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Author/s: Susan Greenaway, Lisa Zwankhuizen, Erika Gonzalez Garcia

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Outcomes and Observations

Visit to IZO Official Translation and Terminology Services Vitoria-Gasteiz, Basque Country

Susan Greenaway, Lisa Zwankhuizen and Erika Gonzalez
January, 2024

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Overview

The December 2023 visit to the IZO Official Language and Terminology Services in Vitoria-Gasteiz, Basque Country, presented a valuable outward facing opportunity for staff within the Department of Health and Aged Care (Health) to connect with an international government administration. This collaboration allowed the sharing of knowledge, experiences, and best practices in engaging with communities of people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The exchange strongly aligns with the department's commitment to inclusivity and excellence in service delivery.

The potential benefits arising from the visit and the ensuing observations extend beyond improved communications to influencing the intercultural reach of Health's broader communication strategies and activities and serving as a model for other government agencies.

In this report, we document the visit, our learnings, and the possible applications within Health that could be applied to benefit:

- directly, Australia's government communication
- downstream, through improved access to quality health information of vulnerable groups, their health literacy, and
- finally, their health outcomes across a range of preventable conditions.

Background

In December 2023, the Department's Susan Greenaway and Lisa Zwankhuizen travelled to Spain as part of their ongoing collaboration with researchers at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology's (RMIT's) School of Global, Urban and Social Studies.

RMIT sponsored Health staff to visit the Basque Government's IZO Official Language and Terminology Services to learn about its dedicated program of in-language information provision. That program works to ensure all Basque Government communications conform to the standardised Euskara (Basque) language.

RMIT's main objective for the visit was to facilitate collaboration between government and industry in providing clear and accessible information for people from multicultural backgrounds. Jointly both RMIT and Health sought to find solutions to our shared challenges in engaging with and supporting people from multicultural backgrounds to fully participate in the rights and entitlements of our society, including Australia's health system.

This visit continued and expanded on an ongoing program of work under way between Associate Professor Erika Gonzalez (AUSIT/RMIT) and the department to improve Health's communication, including translation, with culturally and linguistically diverse people in Australia. In 2023, the department commissioned RMIT and others to work together on a series of projects that encapsulated the learnings from our work with communities on communications and engagement during the pandemic and identify steps towards improved practice. In its report on its specific body of work, RMIT recommended the establishment of an in-house translation service in Health be considered. The visit to the Basque Government's IZO Official Language and Terminology Service was intended to further inform this establishment.

The visit provided valuable insights into best practices for adopting a plain language policy, in-language information provision and terminology services. This report outlines key observations and proposes principles for Health to enhance communications for everyone in Australia, and influence improvement of this delivery across government.

While there are clear differences in scale and linguistic diversity between the Basque Country and Australia, there are also elements of broad commonality and relevance:

- Observing the implementation of methodologies that work efficiently and effectively in other parts of the world reveals opportunities for adoption in the Australian context.
- Well established in-house plain language specialists and translation services ensure that communications are reliable and consistent.
- Terminology banks within these services assist the general public, community services and health care providers, interpreters, translators as well as government employees, to use consistent language that is meaningful and understood by the target audiences, avoiding misinterpretation and misinformation.
- Moreover, in regions with solid language policies in place such as Basque Country, in-house dedicated plain language specialists and translation services offer linguistic assistance to the public for in-language drafting, solve public complaints regarding poor quality translations and maintain control over the quality of communications or translations produced by external language service providers.

Ultimately, the visit provided both RMIT and Health with connection with another international government administration on a shared objective to improve our engagement with our communities. The learnings have the potential to influence improvements to communication, including translation, with multicultural communities at Health and other Australian agencies.

The itinerary of the visit is outlined below as further background and context before outlining potential opportunities to improve Health's own service and information delivery.

Itinerary

Day 1: Arrival and orientation

Upon arrival at the IZO Official Translation and Terminology Services, the Australian delegation engaged in a warm meet and greet session.

We were met formally by the Minister of Public Governance and Self-Government, Olatz Garamendi, and Secretary of the Institute of Public Administration, indicating the value and priority of language and cultural services to the Basque administration.

Service director Manu Arrasate provided a comprehensive contextual and historical overview of the services, offering insights into translation, revision, interpreting, and terminology

operations. The delegation gained valuable understanding of staff recruitment, continuous professional development, and day-to-day operations.

Day 2: Facility tour and expert presentations

The Australian team embarked on a detailed tour, exploring the facilities that support translation and terminology services. Senior experts Maite Imaz, Joseba Urkia, and Mertxe Olaizola, delivered presentations on language standardisation, translation, interpreting, and terminology, respectively. The challenges and strengths of the service were candidly discussed, providing the Australian delegation with a nuanced perspective.

Day 3: In-depth exploration of terminology services

The Australian team presented to officers from across a number of Basque Government departments. Susan and Lisa spoke about the work Health did throughout the pandemic to collaborate and engage with multicultural communities and how we are building on the lessons learned to inform better communications practices and processes for meaningful engagement with these communities.

The delegation delved into the implementation of Euskalterm, the official terminology data bank. Insightful discussions on the daily functioning and operations of the data bank shed light on best practices. Additionally, the use of computer assisted tools, particularly Trados, was explored, showcasing the technological aspects that contribute to efficient service delivery.

Day 4: Managing external partners and quality control to maintain standardised language

Discussions on managing external Language Service Providers (LSPs), the role of neural machine translation, and robust quality control mechanisms were the focal points of Day 4. The delegation gained understanding on how co-drafting is integrated into the workflow, ensuring collaboration between the in-house team and external contributors.

