

Review of Disability Standards for Education 2005

The Deaf Society and Deaf Services Ltd.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Deaf people who sign have unique access needs. These needs arise not simply from the inability to hear, but also because many deaf people have been deprived of language and education in childhood, which affects their ability effectively to engage with education. Auslan is the language of the Australian Deaf Community.

Our submission is based on the comments of two focus groups conducted with members of the Deaf Community and parents of deaf children. It focuses on four areas for consideration in the revised Disability Standards in Education 2005 (the Standards). These are:

- the scope of the Standards with reference to early childhood education,
- awareness of the Standards amongst users of education services,
- the need for the Standards to stipulate that Auslan interpreters in education settings need to be qualified, and
- the need for improved staff training on the access needs of students with a disability.

TERMINOLOGY

HARD OF HEARING

The term “hard of hearing” is usually used to refer to those who use English rather than a signed language as their primary means of communication. The majority of people with a hearing loss (estimated at one in six Australians), belongs to this group. Generally, hearing loss has been acquired later in life and education is not affected. People with acquired hearing loss will usually continue accessing information and interacting with those around them in English, whether spoken or written, and are well served by assistive technologies such as hearing aids, hearing loops, and captions.

DEAF

The term “deaf” refers to those who use a sign language as their primary language. Deaf people are more likely to have been born deaf or to have acquired a hearing loss early in life. This group is relatively small, but not insignificant: 9,723 people chose a signed language as their “language spoken at home” in the 2011 Census.

AUSLAN

Auslan (Australian Sign Language) is the signed language used by the Deaf Community in Australia. It is historically related to British Sign Language, as is New Zealand Sign Language, and has been influenced to a lesser extent by Irish Sign Language and American Sign Language. It is not a signed form of English. Rather, it is a language in its own right with a grammar and lexicon quite different to those of English. As for any foreign language, many years of study are needed to acquire fluency.

Auslan is the preferred language of those who identify with the deaf community. Fewer than 5% of deaf people acquire Auslan as a first language from deaf parents.¹ Others typically acquire it from participation and socialisation within the school environment, from interacting with the Deaf Community as a teenager

¹ 10% is often quoted as the proportion of deaf children with deaf parents, but Johnston (2004) found that 3% of deaf students enrolled at a particular institution had any deaf relatives and Mitchell and Karchmer (2004) argue that the figure is under 5%.

or young adult, or in some cases from hearing parents who have learned the language themselves. Auslan is also acquired as a first language by the hearing children of deaf parents.

BACKGROUND TO OUR SUBMISSION

In preparation for this submission, we conducted two focus group meetings with members of the Deaf Community to discuss their experiences of deaf education. The first focus group consisted entirely of deaf parents who themselves have deaf children. The second group consisted of deaf individuals and hearing parents of deaf children. A range of themes were identified as problematic in access to education for deaf children and adults. These included:

- Issues of compliance with the Standards. The problem of education providers refusing to provide reasonable adjustments such as captions, transcripts, and Auslan interpreters appears to be endemic. One participant reported needing to pay herself for someone to transcribe audio files that she needed to access as part of the course.
- Issues relating to provisions which only give the “illusion of inclusion”. For example, hiring interpreters who are not qualified and who mangle the language or fail to interpret the content of the class.
- Concern that teaching staff are not aware of the needs of deaf students.
- Concern that educational interpreters are being given tasks by the teacher that are in fact the teacher’s job, such as marking or parent liaison.
- Concerns that the role that teachers of the deaf have in education for deaf students is being curtailed through reductions in hours.
- Concerns that early intervention programs for deaf children are not provided full time.
- Concerns that mainstream early childhood education programs do not promote the signed language development of children.
- The focus on inclusion has a “disability mindset” that prevents schools from seeing the needs of culturally deaf people.
- The lack of access to deaf peers for deaf school students - this has mental health impacts.

COMMENTS ON THE STANDARDS

Many of the issues identified by our focus groups are matters of compliance that cannot be addressed by changes to the Standards. However, four matters where changes to the Standards could be considered. These are:

- The scope of the Standards with respect to early childhood education
- The need for information about the Standards to be provided by education providers
- The need for accreditation for those working in education as Auslan interpreters
- The need for training for teaching staff in disability awareness

We outline each of these below.

