer listed, and is not known to have ever been delivered.

2. A pathway that allowed those with two completed years towards a teaching degree or equivalent (a typical training level for the role of Aboriginal education officer) to enter the graduate certificate and bridge up to the MILE conditional upon achieving a high grade point average will be closed from 2014 to comply with incoming Australian Qualifications Framework requirements. Few

candidates had successfully followed this pathway and, despite graduation with the MILE, all remain ineligible for registration as teachers in any jurisdiction.

3. For those unfamiliar with the field, while the teaching of Indigenous Australian languages in schools by non-Indigenous teachers does occur, it is rare, and normally based in the prior good standing of the candidate and their recognised long-term commitment to the community and the revival of its language. Local protocols otherwise usually preclude outsiders (sometimes including those from other Australian language groups) from participation as language teachers and, in some cases, learners.

4. I thank these contributors for their advice and recognise that each has provided information to the best of their knowledge in dynamic settings.

5. This strategy was successfully implemented in the South Australian senior school Aboriginal languages framework (Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia, 1996).

6. The author is not an advocate of this strategy and believes community-based revival should be given the highest priority, as is the case for Palawa kani in Tasmania. However, it is the strategy most Australian revival communities are currently pursuing.

7. A score in the range of 80-89% for a standard two unit (non-extension) course in the NSW Higher School Certificate.

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Practices and Policies: Current Research in Languages and Cultures Education

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