

## ***Briefing Paper drafted on behalf of TEDCA on the issues related to the use of sign language interpreters in the tertiary sector.***

### ***Purpose***

The purpose of this briefing paper is to highlight the issues that have been identified as currently relating to the use of sign language interpreters in the tertiary sector and to stimulate discussion and initiate a collaborative response to address these issues. This paper does not seek to provide any comment about what constitutes best practice in the provision of sign language interpreters for deaf students – other documents have done this previously.

### ***Background***

The Tertiary Education Disability Council of Australia (TEDCA) is the peak body for regional network groups of service providers and consumers concerned with the education and employment needs of people with disabilities in post-secondary education. There is provision in the Constitution for two councillors to represent the higher education and vocational education and training sectors in each state and territory. State networks usually nominate the people for these positions from their membership. For example in Queensland, councillors are drawn from the management committee of the Higher Education Disability Network (Inc) Queensland.

It is a common practice at face to face Council meetings for councillors to provide a report on activities occurring within the sector in their state/territory and to identify any issues that appear to be emerging. It was at such a meeting that a number of councillors indicated that universities and Institutes of TAFE were experiencing difficulties in providing appropriate interpreting services for their Deaf students who required them. Councillors were reflecting both their concerns as service providers and the concerns of their clients. After some discussion, it was decided that the issue warranted further investigation. TEDCA councillors saw it as the role of TEDCA to identify the issues specific to our sector and to then engage in further discussion with peak bodies which had a mandate for the oversight of such issues. Among the peak bodies identified were the Deafness Forum, Australian Association of the Deaf and the Australian Sign Language Interpreters Association.

While TEDCA recognises that Deaf students who require sign language interpreters to access the educational environment are a key stakeholder in any discussion that may take place on these issues, a number of other stakeholders need to be consulted including:

- sign language interpreters;
- senior management of universities and vocational education providers, AV-CC
- disability services staff within the tertiary sector;
- representatives from organisations training interpreters;
- Deaf Societies;
- Other peak bodies such as the National Disability Advisory Council and National Caucus of Disability Organisations; and

- Appropriate government departments at both the federal and state levels, DETYA, ANTA.

### **Process**

The issues that have subsequently been identified have been drawn from input received from a number of sources including Disability Liaison Officers at universities and Institutes of TAFE, other service providers, and interpreters. This feedback was elicited from:

- their responses of a formal survey distributed on the list-server, ozuni (now austed) – there were 17 respondents to the survey;
- following general discussion posted on the austed list server from time to time; and
- discussion with interpreters and service providers participating in professional networks.

### **Issues**

It should be noted that:

- The concerns raised during this brief investigation are not unique to any single institution or state or territory. The issues are of national concern and so require a high level national collaborative response.
- There have been a number of reports in recent years that have alluded to the issues that are, in fact, being reiterated here. For example: *Issues in Educational Settings for Deaf Students and Interpreters* (February 1996): A project funded by the Cooperative Projects for Higher Education.
- In general, there is a growing concern that there is not enough attention being given to these issues and so the situation will continue to deteriorate in the short to medium term.
- Of considerable concern is the impact that being unable to provide interpreter services that are appropriate for each individual will have on the client as well as the service provider 'at the coal face' who can also be frustrated by ongoing problems.

The issues identified can be loosely grouped under the following headings:

- Issues related to the supply of and demand including:
  - Recognition and promotion of interpreting as an attractive career option;
  - Recognition that there is a critical shortage of people with the skills required to interpret in the tertiary education setting at the current time;
  - Provision of accredited training in a variety of modes and at a number of levels; and
  - Recognition of the importance of comprehensive forward planning to minimise the impact of increasing demand as a result of the successful implementation of strategies to encourage students who are deaf or hearing impaired to access the tertiary system or the impact of significant 'one off' events which stretch already limited resources.
- Quality issues including:
  - Organisational structures/processes which support quality service provision;
  - Knowledge, skills and experience of Disability Liaison Officers and Coordinators of interpreting services particularly in the areas of what

constitutes good practice and the occupational health and safety issues that can arise; and

- The need for processes for monitoring and evaluating service provision.
- Industrial issues related to the development of equitable and safe employment conditions for interpreters in Australia such as:
  - Great variability in pay rates around Australia;
  - Non-standardised conditions of employment;
  - Little recognition of occupational health and safety issues;
  - Few opportunities for interpreters to access professional development activities;
  - Little development of career pathways in the field; and
  - Relatively recent development of a professional bodies representing interpreters.

