



**Australian Sign Language Interpreter's Association
Australian Multicultural Framework Review Submission**

October 2023

The Australian Sign Language Interpreter's Association (ASLIA) is a not-for-profit body and is the national peak organisation representing the interests of Auslan-English Interpreters and Deaf Interpreters in Australia. ASLIA has a 25-year history of representing the Auslan/English Interpreter industry. Our unpaid, voluntary committee work on issues relating to the needs of the industry, ensuring that best practice protocols are upheld and working conditions of interpreters are represented. ASLIA takes a proactive and collaborative approach to resolving issues faced by practitioners and the industry. ASLIA works in collaboration with employers, practitioners and clientele (both deaf and non-deaf) which contributes to a sustainable interpreting industry.

For further information on this submission please contact:

Belinda Roberts

National Chairperson

chairperson@aslia.com.au

The Australian Sign Language Interpreter's Association acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands on which we live, learn and work. We pay our respects to ancestors and Elders past, present and future. We honour Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' unique culture and spiritual connection to the land, waters and seas and their contribution to enriching Queensland and Australia's communities. We also acknowledge the past leaders of Deaf community, who, through adversity and discrimination, have preserved the rich culture and language of the Australian Deaf community.

Introduction

According to the Queensland Health Statewide Deafness and Mental Health service¹, people who are deaf and use sign language to communicate also belong to a culturally and linguistically diverse community referred to as the Deaf community. Each country has its own native sign language. There will be universal traits of Deaf culture but there are also definite nuances, unique to the ethnic and geographic location of the Deaf community. While members of the Deaf community do not identify with label or experience of 'disability' in relation to their deafness, oftentimes society and societal structures and systems label experiences of deafness as a disability. Experiences and understandings of deafness, Deaf identity, and sign language differ around the world depending on ethnic cultures and their cultural and spiritual beliefs and practices. It is important to acknowledge the complex and dynamic intersection between disability and culture as it relates to deafness. Although we consider the Deaf community a part of the CALD community, for clarity in this submission, we will refer to CALD communities as those who speak languages other than English and cultures other than white, Anglo–Australian culture.

There are no easily identifiable statistics regarding how many Deaf people, who communicate via a signed language, also identify as CALD. However, People with Disability Australia (PWDA)² report that one person in four with a disability is culturally and linguistically diverse. Sign language interpreters are working in situations where the deaf person is from CALD background and members of the immediate family are also CALD.

Sign language Interpreters and translators are the bridge between English speaking, hearing culture and sign language and Deaf culture. Diversity is more than being culturally and linguistically diverse, it is multifaceted and intersectional. Deaf Interpreters are Deaf people certified by the National Accreditation Authority for

¹ The State of Queensland (Metro South Hospital and Health Service) Metro South Addiction and Mental Health Services Deafness and Mental Health Statewide Consultation and Liaison Service (2020), https://www.health.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0032/1098842/dmhs-guidelines.pdf

² People with Disability Australia (2021), The Experiences and Perspectives of People with Disability From Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds, <https://pwd.org.au/the-experiences-and-perspectives-of-people-with-disability-from-culturally-and-linguistically-diverse-backgrounds-joint-submission-to-the-disability-royal-commission-by-pwda-neda-and-fecca/#:~:text=One%20in%20every%20four%20people,to%20have%20access%20to%20support.>

Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) as Deaf interpreters. They work at the complex intersection between people who communicate via visual languages and are from international culture. Deaf interpreters, in tandem with hearing Auslan interpreters and spoken language interpreters, are the bridge between visual methods of communication, sign language, spoken language, Deaf culture, hearing culture, Australian culture and ethnic cultures. We believe a multicultural framework should encompass the intersectionality that exists in CALD communities of Australian society.

Vulnerability Due to Language Fluency and Literacy

Experiences of deafness and access to opportunities in a hearing world are diverse and complex, as such social and educational experiences are highly varied and therefore, so are communication preferences, literacy levels and fluency in sign language³. A common experience for deaf and hard of hearing children, born in Australia or overseas, is a lack of incidental learning opportunities, the acquisition of information through passive exposure to events witnessed or overheard⁴.

