LIdIA POLICY FORUM

POSITION STATEMENT 01:
MAKING HIGHER EDUCATION MORE DEAF-FRIENDLY

Deaf people in the UK have the right to participate fully in higher education, as both students and academic staff.

The dominant language of higher education is English, which is not fully accessible to deaf people.

The preferred language of many Deaf[1] people in the UK is **British Sign Language (BSL)**, a language with the same expressive potential and complexity as spoken languages.

Accordingly, from the perspectives of both **disability rights** and **linguistic and cultural rights**, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) should take steps to make higher education more Deaf-friendly.

Specifically, HEIs should:

- ensure that higher education is as inclusive as possible for **D/deaf students**;

- encourage members of the Deaf community to consider careers in academia, and take steps to enable **Deaf academic staff** to participate fully in the life of the academic community;

- take action to help ensure that the role of the **Deaf community** in UK public life is fully acknowledged and promoted.

Note

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[1] It is conventional practice to write *deaf* with an upper case 'D' when referring to Deaf cultural identity, with lower case 'd' when referring to hearing loss, and as *D/deaf* when the distinction is deemed unimportant or embraces both senses.

POSITION PAPER

Executive Summary

D/deaf people experience inequality in UK higher education because the dominant mode of communication, English, is not fully accessible to them; for many is a second or dispreferred language. The preferred language of many Deaf people in the UK is British Sign Language (BSL). BSL has the same expressive potential and complexity as spoken languages and is a central element in Deaf people's sense of identity as members of a Deaf community.

Deaf students typically underachieve in education, resulting in a disproportionately small number studying at, and graduating from, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Due to a 'glass ceiling' effect caused by lack of access at an institutional level, the numbers of Deaf academics also remains small.

From a disability perspective, D/deaf people are entitled to reasonable adjustments. From a linguistic rights perspective, they have the right to use the first language of their community in public and private life.

Accordingly, we present recommendations for HEIs to: (a) ensure that higher education is as inclusive as possible for D/deaf students; (b) encourage members of the Deaf community to consider careers in academia and enable them to participate fully in academic life; (c) take action to ensure that the role of the Deaf community in UK public life is fully acknowledged and promoted.

Issue

D/deaf people experience inequality in UK higher education as students and academics, and as aspirants to study or work at this educational level. The source of this inequality is essentially linguistic, in that the dominant mode of communication in UK higher education is English, a spoken language which is not fully accessible to D/deaf people, and for many is a second or dispreferred language.

The preferred language of many Deaf people in the UK is **British Sign Language** (BSL). Sign languages are natural languages which differ from spoken languages in terms of modality (visuo-spatial instead of auditory-acoustic). They have the same expressive potential and complexity as spoken languages; they are not 'mimed' versions of spoken languages (Bellugi and Klima, 2001). Over 130 sign languages are documented in *Ethnologue*, the most authoritative survey of the world's languages (Lewis et al., 2014). The British Deaf Association estimates that 156,000 people use BSL at home in the UK (BDA, 2013). BSL is not intelligible to speakers of English unless acquired as an additional language. Similarly, outside of the British, Australian and New Zealand family of sign languages (Brentari, 2010), BSL is unintelligible to users of other sign languages, such as American Sign Language.

Like spoken languages and other sign languages, BSL is a central element in Deaf people's sense of identity as members of a **Deaf community**, with their own history, shared experiences, cultural practices, art forms, social networks, etc. For many deaf people, their deafness is a defining feature of their cultural identity, rather than a disability (Ladd, 2003; Branson and Miller, 2002; Padden and Humphries, 1988).

D/deaf students typically underachieve in education. Initial studies in the 1970s (Conrad, 1979) showed that D/deaf young people were leaving school with the reading comprehension skills of an average nine year old. While there has been some improvement since, D/deaf young people remain behind their hearing peers on measures of literacy (Powers, 2003; Wauters et al., 2006; Harris and Terlektsi, 2010; Kyle and Harris, 2010). Paul (2001) offered some suggestions for why achievement in written English remains so low for D/deaf young people, including a lack of language input from an early age, and a lack of

knowledge on the part of school teachers in imparting adequate education in reading and writing.

This situation leads to a disproportionately small number of D/deaf people studying at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). In 2013, there were 805 UK students with 'serious hearing impairments' (UCAS, 2014). On the basis of figures for deaf secondary school pupils in 2012/13 (CRIDE, 2013), this amounts to around 6.5% of school leavers, a figure significantly below the national proportion of 38% (HEFCE, 2013). Moreover, the numbers appear to be falling. Between 2008 and 2013, the number of students with serious hearing impairments accepted to UK HEIs fell from 1096 to 805. During the same period, the number of deaf HE students in Northern Ireland decreased from 240 to 95 ("Sharp decline", 2013). Graduation rates for deaf students in the UK are not available, but a study of D/deaf university students in the USA reports that only 25% graduate (Lang, 2002, p. 268).

Deaf academics constitute a very small group and their experiences have not yet been studied systematically. O'Brien and Emery (2014, p. 28) affirm that "Deaf people are, despite structural restrictions within the field, increasingly making valuable and valid contributions to knowledge, not as research objects/subjects but as academics in their own right." They dispute, however, claims that "this influence has brought Deaf academics equal academic capital to their hearing peers […]."

Because of their struggles in accessing higher education, the numbers of Deaf academics remains small. The international network of Deaf scholars, the *Deaf Academics Organisation* (www.deafacademics.org) has been meeting regularly since its inception in Texas in 1999, with conferences held in Washington, D.C. (2004), Stockholm (2006), Dublin (2008), Florianopolis (2010), Lisbon (2012) and, forthcoming, in Leuven (2015). Despite this, the group remains small, numbering only around 400 members (C. Vogler, personal communication, 2012). It is also mostly Western and European in nationality, possibly excluding Deaf academics from the Global South.