### ***General Discussion***

**Issues related to the supply of and demand for sign language interpreters** in the tertiary sector are complex and need to be considered within the context of the sector.

Demand for interpreting services at the tertiary institutions that responded to the survey can be characterised in the following ways:

- Don't have any demand and unlikely to;
- Don't have a heavy demand so current service provision is adequate;
- Have a demand to provide interpreter services and are managing to provide services – however if anything unexpected happens can experience difficulties;
- Have a high demand and all resources are stretched;
- Have a high demand and cannot provide appropriate service in some situations.

Respondents to the survey indicated that it was difficult, if not impossible for some tertiary institutions to access interpreter services in some locations. In some cases, the locations in questions are not remote or even regional, just the outer suburbs of capital cities.

In the education sector, demand for interpreter services can vary greatly. There are certainly times of peak demand as well as periods of little if any demand such as during semester holidays. This is however, also changing as more tertiary education institutions adopt 'summer' semesters or continuous enrolment processes. In the vocational education and training sector there has also been a shift for training to take place in the workplace. Such initiatives can increase the demand for interpreters in that they change the dynamics of the context and create a different set of conditions in which an interpreter can be required to work.

There are other factors that also drive demand. For example, a deaf student may enrol in a course as a full-time student. However after a few weeks his/her circumstances may change and so s/he may decide to reduce his/her workload. This is an option available to any student, however when a deaf student who has required interpreter services does this the workload for the interpreter involved decreases significantly. It may be difficult for that interpreter to pick up replacement hours as demand may have stabilised across the sector.

The reality is that there are few permanent or even contract positions available, providing regular income in the sector. Interpreters often tend to work freelance, relying on casual employment. This can lead to interpreters accepting as much work as possible when it is offered which can place them at risk of injury or having to look for employment in other fields when work is not available. Variable demand for interpreters can result in problems retaining interpreters in the profession and in some locations.

**Effective forward planning** would assist in offsetting changing conditions that may occur in the sector because of the implementation of policies and major strategies. Demand for interpreting services has been affected by a number of initiatives in the sector. For instance in Queensland in 1999, the Department of Employment, Training and Industrial Relations promoted the advantages of providing training opportunities for people who are deaf or hearing impaired to a range of employers as well as encouraging people who were deaf or hearing impaired to see training as an option. As a result, there was an increase in enrolments of people who were deaf or hearing impaired in institutes in Semester 1, 2000. One Institute of TAFE reported an initial increase of 10 students over the previous semester. The majority of these students required access to interpreting services. This sudden increase in demand created major difficulties when it was combined with the loss of two/three very experienced interpreters to the profession because of other work commitments or occupational overuse syndrome. This resulted in a domino effect on service provision in the university sector. While it is essential to encourage people who are deaf or hearing impaired to access tertiary education options, there needs to be careful planning to ensure that there are the resources, both human and financial, to meet any increase in demand.

At other times single 'one-off' events such as conferences and workshops can deplete the number of interpreters who are available to work in the sector. For example, the tertiary sector in Queensland, particularly Brisbane, found it very difficult to access interpreter services during the World Deaf Congress that was held in 1999. Such high profile events may occur infrequently, however their impact is significant.

Recently, there have also been some changes to the accreditation of interpreters and to the role of NAATI. Unfortunately, many people coordinating disability services within the tertiary sector would be unaware of these changes. It is vital that such information is advertised to the sector more widely. Perhaps this has not occurred because there is not a broad understanding of who are the clients/stakeholders in this area.

The supply of interpreters is influenced by a number of factors including whether people see interpreting as a viable career and the availability of accredited training programs. Both of these factors are inexorably linked to issues related to the environment in which they are employed and the conditions in which they work.