The literacy skills of Deaf adults and children are typically lower than their hearing peers^{5,6,7}, having implications for employment and social opportunities. Internationally, the average reading age of Deaf adults is said to be at fourth grade level^{8,9,10}. The acquisition of a spoken (and written) language is usually very difficult resulting in limited prior familiarity with a spoken language(s) and also delayed

³ Calderon R, Greenberg M. Social and Emotional Development of Deaf children: Family, school, and program effects/. In: Marschark M, Spencer PE, editors. *The Oxford Handbook of Deaf Studies, Language, and Education*, Volume 1, Second Edition. 2nd ed: Oxford University Press, USA; 2011

⁴ Hauser P, O'Hearn M, Steider A, Thew D. Deaf epistemology: Deafhood and Deafness. *American Annals of the Deaf*. 2010;154(5)

⁵ Traxler CB. The Stanford Achievement Test: National norming and performance standards for deaf and hard-of-hearing students. *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*. 2000;5(4):337-48.

⁶ Antia SD, Jones PB, Reed S, Kreimeyer KH. Academic status and progress of Deaf and hard-of-hearing students in general education classrooms. *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*. 2009. Epub June 2009.

⁷ World Federation of the Deaf. 7 September 2016: WFD Position Paper on the Language Rights of Deaf Children [cited 2020 11 March]. Available from: <https://wfdeaf.org/news/resources/wfd-position-paper-on-the-language-rights-of-deafchildren-7-september-2016/>

⁸ Antia SD, Jones PB, Reed S, Kreimeyer KH. Academic status and progress of Deaf and hard-of-hearing students in general education classrooms. *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*. 2009. Epub June 2009.

⁹ Luckner JL, Sebald AM, Cooney J, Young J, Muir SG. An examination of the evidence-based literacy research in deaf education. *American Annals of the Deaf*. 2006;150(5):443-56

¹⁰ Azbel L. How do the deaf read: The paradox of performing a phonemic task without sound. *Intel Science Talent Search* [Internet]. 2004.

access to a language (signed or spoken)^{11,12}. Similar to the experiences of CALD (hearing) people learning English, some Deaf adults who use Auslan as their preferred language, may also have difficulties with written English comprehension. In many cases, people who are Deaf don't have access to the spoken form of their ethnic spoken language and learning the written form of the language is mediated through a completely different language (sign language).

Legislation, policy and guidelines need to factor in complex learning, language and literacy needs of the Deaf CALD community. For information materials to be accessible and receivable for the deaf community, there needs to be provision of translated materials, documents and resources into the community's native sign language. Equally, there needs to be a concerted effort and allocation of funds to implement Auslan courses, English courses to Deaf interpreters, both certified and aspiring. Deaf Interpreters are often the link to the most marginalised of the community and the broader Australian society.

Provision of Sign Language Interpreters Including Deaf Interpreters

Despite the work of associations such as ASLIA and NAATI, there continues to be reports of English speaking, hearing professionals inappropriately relying on unqualified bilingual colleagues or family and children of Deaf and CALD people to assume the responsibility of interpreter. Although various State-based Language Policies state qualified interpreters should be engaged within Queensland Government (Health, Justice, Education), there continues to be anecdotal evidence of bilingual staff, children and family members being asked to interpret.

For CALD families with Deaf children and Deaf CALD people, they may not be aware of their access to interpreters or empowered about their rights. Using family members and children to broker interactions and navigate the Australian bureaucracy often causes additional stress and anxiety on the individual¹³. More than this, there is no way of checking or relying on the quality of the information that

¹¹ Goldinâ, Meadow S, Mayberry RI. How do profoundly deaf children learn to read? *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*. 2001;16(4):222-9

¹² Geers AE, Hayes H. Reading, writing, and phonological processing skills of adolescents with 10 or more years of cochlear implant experience. *Ear and hearing*. 2011;32(1):49S

¹³ Aumarah, K, Akbari, H, Louise, K & Keegan, D. (2023) *Cultural Transitions: Migrant Youth and Family Stories of Belonging and Cultural Wellbeing*.
https://www.hostint.org/files/ugd/d958bb_a39cd79d5f8d4c2cae7e4ab9c25a73c4.pdf

was transferred. English-speaking, hearing professionals need to have much greater concern as to whether their information was faithfully interpreted without bias or omissions.

