

About ASLIA

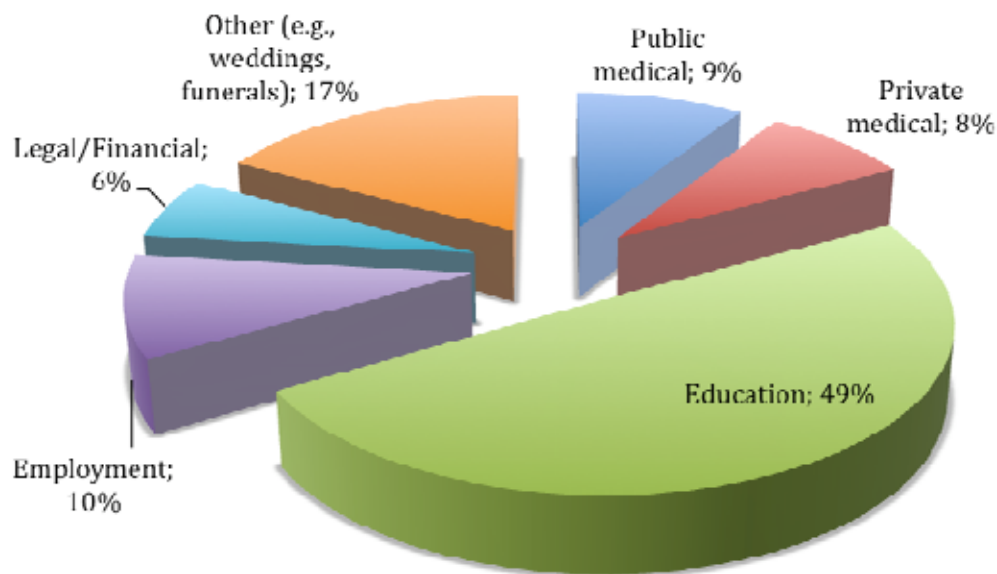
The Australian Sign Language Interpreters' Association (ASLIA) is a non-profit body, and the national peak organisation representing the needs and interests of Auslan¹/English Interpreters in Australia. ASLIA was established in April 1991 and is comprised of a National Executive Committee, a Representative Council and branches in most states/territories. ASLIA's vision is to lead and promote best practice in sign language interpreting across Australia. To achieve this, ASLIA works closely with key stakeholders in developing and maintaining professional standards.

A profile of the Australian sign language interpreting profession

Throughout Australia, Auslan/English interpreters are accredited by the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) as either Paraprofessional or Professional Interpreters, with the competencies and work contexts differing for each level of accreditation. Since formal testing and accreditation of Auslan/English interpreters began in November 1982, NAATI has accredited approximately 900 interpreters. With approximately 750 accredited at the Paraprofessional Interpreter, and approximately 150 accredited at the Professional Interpreter level. However, the total of 900, does not account for deceased practitioners, those no longer working as interpreters, or those who are now living overseas, nor is it representative of the number of practitioners currently working in the industry today. Nationally, the actual number of practising accredited interpreters is estimated to be in the region of 250-300, although it is impossible to specify the exact number.

A scoping study to identify supply and demand issues in Auslan/English interpreting conducted on behalf of the Australian Government (Orima 2004) determined that the majority of Auslan/English interpreting is within the following settings: education, employment, public medical, private medical, legal/financial and other settings (e.g., weddings, funerals, etc.). The percentage of interpreting work within each of these settings, as indicated in the Orima Report, is represented in the following graph. As is clearly evident, education forms a significant percentage of the work undertaken by Auslan/English interpreters. For this reason, ASLIA is obliged to make a submission to the Review of the Disability Standards for Education.

¹ Australian Sign Language



Main areas where Auslan/English interpreters work (Orima, 2004)

As a result of the Orima report the Federal Government allocated funds towards establishing a national interpreting service for private medical appointments – the National Auslan Interpreter Booking & Payment Service (NABS). However, the shortfall of service provision in the other areas remains.

For deaf people who use sign language as their first or preferred language, interpreters provide an important service to ensure they are able to fully participate in all aspects of community life. However, the provision of interpreting services often places the deaf individual at a disadvantage, for example:

- At a job interview, potential employers may see an interpreter as an additional expense if they employ a deaf person.
- At an appointment with a solicitor, there may be disputes over who is responsible to pay for the interpreter.
- Deaf people are often unable to participate in public events (e.g., political announcements, community events/festivals, etc.) because no interpreter is provided.
- Not-for-profit organisations may have limited funds and not be able to afford paying for an interpreter. This may result in using a person who is not accredited, or in the deaf individual not being able to access services they provide.

