



30th June 2023

Submission to the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on a Discussion of Education Needs of Hearing-Impaired Students

CISLI is the professional representative body of ISL interpreters in Ireland. As well as advancing the interpreting profession, CISLI's aims include working in close partnership with the Irish Deaf Society (IDS), the national Deaf-led organisation for the future benefit of *Deaf people who use ISL.

CISLI has a current membership of 84 fully qualified interpreters; there are approx. 113 interpreters registered with RISLI, the Register of ISL Interpreters, which was established under the ISL Act 2017.

CISLI's membership includes both hearing and Deaf Interpreters (DIs). Some of you may not be familiar with the role of Deaf Interpreters. DIs are language professionals who are Deaf or hard of hearing themselves, with recognised linguistic and cultural knowledge, experience and training that combine to bring specialised expertise to routine and sensitive interpreting situations such as legal settings, mental health settings, Deafblind interpreting, or when the Deaf party is using a foreign sign language, or signs particular to a given group (e.g. due to age) or particular to an individual (i.e. when a person communicates in non-standard ISL because of mental illness, intellectual disability and/or language deprivation).

Deaf colleagues also work in presentation-style assignments either directly from written English or in a hearing/Deaf team. In Ireland, you will have seen DIs working in Croke Park signing the National Anthem and the winning speeches, and also on public awareness campaigns, such as the television ads for Covid safety. Internationally, because of their mastery in their native language, in many countries, DIs are preferred for public emergency announcements relating to natural and other disasters.

Mastery of a language (rather than fluency) is acquired through exposure and experience to all facets of the language by a breadth of language users. Many of our DI colleagues work in education also, where the students get the benefit of expert language models able to impart their knowledge in ways that engage and inspire young learners.

Furthermore, we are fortunate in Ireland to have a number of esteemed Deaf academics, making invaluable contributions at an international level in the fields of Deaf education, Deaf studies and equality studies.

According to the Dept. of Education, "Excellent and innovative education and training facilitates individuals, through learning, to achieve their full potential and contribute to Ireland's social, economic and cultural development."

*This document will use Deaf with a capital D to refer to members of the Deaf community who use ISL as their preferred language.

Education, therefore, is the approach society takes in order to share our collective learning, to develop essential life skills in our young people, such as behavioural norms, and how to socialise and interact with others.

Success in education is not only measured by results or academic achievement. A good education provides a foundation for the rest of our lives both personally and professionally. It foments confidence as well as competence, provides access to friendships and social status, and it is a means of establishing a secure sense of identity, and greater resilience and mental wellbeing.

Moreover, positive educational experiences promote a lifelong love of learning which brings many benefits throughout a person's life and career.

As ISL is a minority language of the state, Deaf education is also a vital source of language education. It gives opportunities to communicate and learn with peers and from adult role models, especially adult educators. Acquiring fluency in ISL is a route to learning other languages (including English) and enables access to incidental learning. This is especially significant in a context where the use of ISL in the home may be limited, and where access to ISL by other means, for example through broadcast media, is practically non-existent; even online there is very little age appropriate or educational content in ISL.

However, to achieve excellence and innovation in education, the education system must have learners at the centre, and the resources allocated must be sufficient, innovative and of an excellent standard. Meeting bare minimum requirements will not suffice.

On this basis, CISLI supports the model described in the IDS' education policy paper (attached to this submission) that Deaf learners should be educated in inclusive environments "with direct instruction in sign language, access to Deaf teachers and Deaf peers who use sign language, and a bilingual curriculum that includes the study of sign language" (IDS Education Policy Paper, p. 4).

CISLI recognises the importance and benefits of interpreting in a myriad of educational scenarios and settings. However, we know that the presence of a small number of adult professionals in a mainstream school setting cannot replace the language-rich learning environment required to acquire proficiency and possible mastery in your first language and the facilities described above that this provides.

As identified in the recent NDA report on the implementation of the ISL Act, the greatest challenge currently in the provision of interpreting services is the shortage of interpreters. The effects of this have become more noticeable in recent years as the demand for interpretation increases.

As already mentioned, there are 113 registered sign language interpreters in Ireland, compared to over 500 interpreters in Finland, which has a similar size Deaf community.

At present, the most direct route to qualify as an interpreter is to complete a four-year bachelor's degree at the Centre for Deaf Studies (CDS), Trinity College. Applications are by CAO, therefore they are open to everyone including those with no knowledge of ISL.

The number of places available at CDS is limited; there is a maximum of 20 places across the three courses provided (ISL interpreting, ISL teaching and Deaf studies), with an annual average of 4 students graduating from the interpreting programme.

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The Centre for Deaf Studies has developed a one-year master's in ISL interpreting for people with an existing knowledge of ISL. Our understanding is that no funding has been allocated for the implementation of this programme. CISLI urges the government to provide funding for this qualification in order to grow the pool of interpreters in the shortest period of time possible.

Furthermore, as it is not possible to train ISL interpreters without ISL teachers, CISLI requests that the government increase its support for the teaching qualifications provided at CDS, and with a long-term projection, the Bachelor of Education (ISL). This is taught at DCU and is the first qualification in Ireland that enables ISL users to become primary school teachers. The first cohort of students will qualify this academic year.

The development of an ISL curriculum at primary and secondary levels is also urgently required.

The aforementioned NDA report identified many of the daily barriers encountered by Deaf people, for example accessing healthcare and other vital public services. Despite the suite of legislation on the statute books (i.e. ISL Act, Equality Act, Disability Act etc), access to all forms of education remains challenging.

Lifelong learning opportunities for both professional and non-professional purposes, including general interest courses, part-time qualifications and courses provided by private colleges are often out of reach of Deaf adult learners due to a failure or refusal to provide interpretation. This also happens in publicly funded bodies. For example, will interpretation support be provided as a matter of course on the redeveloped apprenticeship scheme?

While CISLI understands that employment is not the remit of this committee, it would be remiss of us not to highlight the difficulty experienced by many Deaf people when looking for work. A recent report produced by the European Disability Forum found that among EU countries Ireland has the lowest rate of people with disabilities in employment (32.6%), and the highest gap between employment rates of persons with and without disabilities, which is 40%, compared to an EU average of 24.4%.

CISLI would also like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the many achievements of our Deaf colleagues and many others in the Deaf community both individually and collectively despite the barriers they have faced.

CISLI thanks the members of the Joint Oireachtas Committee for the invitation to participate in this discussion. We welcome further opportunities to participate in discussions on Deaf education and other related topics, with the IDS, the Deaf community DPO in Ireland, as per UNCRPD note 1.