Specifically in relation to Deaf CALD people, there are additional cultural and linguistic considerations. Particularly in the context of language fluency and literacy. In Australia we have access to NAATI Certified Provisional Deaf Interpreters (CPDI). CPDIs are Deaf individuals who have been assessed by NAATI to be skilled at transferring meaning between Auslan and/or written English, and other signed languages including non-conventional sign language. Deaf Interpreters work with clients who have sensory or cognitive disabilities, have recently migrated to Australia and are more familiar with foreign sign languages, are educationally or linguistically disadvantaged, or have limited conventional Auslan. CPDIs are well placed to bridge the cultural and linguistic gaps between Deaf CALD individuals and hearing, spoken English professionals.

Industry legislation, policy and guidelines needs to ensure booking of Deaf Interpreters is promoted as best practice and fund the engagement of Deaf Interpreters for events such as appointments and public events for Deaf CALD community members. When newly arrived Deaf CALD people/families arrive to Australia, part of their educational orientation should include information about interpreting services, their rights to access and use of deaf interpreters.

Access in Rural Areas. For newly arrived families who live rurally, there are additional challenges in providing accessibility. There is already a widely known issue with the supply and demand of Auslan and Deaf interpreters. This issue is accentuated in regional and rural areas. Oftentimes, accessibility will necessitate the use Video Remote Interpreting. Again, issues with language and literacy can create additional barriers for CALD Deaf people to navigating the use of video platforms such as telehealth and Microsoft Teams. Having Deaf interpreter representation in the space of government funded programs and courses including the teaching of how to use interpreting services via Video Remote Platforms would insure this vulnerable and at-risk cohort can access culturally safe and supporting learning environments. This support at the base level would lead to empowerment of the Deaf CALD community and develop confidence and independence to participate and contribute to the wider Australian society.

Provision for extended appointment times when working with multiple languages. Interpreter mediated communications are necessarily longer than direct language communications. Working between at least two different languages and cultures requires additional time to receive, process, translate and send messages. Although Auslan interpreters work simultaneously between spoken English and Auslan (where spoken language interpreters typically work consecutively between languages in community settings), communication requires additional time. Auslan interpreters have reported that they are frequently not booked long enough particularly in hospital and health appointments¹⁴. In the context of CALD Deaf people where there are multiple languages and cultures to work between and the possibility of the CALD Deaf person having low literacy levels or no fluent language at all, longer appointments are needed to ensure all parties involved in the interaction can participate and comprehend the information being exchanged. There also needs to be greater flexibility to allow for the availability of all parties required for appointments to go ahead. Where spoken languages can be provided on demand via telephone interpreting. This is not the case for sign language, especially when working with CALD Deaf people. The shortage of Auslan and Deaf interpreters can make it difficult to coordinate availabilities and as such they usually aren't available on demand.

Adding emphasis to the role of Deaf interpreters and the provision of effective access, Deaf Interpreters report that concepts such as 'home address', 'date of birth' and 'next of kin' can be difficult concepts to interpret to CALD Deaf people. Questions and concepts that might be standard in our health, justice and education systems may be unfamiliar for newly arrived CALD Deaf people. Government funded programs and courses, including the provision of Deaf Interpreters to teach CALD Deaf people about standard forms and questions would empower them to participate in their appointments and make informed decisions.

