

GOVERNMENT  
OF THE  
REPUBLIC OF VANUATU

**MINISTRY OF EDUCATION  
AND TRAINING**

**DIRECTOR GENERAL**

Private Mail Bag 028  
Port Vila, Vanuatu  
Tel : 22309  
Fax : 23289



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DE LA  
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FORMATION**

**DIRECTEUR GENERAL**

Sac Postal Prive 028  
Port Vila, Vanuatu  
Tel: (678) 22309  
Tel/Fax: (678) 23289

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## **International Mother Tongue Day – Vanuatu leads the way**

### **-Press Release-**

On the 21 February 2017 International Mother Tongue Day is celebrated around the world. It is fitting that Vanuatu acknowledges this day, as the archipelago is one of the most linguistically rich, diverse, multi-lingual nations, with an estimated 83 vernacular languages spoken today. This day is significant because it highlights the importance of retaining these vernacular languages as an intrinsic part of our cultural identity and sense of belonging.

In 2015, the Vanuatu Ministry of Education published the National Language Policy for education. This policy is a major achievement for the Ministry of Education and a key element of the new era of reform in education. The policy went through an extensive, consultation process before being endorsed by the Council of Ministers for implementation.

The National Language Policy acknowledges the importance of language as one of the principal means through which culture is maintained and strengthened. It also embraces the concept of mother tongue-based multilingual education, and for the first time, provides a key role in education for the national language, Bislama, and for the numerous vernacular languages that are spoken in this linguistically diverse nation.

The policy also promotes English and French, the two 'main' languages of education as stated in the Constitution, and the longstanding aspiration for all educated Vanuatu citizens to achieve competency in both of these introduced international languages.

Implementation guidelines from the Ministry of Education require that in the early years of schooling students learn in their mother tongue or Bislama, and then gradually transition to learning in English or French and Bislama. This is consistent with international research findings that show that students benefit greatly from using their mother tongue in the early grade years.

Already teachers in Vanuatu are reporting that students are enjoying learning, participating more, understanding more and learning more quickly and more effectively. They are also more self-confident, more positive about school, which they see as more relevant to their lives, and have a stronger cultural identity.

At the same time, learning in the mother tongue is providing a strong foundation for students to learn additional languages such as English or French more easily and ultimately to progress through the education system. Thus schools will be encouraged to introduce opportunities for

students to learn some basic English or French from Year 1 onwards. From Year 4, schools should also introduce opportunities for all students to learn Bislama.

This year schools will receive further support from the Ministry of Education around teaching mother tongue or Bislama and gradually introducing English or French. This support includes distributing class sets of reading materials in 65 vernacular languages and providing more in-service training for teachers in teaching mother tongue literacy and English or French.

This is a very exciting time for Vanuatu. These major reforms in education are ground-breaking, not just for Vanuatu but also for the international community and efforts to preserve linguistic diversity, to promote multilingualism and multi-culturalism and to achieve significantly improved education outcomes for children. Vanuatu is leading the way.

This press Statement is approved by

  
Jesse Dick  
Director General