- In the workplace deaf people are often unlikely to have interpreters provided for staff meetings/training – particularly in small businesses.

The Federal Government currently provides some funding for deaf Australians in the workplace under the Employment Assistance Fund. However, the funding is very limited and is insufficient to adequately meet all the potential needs of a deaf employee. It provides minimal access and fails to satisfy the real-life demands most deaf employees face in the workplace. As such, they are often excluded and have limited access to information, which may result in isolation within the workplace and failure to achieve promotions and career development. As such, there is potential for the NDIS to redress some of these inequities and support deaf people in achieving greater community participation, increased opportunities in the workplace and access to community services.

Monitoring service provision

While providing increased access may be desirable, the current under-supply of interpreters raises the potential that unqualified interpreters may be used to fill the demand. It is important that NAATI accreditation remains as the industry standard for service provision, without this the quality and ethical conduct of the practitioners cannot be guaranteed. Employing someone without NAATI accreditation to perform the duties of an interpreter creates the impression that the participants in the situation have full and equal access to the information. However, there can be no certainty that an unskilled practitioner will be able to accurately relay information between Auslan and English and the participants may be unaware of any omissions, inaccuracies or breaches of ethics.

One main challenge in ensuring quality of interpreting service is that there is no body overseeing and monitoring the industry. At present, due to the demand for interpreting services, individuals with and without accreditation are being employed in a wide range of settings. While NAATI accreditation is intended to indicate a certain level of proficiency, the level of accreditation (i.e., Paraprofessional or Professional) is also meant to certify that a practitioner has skills to work within a defined range of interpreting settings. According to NAATI, these settings are: Paraprofessional Interpreter – “undertake the interpretation of non-specialist dialogues”; Professional Interpreter – “capable of interpreting across a wide range of subjects involving dialogues at specialist consultations. Their specialisations may include banking, law, health, and social and community services.” However, individuals with and without accreditation are regularly employed to work in settings without the appropriate level of accreditation. In financial, legal, health and

social and community service settings, this is of particular concern because inaccurate interpreting in these settings may have grave consequences.

NAATI has recently implemented a system of revalidation, which requires interpreters accredited after January 2007 to provide evidence of on-going employment as an interpreter and professional development in order to retain their accreditation. For Paraprofessional interpreters accredited after January 2007, there is the expectation that they work towards achieving Professional accreditation, with Paraprofessional accreditation expiring after nine years. For practitioners who received accreditation prior to January 2007, they have the opportunity to opt into the NAATI system – with a high percentage of Auslan/English interpreters choosing to do so. One of the reasons for this high rate of support for the NAATI system of Revalidation is an initiative by ASLIA National, which we have called the “*Revalidation Revolution!*”. However, NAATI has recently deferred the Revalidation system, so it has yet to be implemented.

In spite of the large uptake by Auslan/English interpreters, there are still many individuals who have not opted in for Revalidation and many individuals who provide interpreting services without NAATI accreditation. In countries like the UK and the USA there are bodies which certify practitioners and register them for work – without this registration they are not able to work. People who want to book an interpreter are able to verify the currency of an individual’s ability to practice as an interpreter, which prevents unaccredited people working in the field, and also helps to ensure that practitioners with the appropriate level of accreditation work in given areas.

Another impediment for effective monitoring of service delivery is that there is currently no body able to handle grievances and complaints about practitioners. NAATI is responsible for accreditation, but does not have the authority to strip an individual of accreditation for unethical conduct. ASLIA is a volunteer-run organisation which does not have the authority or resources to handle grievances, and in the worst cases, prevent an individual from working in the field. One of the ASLIA state branches (ASLIA-WA) has been in discussion with NAATI and the WA State Government about establishing a Registration Board for Auslan/English interpreters in that state. We strongly support this initiative and would like to see it implemented on a national basis.

Recommendations:

1. *To ensure only appropriately skilled interpreters are employed, the NDIS needs to stipulate that only Auslan/English interpreters with NAATI accreditation will receive*

funding through this system.

- 2. To achieve point 1, it is recommended that funding and support be given to the creation of a Registration Board. The Board must have the authority to register interpreters, verify their suitability to work in specific settings and the power to handle grievances. ASLIA is willing to provide advice on the creation of this body.*

Community education

The creation of the NDIS is an important initiative which promises increased access and community participation for deaf Australians. However, for deaf people who use Auslan as their first or preferred language it is important that any information about the Scheme is made available in accessible formats.