**Ease of access to accredited training programs** impacts on the supply of qualified interpreters. It cannot be stressed enough that access to high quality training opportunities is pivotal in the development of interpreters who have the skills necessary to interpret in a range of educational settings.

Currently training is occurring in some states and territories but not in others. Again there are a number of factors influencing the provision of interpreting courses. The allocation of funding or EFTSUs, the availability of suitably qualified teachers and the existence of a number of prospective students to undertake the course are just a few. There needs to be recognition at a strategic level within the necessary training organisations such as DETYA, ANTA, state training authorities and industry training advisory boards that there is a critical shortage of skilled interpreters.

A number of respondents to the survey also indicated that they felt it was imperative to **improve the general educational background of interpreters**. The educational background of current and prospective interpreters must be taken into account when developing training programs. Within the scope of any training program, opportunities should be created so that they can enhance their knowledge and skills across a range of subject areas not just exclusively focus on the development of interpreting skills. By doing this, an interpreter can be employed in a wider range of contexts within the tertiary education environment.

### **Organisational structures and management processes for the provision of interpreting services**

Responses to the survey reflect a diverse range of organisational structures and management processes, which are related often to the demand for interpreter services at a specific institution, and the level of expertise in Deaf education that that institution has. For example, there are some notable examples of specialist units in the higher education and vocational education and training sectors. These organisations attract students who require such services. Typically these organisations are providing significantly more hours of interpreting than other providers (between 1 500 – >5 000 hours annually as compared to between 1 and 500 hours annually) and have employed staff with specific expertise in the field or dedicated staff to particular roles such as the coordination of interpreters. In other institutions the task of coordinating interpreter services often falls to the Disability Officer or in some instances to the client themselves. The amount of time required to coordinate interpreter services varied from less than 1 hour per week to the need to have full-time dedicated positions. Some disability services outsourced their interpreters from local Deaf Societies. This would certainly lessen the amount of time required in administration however it may not provide the service provider or the client with some of the flexibility so often required in the sector when for example lecture or tutorial times are changed at the last minute etc.

To provide services that are of a high quality, disability services staff do need to understand the dynamics of service provision to this client group, particularly aspects of Deaf culture and the ethical issues that may confront both the service provider and interpreters. It was not possible to ascertain from the survey the level of training and the extent of the experience that staff providing services had had. Responses to the survey did indicate that most disability service providers facilitate some form of awareness raising activities in their organisations either through formal training programs or through the dissemination of information to staff who will be working with students who are deaf or hearing impaired.

There were a variety of responses in relation to a question about the key competencies that a coordinator of interpreting services has or may be required to

have. Two respondents indicated that they felt it was essential for anyone coordinating interpreter services to have NAATI accreditation at a para-professional level. Another two felt that it was essential to have an understanding of Auslan and the needs of Deaf people in an educational environment.

It would be particularly important for service providers regardless of how much interpreting they had to arrange to have an understanding of the occupational health and safety issues related to interpreting.

There is also a need for any service provider to be aware of a number of issues related to the provision of **quality** interpreting services. Some large service providers have formal mechanisms for evaluating/monitoring the quality of the service that they are providing. This may include supervision by a 'senior' interpreter who sits in on sessions, mechanisms for obtaining feedback from all stakeholders about the appropriateness of the service for the individual eg match of student to interpreter, briefing of interpreters for specific areas of content etc. Other tertiary institutions have informal methods of gathering such information. Of course some of these 'quality' issues are overshadowed at times by the problem of just accessing an interpreter. Sometimes all involved are just 'grateful' that they have managed to get an interpreter. This is a mind-set that needs to be avoided, as it will do nothing to improve the current situation. All stakeholders need to be encouraged to have input on the issues that affect them so that the systemic issues can be addressed.

While the focus is usually on the requirements of the Deaf client and the task of sourcing an interpreter, it needs to be recognised that the task of coordinating interpreter services can be highly stressful. It is not often recognised by others outside of the immediate situation that the staff performing these duties are trying their best in what can only be described as difficult circumstances. This is not a situation that is unique to this client group but it does seem that Disability Officers find themselves as 'the meat in the sandwich' more often than not when trying to arrange interpreting services. There are so many factors that can affect the outcome of the process. It is often incorrectly assumed that the fault lies with the person coordinating the services rather than with others involved in the process or with issues that are really systemic in nature. This may be why some institutions choose to outsource their service provision.