While more research is needed to understand the nature of Deaf academics' experiences, both in the UK and internationally, it is important to recognise that their small numbers can be traced back to poor access to education at school and the HE level. It is not due to lack of interest or motivation that the numbers of Deaf academics remains low, but due to a 'glass ceiling' caused by lack of access at an institutional level.

Discussion

From a **disability perspective**, D/deaf people are entitled to reasonable adjustment under the Equality Act (2010). In accord with this act, it is the duty of HEIs to make sure that disabled people are not discriminated against or harassed in the processes of recruitment, admission, progression, and award (for students) and recruitment, development, and progression (for staff).

While HEIs cannot be expected to correct all the inequalities experienced by D/deaf people, they can adopt principles and practices to ensure that activities and processes are equally accessible for deaf and hearing members of the academic community. For example, some HEIs (including University of Bristol, University of Central Lancashire, York St John University) have implemented or approved procedures for assessing Deaf students in BSL where this is the student's preferred language. There do not appear to be any HEIs that offer access to the curriculum via BSL, and the active recruitment of Deaf students does not feature as a common practice in Widening Participation initiatives.[2] Similarly, little, if anything, has been done to recognise the specific challenges and opportunities associated with the employment of Deaf staff members.

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[2] Although there are some limited initiatives, e.g. DeafLearners.org (2011).

According to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2009, Article 30, clause 4), to which the UK is a signatory: "Persons with disabilities shall be entitled, on an equal basis with others, to recognition and support of their specific cultural and linguistic identity, including sign languages and deaf culture". This suggests that HEIs might broaden their approach beyond disability support and consider the issue from a **cultural and linguistic rights perspective**, recognising the unique cultural identity of the Deaf community.

Accordingly, it is important to recognise that British citizens have the right to use the first language of their (non-migrant) community in public and private life, following the UK's ratification in 2003 of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (Council of Europe, 1992). Although BSL has not yet been recognised as a UK minority language for the purposes of the Charter (Council of Europe, 2014), the government of the day did grant official recognition to the language in 2003, stating:

> The Government recognise that British Sign Language (BSL) is a language in its own right regularly used by a significant number of people. For an estimated 70,000 deaf people it is their preferred language for participation in everyday life. BSL is a visual-gestural language with its own vocabulary, grammar and syntax.

<div align="right">(HC Deb (2002-3) 401 c37WS)</div>

Other UK indigenous minority languages (Welsh, Gaelic-Scottish, Irish, Scots, Ulster Scots, Cornish, Manx-Gaelic) have been officially recognised under the Charter in their respective geographical regions, and hence enjoy legal protection.[3] BSL, like these languages, is an indigenous minority language of the UK. But although it is also a national language, its users have yet to be granted legal protection.[4]

Recommendations

1. In order to ensure that higher education is as inclusive as possible for D/deaf students, HEIs should:

    (a) actively reach out to and recruit students from the Deaf community by engaging with Deaf organisations and institutions at national, regional, and local levels;
    (b) provide explicit information for prospective and admitted D/deaf students in online and printed promotional materials;
    (c) allow students who consider BSL their first or preferred language to submit all work for assessment in BSL;
    (d) enable students who consider BSL their first or preferred language to access the curriculum, where possible, in BSL;
    (e) make special efforts to recruit D/deaf students to programmes in linguistics and related subjects, and in such cases provide alternatives to modules which require access to spoken data (e.g. phonology and phonetics);
    (f) conduct research on the admission processes for D/deaf students and their progression through HE to better understand the challenges these students face and how to approach them;
    (g) recognise that not all deaf students will be BSL users, or will identify with the Deaf community, and develop specific strategies to support such students.

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[3] In Wales, additional legislation requires public bodies, such as universities, to produce a Language Scheme for the use of Welsh (e.g., cf. Bangor University, n.d.).

[4] Legislation has been introduced in the the Scottish Parliament to promote BSL as a minority language by requiring public authorities, including HEIs, to prepare an appropriate BSL plan (Macpherson, 2015).

2. To encourage members of the Deaf community to consider careers in academia, and to enable Deaf academic staff to participate fully in the life of the academic community, HEIs should:

    (a) adopt a culture of inclusion within the institution, while recognising the Deaf community as separate from, but equal to, the hearing community, and BSL as separate from, but equal to, spoken/written English;
    (b) ensure that all staff and students working with Deaf academic staff have access to specialised Deaf awareness training and the opportunity to learn BSL;
    (c) not expect Deaf academic staff to deal with all their communication needs individually, but take steps at the institutional level to facilitate appropriate communication access.

3. As part of the mission of HEIs to contribute to a more just society, they should take action to ensure that the role of the Deaf community in UK public life is fully acknowledged and their rights promoted, by:

    (a) exploring the possibility of adopting (some of) the pledges of the British Deaf Association's *BSL Charter* (BDA, 2012);
    (b) supporting BSL users and the Deaf community more broadly through educational and cultural programmes and events;
    (c) organising programmes and events for the hearing public, to raise awareness of deafness, BSL, and the cultural identities and practices of the Deaf community;
    (d) promoting research and teaching in the areas of BSL language and linguistics and Deaf culture;
    (e) representing to Government the need for deaf children to be provided with opportunities in the mainstream educational curriculum to become proficient in BSL.

4. HEIs should be aware of the need to allocate appropriate resources for the fulfilment of these recommendations. Allocation should not only be based on the need to meet legal responsibilities, but also institutional priorities and values, which should be research-informed, openly debated, and fully documented.

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Acknowledgements