SCOPE

Our focus groups raised concern that deaf children are not receiving access to early childhood education that takes account of their language development needs. The standards are unable to help in this case because they do not cover child care.

However, concern was also expressed that if the Standards were to cover child care, parents may no longer receive funding for NDIS supports that can be used in a child care setting.

Recommendation

That consideration be given to the desirability of extending the scope of the Standards to include early childhood services including early intervention programs and child care, but only if this would not remove the option for parents to use NDIS funds for supports within the day care setting.

AWARENESS

In our first focus group, only two people out of nine were aware of the standards. It bears repeating that these are deaf people who themselves have deaf children and who are strong advocates for their own access to education and for the education of their children. They are not members of the wider community with no interest in the topic.

Recommendation

That the Standards require all education providers to provide those accessing their services with a copy of the Standards and information about how to make a complaint under the Standards as part of their enrolment process.

QUALIFICATIONS OF INTERPRETERS

Many education providers employ “educational interpreters” who are not actually qualified interpreters. The employers do not require these people to have any kind of qualification and those hiring them also do not know how to assess their ability to do the job. Parents expressed grave concerns about the impacts of unqualified interpreters on the ability of their children to access the curriculum. Reports of “interpreters” who sign very poorly (described as “painful to watch” by one focus group participant) are especially concerning given that this mangled language is being placed in the classroom as a model for students. The complexity and density of the curriculum requires competent interpreters who can convey complex information at speed.²

In our view, the provision of unqualified interpreters is a serious inequity which the Standards could explicitly address.

The Standards mention interpreters (7.3(d)), but we believe that it would be beneficial to stipulate that interpreters must hold NAATI certification. NAATI certification is the recognised Australian benchmark for interpreting competence and would provide much-needed guidance for those hiring interpreters so that they can be confident that the interpreters will actually provide access to the curriculum. Without this benchmark, students will continue to be unable confidently to access education and training.

Recommendation

That the Standards stipulate that those doing Auslan interpreting work in all education settings must hold NAATI accreditation as Auslan interpreters.

² ASLIA, Guidelines for the Employment of Sign Language Interpreters in Educational Settings, August 2011.

Including this requirement in the Standards would also bring them into line with Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which states the need for people qualified in sign language in education settings.³

TRAINING

Members of our focus groups identified a lack of awareness of disability access needs and deaf culture amongst teaching staff. This leads to inappropriate access measures, or no access measures being put in place, or misunderstandings about the role of support staff. Training is available that would solve this problem, but it is not always provided.

The Standards only “recommend” such training. We would welcome this being strengthened so that training is a requirement where the staff member cannot demonstrate prior knowledge or experience of that particular disability.

Recommendation

That the Standards stipulate that education providers must train their staff to meet the access needs of students with disability unless the staff member/s can demonstrate prior knowledge of that disability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- That consideration be given to the desirability of extending the scope of the Standards to include early childhood services including early intervention programs and child care, but only if this would not remove the option for parents to use NDIS funds for supports within the day care setting.
- That the Standards require all education providers to provide those accessing their services with a copy of the Standards and information about how to make a complaint under the Standards as part of their enrolment process.
- That the Standards stipulate that those doing Auslan interpreting work in education settings must hold NAATI accreditation as Auslan interpreters.
- That the Standards stipulate that education providers must train their staff to meet the access needs of students with disability unless the staff member/s can demonstrate prior knowledge of that disability.

REFERENCES

ASLIA. *Guidelines for the Employment of Sign Language Interpreters in Educational Settings*. August 2011. <https://aslia.com.au/wp-content/uploads/ASLIA-Educational-Interpreting-Guidelines.pdf>

Johnston, Trevor A. “W(h)ither the Deaf Community? Population, Genetics, and the Future of Australian Sign Language” *American Annals of the Deaf* 148(5), Spring 2004, pp. 358-375.

³ UNCRPD, Article 24.

Mitchell, Ross and Karchmer, Michael. "Chasing the Mythical Ten Percent: Parental Hearing Status of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students in the United States" *Sign Language Studies* 4(2):138-163, December 2004, pp. 138-163.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

<https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-24-education.html>

ABOUT US

The Deaf Society and Deaf Services Ltd. are specialist service providers for deaf, deafblind and hard of hearing people. We work with the Deaf Community towards equity for deaf people.

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