Accessibility and Navigation of Complex Bureaucratic Processes. Newly arrived CALD Deaf people will need to engage with complex systems such as the legal system, health system, Centerlink and eventually the National Disability Insurance Scheme. For people who have English as a first language, these systems

¹⁴ Aurbach, R. (2023). Report Of Survey Results: Naati-Credentialed Spoken and Sign Language Interpreters. Unpublished

are complicated. Trying to access the services and supports you need for daily living, while having to coordinate between these inaccessible services, a hearing Auslan interpreter and a Deaf interpreter can be frustrating and overwhelming. These system barriers and additional barriers faced by CALD Deaf people can impact their quality of life and mental wellbeing as they experience delays in receiving the payments or services they need for basic necessities such as food and housing. This creates opportunities for Deaf CALD people to be exposed to exploitation in ways that non-Deaf CALD people are not. In response to the NDIS, many language service providers respond that they are unable to provide interpreting and translating services to Deaf CALD individuals because they are ineligible for NDIS.

To promote efficiency of staff time, specific strategies need to be initiated to prioritise the fast tracking of Deaf CALD community members at their application, interviews and appointment times. This would remove the hours of paid wait time of interpreters who are needed in other bookings due to the industry wide shortfall in supply of this highly specialised role. Policies and guidelines also need to be clearly defined for staff on how to engage Deaf Interpreters alongside spoken language interpreters for appointments. Separate or additional funds need to be considered to cover the costs of Deaf Interpreters and Auslan interpreters for Deaf CALD people trying to access and participate in the community.

Reporting. There needs to be mechanisms for individual interpreters, language service providers and CALD Deaf people to report what is happening on the ground in real time. The Disability Discrimination Act (1992) has not been updated to reflect changes in society and there is a lack of accountability when it comes to who is responsible for enforcing the Act. Implementing legislation and policies provide the standards and expectations but it is important that people who live these experiences every day have the means to report whether the legislation and policies are being enacted as a means of being able to hold authorities accountable. Illustrative of the lack of mechanisms currently available, there is no way to report or collect data on how many times a Deaf person is being denied an interpreter, how many appointments go ahead without the interpreter.

Regulation of the Language Services Industry. As it currently stands, language services procurement is different in every state and there is a lack of transparency around the cost of interpreters (fees charged to clients) and interpreter

pay rates. Moreover, there is a considerable pay rate gap between spoken and sign language interpreters. This, in conjunction with other factors¹⁵, is having an impact upon the sustainability of the workforce. The language service policies currently in place are not well considered and their efficacy, and the entire industry, is not being monitored or regulated, neither the language service providers or interpreters themselves. This gap in the industry, combined with the lack of reporting mechanisms, creates opportunities for vulnerable CALD Deaf people to be exploited. Given the language fluency and literacy skills of CALD Deaf people, usual mechanisms for accessing legal and mental health supports are extraordinarily difficult. Reform in this space is long overdue and ASLIA calls federal government to action in working collaboratively with stakeholders to develop these intra and inter-governmental Language Service reforms. This opportunity can be used to unite the industry, spoken and signed language interpreters alike with one industry award and working conditions that reflect the unique value and skill of their work.

Investing in the Education of Broader Society

Cultural Awareness and Education. Diversity training needs to go beyond the superficial explanation of different cultures and the inclusion of CALD people. Diversity training needs to embed intersectionality, that we are complex people with multiple identities. More than this, it needs to help people understand what that means, what it means to identify as a CALD Deaf person to create empathy and understanding. It should include practical components like how to work with interpreters and interpreting teams that include sign language interpreters.

Cultural diversity and empathy training should be embedded within tertiary education and within professional development standards across every industry. There is an opportunity to define a modern shared Australian identity, to strengthen public understanding of multiculturalism as more than ethnicity or race but as complex humans with multiple identities that we are all able to relate to in one way or another. A multicultural Australia means every industry is multicultural. However, it's not enough that we have training and education, it isn't enough that government leaders and public servants are 'culturally responsive'. Diversity isn't ad hoc, it is a part of us, our society and our everyday, it needs to be reflected in the language we

¹⁵ Aurbach, R. (2023). Report Of Survey Results: Naati-Credentialed Spoken and Sign Language Interpreters. Unpublished

use in legislation, policies and frameworks. It needs to be embedded within our decisions and actions every day.

Note: ASLIA also contributed to and supports the joint submission prepared by Robert Aurbach, with Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators (AUSIT).