Recommendations:

- 3. All promotional and educational information regarding the NDIS must be made available in accessible formats, including:*
 - a. Simplified English*
 - b. Audio description*
 - c. Braille*
 - d. Auslan (for DVDs and information on the Internet)*

Access to funding

Consideration needs to be given to how deaf people are able to use the NDIS for interpreting services. The diversity within the deaf population means that there will be a range of demands covering education, healthcare, workplace, community participation, etc. Similar systems around the world offer deaf people a set number of interpreting hours per annum. However, the diversity of the deaf community and individual needs should allow for some level of flexibility. Furthermore, some activities – such as education and training – should be encouraged, ideally without limitations.

Recommendations:

- 4. There needs to be extensive consultation with consumers of interpreting services and service providers regarding any specified limits on the allocation of interpreting hours available for an individual to ensure they reflect realistic and appropriate*

options.

- 5. The Scheme should allow for some degree of flexibility, or individual “tailoring” so that people may be able to specify how they wish to use their allocation of interpreting hours.*
- 6. Consideration should be given to activities which are eligible for an unlimited allocation of interpreting hours, for example: education and training.*

Meeting demand

As noted above, there is a relatively small number of Auslan/English interpreters currently working in the field. Because of this, the demand for interpreting services far outstrips the current level of supply. A national summit organised by ASLIA and Deaf Australia in February 2008 identified some key causes for the under supply of interpreters. Three key causes for this are:

- A. Insufficient training opportunities
- B. Unattractive career option
- C. Limited career path

A. Insufficient training opportunities

At present interpreter training programs are offered in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth, Canberra and Brisbane. However, these courses are often not run annually, which stems the flow of new practitioners into the field. The vast majority of interpreting students learn Auslan as a second language, and usually undertake two to three years of study of the language before entering an interpreter training course. During the period of language acquisition there is often a decline in the number of students who choose to, or are able to, continue through the program. At completion of the course, while some may have basic fluency in the language, they are not competent enough to undertake study in the interpreter training course. However, there is pressure from institutions to ensure a minimum number of students are in each course. While this may be necessary for economy of scale, there are often not enough students to fill all the places, resulting in a training course not being offered for a year or more. As a result, some capable students who had promise of being very competent interpreters lose motivation and move into other career options.

Another concern is that these training programs are usually offered exclusively within the large metropolitan cities. This means that potential interpreters in rural and regional areas

are often unable to access training programs, which perpetuates the disadvantage of deaf citizens within those communities. Nationally, there are two training programs available in distance mode (through a combination of online contact, correspondence and intensive face-to-face blocks). The first is offered by the National Auslan Interpreter Booking & Payment Service (NABS) in collaboration with Central TAFE (WA) to train unaccredited interpreters in regional and rural areas with the goal of obtaining NAATI Paraprofessional accreditation. The second is a postgraduate program at Macquarie University which is only available to those already accredited at Paraprofessional level with a minimum of 2 years post-accreditation experience – with a view to graduates obtaining Professional Interpreter accreditation. Thus the Macquarie program keeps people in the profession by providing upskilling, but does not necessarily bring new interpreters into the field. While these programs hold promise, there is often limited incentive for students to undertake this study – often at great personal expense. As already noted, with limited enrolments training programs are at peril of not running due to institutional enrolment requirements, which impacts on maintaining and increasing current numbers of working professionals.

Deaf Interpreters are an emerging group of practitioners within the larger sign language interpreting profession. Deaf Interpreters (DIs) are skilled deaf people who are skilled at: a) relaying information between Auslan and a foreign sign language; b) relaying information between Auslan and an Indigenous sign language; c) interpreting for deafblind individuals in a range of settings; d) working with an Auslan/English interpreter to facilitate communication with a deaf person who may not be fluent in Auslan and/or have additional disabilities. As such a Deaf Interpreter may be employed to work with a Professional Interpreter in unique settings where employing an Auslan interpreter alone cannot guarantee effective communication. The following are some settings where DRIs may work:

- Deaf immigrants and refugees who may (or may not) be fluent in the sign language of their homeland, but not yet fluent in Australian Sign Language (Auslan)
- Deaf persons who have been socially isolated (i.e. those from rural and remote areas; people who are incarcerated or living in institutions)
- Deaf persons with a mental illness, developmentally delayed, and/or educationally deprived
- A Deaf person who is not comfortable with hearing people, or when issues of trust and cultural sensitivity are critical
- A Deaf person who is seriously ill, injured or dying (the Deaf person's ability to

produce signs clearly or use both arms when signing may be affected)