Day 5: Basque Government, Health Department's language policy and services

The final day involved a visit to the Basque Government Health Department, and an exploration of its language and communications policy. A discussion with service executives and senior staff provided an opportunity for the Australian delegation to seek clarifications and gain further insights. An escorted visit to a community health centre to observe how the health-specific products generated by IZO are used in practice was very interesting and informative. Of particular interest was the on-call availability of a national interpreting service to assist people with low Spanish or Basque proficiency during phone consultations and interpret in an immediate environment.

Lessons learned

The visit exposed the Australian delegation to the intricacies of a well-established, expert, in-house communications service to ensure all communications adhere to the standardised language, translation and terminology protocols. The exchange of ideas, discussions on challenges, and exploration of technological tools contributed to a deeper understanding of how principles observed in Basque might be adapted to the diverse linguistic landscape of Australia.

The Australian delegation expresses gratitude for the open dialogue and valuable insights gained during the visit, recognising the potential for applying these principles to enhance in-language communication for multicultural communities in Australia.

Key takeaways include:

- Adopting a plain language policy and building a public terminology bank helps ensure that government messaging remains consistent and accurate for everyone.
- Maintaining in-house plain language and translation expertise provides the required capability to implement the policy and ensure quality assurance.
- Effective community engagement strategies include the value of co-drafting with community members
- Technological tools such as Trados and neural machine translation can play a crucial role in enhancing efficiency, informed by the right expertise.

The observations made during the visit highlighted key areas of focus for Health in improving its own information delivery for people from diverse backgrounds and communities. These include community feedback mechanisms, terminology banks, in-house translation, and quality assurance processes for outsourced language services. Implementing similar mechanisms tailored to Australia's linguistic diversity can generate real benefits.

How can these learnings improve Health's delivery

In considering Health's own journey towards more thoughtful and effective engagement with the Australian population, consideration should be to the development of a comprehensive in-house content strategy and quality assurance team.

This change in role would see the team move away from only transactional functions such as commissioning translation to strategic and best practice multicultural engagement team delivering value-adding strengths and services. The indicative skill set would include cultural competence, linguistics and/or languages other than English, plain English writing, translation and interpretation, cross-cultural communication, training, cultural impact awareness, and multicultural policy guidance.

Standardising language and quality assurance

The establishment of in-house plain English specialists and a translation service, as recommended by RMIT, will lead to the creation of more accurate and accessible information.

The number of languages represented in Australia make the proposition of an in-house translation service for every language impractical for Health at this time. Nonetheless the establishment of an in-house team at Health is recommended with the specific function of enhancing the accessibility of health information for everyone in Australia. Functions may include working with business areas to assist with development of accessible and culturally appropriate communications, providing leadership and assistance to business areas to adopt the plain English policy, conducting random quality checks, and engaging with external Language Service Providers (LSPs to ensure consistency and coherence, fostering trust in the community regarding public health communications).

Broadly, the role of the in-house team serves as a vital link between the department and LSPs, facilitating effective communication and addressing translation-related matters.

Community engagement

The in-house team would play a pivotal role in supporting co-drafting by community members, fostering a sense of inclusivity. Establishing and maintaining links with community representatives would be a key foundation for this. Workshops, training, and expertise for co-creation should be facilitated by the team to ensure meaningful community engagement

across all information products. This approach contributes to the creation of culturally sensitive and accurate information products, including translations.

Standardised terminology

Standardising terminology is highly relevant to Health, particularly given its complex medical and scientific lexicon. Establishing a publicly available terminology bank is recommended to assist the health, community and translation sectors to access accurate and verified terminology in English and in-language. This resource benefits grassroots organisations, community groups, translators, and the general public, enhancing health literacy and promoting consistent use of official terminology.

Influence on other agencies

The observations and learnings have the potential to influence not only the work of Health but also that of other Australian government agencies such as Home Affairs' and its current work to improve national language services. Health's involvement and guidance in this work to improve national language services can ensure accurate and culturally sensitive translations of health-related information, making it more accessible to individuals with diverse linguistic backgrounds.

Lessons learned and best practices identified through this international engagement can also be shared across other government entities, fostering a collective improvement in communication and engagement strategies. This ripple effect contributes to a more cohesive and effective approach to serving linguistically diverse communities, building trust in and greater engagement with government.

Conclusion

The observations from the visit to the Basque Government's in-house language and terminology services provides practical examples of ways Health can enhance the creation of meaningful communication and engagement for everyone in Australia.

To implement any or all of these requires a commitment from leadership to not just the principles but the practice of inclusion in public administration, and to embedding both in government processes. At least in part responsible for the longevity and priority of the standardisation of the Euskaran language services in Basque Country must be the priority it commands for government and bureaucracy. Here in Canberra, departmental and sector leadership towards better practice is similarly required.

Implementation towards this heightened capability also requires a strategic shift in emphasis in engagement with the diversity of Australia's population from transactional production of translated words to sustained and genuine community engagement, quality assurance, and iterative improvement.

By applying these insights strategically, the Health can create a more inclusive and effective approach to communication and engagement, ensuring that health information reaches and resonates with everyone in Australia regardless of their ability or linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

In conclusion, the information exchange facilitated by the RMIT-sponsored research project provided invaluable insights for Health. What we have learned and what we propose for our own adoption builds on the knowledge we have amassed in 2022-23 and since in COVID-19

community engagement evaluation work and in the cancer screening preventive health strategy project.

The potential benefits extend beyond improved translations to influencing broader communication strategies and serving as a model for other government agencies.

Aligned with the department's commitment to inclusivity and excellence in service delivery, it is recommended that these learnings be unified in a growing knowledge base within the department. With further discussion and planning at the executive level, they can be put to work to the benefit of people from multicultural backgrounds and indeed all people in Australia