This may also be the reason why some service providers see the best solution to all of these problems as being the development of 'real time captioning' of lectures. There is general agreement among those service providers with expertise in the area that the reproduction of lectures etc either by using laptop notetaking services which reproduce a verbatim transcription of lectures or in the future, by using voice interactive software is not necessarily the best way to provide access to information for some Deaf students. The development of transcription services and the emergence of the technology that facilitates this should not be seen as a precursor to declining demand for interpreters in educational settings. It comes down to a question of providing access to the educational environment in a manner that is the most appropriate for an individual. In many cases, this will continue to be through the use of Auslan interpreters and other services such as notetakers and specialist tutors as many Deaf students, particularly prelinguistic Deaf students, may have difficulty understanding written English.

## **Employment conditions**

The issues outlined here contribute significantly to the retention of interpreters in the profession and the quality of the interpreting services available. The following points summarise a range of comments about employment conditions:

- Great range of pay rates from <\$25 per hour to \$95 for the first two hours of an assignment
- Some pay rates differentiate between professional and paraprofessional levels
- Some pay rates differentiate between evening or out of hours work
- Some pay rates allow for the inclusion of ½ hour of preparation time for every 2-3 hour assignment
- Pay rates that have not increased in relation to inflation or the consumer price index as they do in other professions
- Not being considered as a stakeholder in any wage negotiations that go on in educational institutions – tends to depend on employment status.
- Not having access to work benefits such as sick leave and long service leave
- Travel time generally unpaid
- Length of time that it can take to be paid for a job, related to the bureaucratic processes that often exist in organisations
- Resource constraints creating a reluctance to employ a team of two interpreters when the nature of an assignment length of assignment, intensity of interpreting) would indicate that this is warranted.
- Limited access to ongoing professional development. Because services are either out-sourced or provided on a casual basis, interpreters are unlikely to be able to access professional development funding to ensure that they maintain or enhance their level of skill or even improve their level of basic education.
- In Queensland, interpreters are also disadvantaged in that there is not a local branch of ASLIA currently operating.

## **Recommendations**

Among some of the suggested actions that TEDCA would like to see initiated are:

- The urgent formal recognition that this as an area where there is a shortage of skilled labour.
- The identification of a specific 'industry' area where training issues can be addressed including mapping of courses available.
- The inclusion of a representative of TEDCA in any meetings of peak bodies on the matter.
- The allocation of resources in both the vocational education and higher education sectors so that courses can be offered and maintained so that there is continuity of provision. For example the B Arts in Auslan Interpreting. There needs to be a recognition that while course of this kind will not have a high demand and may not meet the general criteria for offering courses. However such courses are vital if Deaf people are to take advantage of opportunities in the tertiary sector.
- An exploration of options for managing interpreting services including the implications of some form of centralised booking agency for interpreters. There would be a number of issues to be considered with regard to this including issues relating to existing services provided by Deaf Societies.

- Recognition that issues related to the provision of interpreting services will be shaped by local and regional factors and that there may not be a single solution suitable for all.
- For HREOC to undertake an inquiry into the issue to identify any systemic concerns. Such an inquiry would allow for wide consultation and would defuse the tension that may surround specific institutions and their ability to currently provide sign language interpreters when required.
- Professional development activities which raise awareness about the issues related to the provision of quality services and support for people who are deaf or hearing impaired in the tertiary sector.
- Dissemination of information on the characteristics of effective service provision to this particular client group.

*This paper was authored by Judy Hartley, Disabilities Coordinator, Griffith University, and Higher Education Representative for Queensland on TEDCA. An undertaking was given to ensure that responses to the survey on the 'ozuni' list server would remain confidential. To this end a summary of responses has been prepared which does not identify any respondents. A copy of this summary is available upon request to Judy Hartley: Phone: 07 3875 7280; Fax: 073875 7713; E-mail: J.Hartley@mailbox.gu.edu.au*