- Deaf children who have not been exposed or who may have had limited exposure to English and/or Auslan
- Deafblind consumers
- Deaf Indigenous Sign dialects/contact sign language
- Deaf people with dementia

ASLIA, in conjunction with NABS, ran a pilot accreditation program to test and award accreditation to DIs. The work of professional DIs is essential in enabling community participation and access to rights and services of many deaf and deafblind individuals in Australia. However, training opportunities are ad hoc and do not conform to a national curriculum or lead to accreditation; courses have been offered once in Perth, once in Sydney, and a couple of times in Melbourne. Each of these courses have been offered using different syllabi and learning outcomes, so DIs are not necessarily being trained to a national standard.

B. Unattractive career option

One of the main reasons interpreting is not an attractive career option is because of the relatively low earning potential. In general, sign language interpreting is a seasonal profession, with the work being available in increased demand at certain times of the year, and very limited at other times. There is also a physical limit to the amount of work an interpreter is able to do without placing themselves at risk of Occupational Overuse Syndrome (OOS) or Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI). ASLIA recommends that an interpreter should work no more than 5 hours per day and a total of 25 hours per week. However, we are aware that many interpreters are working beyond this recommended limit. A result of this tendency to work beyond recommended limits is a sharp increase in the number of interpreters who are unable to work for a period (or permanently) due to OOS injuries.

Significantly, Australian research has found that the vast majority of interpreters are female (Bontempo & Napier, 2007; Napier & Barker, 2003), which indicates that males are not being drawn into the field. This is of concern when considering that deaf males may require (or at least prefer) to have a male interpreter for personal medical examinations/procedures, or even in general interpreted events – so that the gender of the interpreter's voice matches the gender of the signer. The data also suggests that interpreting is a 'female profession', which makes it less-attractive to males as a career option.

C. Limited career path

At present there are only two levels of accreditation available to sign language interpreters: Paraprofessional Interpreter and Professional Interpreter. However, not all interpreting agencies differentiate the pay for practitioners at these two different levels. This results in limited motivation for those at the Paraprofessional level to attempt to work towards achieving Professional accreditation. Furthermore, once achieving the Professional level of accreditation there are limited options for career development. As a result, many highly competent and experienced interpreters leave the interpreting profession for higher-paying, more regular employment with greater career development prospects.

In summary, the limited training opportunities and career path, coupled with seasonal income and earning potential guarantee that the number of practitioners fails to increase with the growing rate of demand. The NDIS is certain to increase the demand for interpreting services, so consideration should be given to addressing these key factors.

Recommendations:

- 7. The NDIS funding should also be channeled into training for Auslan/English and Deaf Interpreters. This increased funding should allow for: annual fluctuations in class sizes; delivery of training to interpreters in rural and regional settings.*
- 8. The funding should also include a national sign language interpreter mentoring/internship program to prevent attrition from the profession, provide expanded career options (e.g., roles as mentors, trainers, coordinators, etc.) and further skill development of existing and new interpreters.*
- 9. The funding should include a national program to coordinate and deliver interpreter professional development and training, with a specific focus on interpreters in rural and regional settings.*
- 10. The funding should include recognition of Deaf Interpreters - including funding for training, testing and accreditation.*
- 11. Funding for and payment of interpreters through the NDIS should reflect different levels of NAATI accreditation.*
- 12. The NDIS must promote safe work practices, including good OH&S standards, such as those outlined by ASLIA.*
- 13. Interpreting services to deafblind individuals should also be covered by the NDIS.*

Summary

In response to data from the Orima Report (2004), which highlights significant unmet demand for the services of Auslan/English interpreters, ASLIA is supportive of the creation of an NDIS. ASLIA recognizes that there is potential for such a Scheme to provide deaf Australians with increased access to community services and participation, and increased opportunities in employment and education. However, the information presented here raises some significant concerns which need to be considered for the structure, scope and implementation of the Scheme. In particular, the NDIS is likely to increase demand for sign language interpreting services, and the recommendations presented above will help ensure this need is met and will maintain appropriate professional standards and best practices for sign language interpreting service provision. Ensuring the highest level of professional standards will maximise the effectiveness of the NDIS and ensure its goals are achieved.

References:

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- Napier, J. & Barker, R. (2003). A demographic survey of Australian Sign Language interpreters. *Australian Journal of Education of the Deaf*, 9, 19-32.
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