



Empowering allyship



Philip Gerrard discusses the increase in numbers entering the profession, and the need to agree on a strategy for the future

Scan the QR code for a BSL video from the ASLI Conference

Over the past 40 years, the interpreting field has evolved to become a profession. To give some context to how far things have come, it was only in 2000 that the keynote presentation at one national conference had the title 'Why we need a register'.

Today, registers of one kind or another are familiar throughout the profession, so progress has been made, and we should celebrate the dedication of groups and individuals that have enabled this to happen. In fact, instead of needing to advocate for one register, we now have the problem of too many registers!

Throughout the evolution of the profession, registration systems and routes to qualification have developed in a very ad hoc manner, based on people's thinking at that particular point in time, rather than on a long-term strategic vision

for the profession. This has led us to a fractured, partisan landscape, so the ASLI Conference theme 'Reframe, Refresh and Reset' was very well timed. Every industry should conduct an oversight review, especially after being in place for 40 years.

More visibility, more numbers



Increased visibility in the media



We particularly need to think about this because BSL is more visible today than ever before.



Combined with the new GCSE in BSL, it's likely that we will see interpreting becoming a much more popular career option – and an option for people who have had no exposure to the deaf community. The GCSE will become a gateway qualification: but after this, the information is often conflicting and unclear. There's no definitive pathway as in other professions like medicine or social work – and, since registration is voluntary (and varied), there's also no ultimate end goal for professional interpreters.

We need to prepare now for this potential growth in the number of professionals and seize upon this opportunity for growth. And a registration system will be key to this preparation as it would give organisations booking interpreters reassurance on quality standards; people from the deaf community the confidence to know they are safe; and interpreters the assurance of systems behind them supporting them to do their job well and with credibility. Even without the anticipated higher demand, change is needed. The increased visibility has just expediated this.

Terminology deciphered

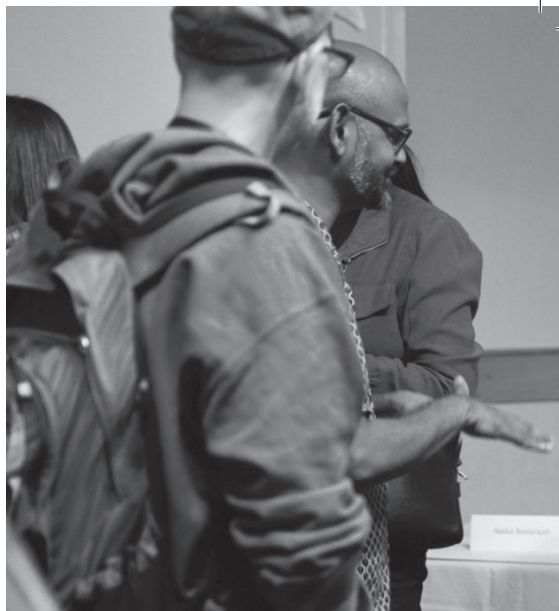
The language and terminology shrouds people in mist. Regulator; regulatory body; register; self-regulation; statutory or mandatory regulation; independent regulator – are the people who are directly affected by these terms clear on what these mean? If they are not, they cannot navigate the system safely. For clarity here:



A regulatory body oversees the work of practicing professionals, making industries safer.

A self-regulatory body is a regulatory body that is not independent, managed by working professionals.

Statutory regulation refers to professions that must be registered with a professional regulatory body by law.



▲ Interpreters **register** with an organisation that compiles a list of interpreters. This may or may not be a regulatory body.

▲ Interpreters are **regulated** when they are monitored by a **regulatory body** to make sure they are safe to practise as interpreters. This **regulatory body** directs that interpreters follow a code of conduct, have police checks, have appropriate insurance for professional practice, and undertake regular training to keep their skills and knowledge up to date.

▲ A **self-regulatory body** is a regulatory body that is run and administered by those practising in the profession.

▲ **Statutory/ mandatory regulation** refers to professions that must be registered with a professional regulatory body by law.

▲ Currently, the registration bodies within the profession are the National Register of Communication Professionals working with Deaf and Deafblind People (NRCPPD); the Regulatory Body of Sign Language Interpreters (RBSLI); and the Scottish Register (SRLPDC). The membership bodies are the Association of Sign Language Interpreters (ASLI); the Scottish Collaborative of Sign Language Interpreters (SCOSLI); and Visual Language Professionals (VLP). The union is the National Union of British Sign Language



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having all these bodies there is a void where an overarching organisation should sit and be asking the strategic questions like 'How many interpreters are leaving the profession and why?', 'How many interpreters do we need to recruit to the profession to meet demand?' and 'How can this demand be met with the current mapped training systems?'

One voice and one strategy

We need one voice, to show strong leadership for the movement forwards. The only independent regulator is the NRCPD, which has said publicly that its long-term aim is mandatory registration. The other bodies are all self-regulatory. However, this has not been discussed with a collective of representatives, as the registration bodies work in silos; therefore, we do not know if all the stakeholders want mandatory registration, and we cannot say this is the profession's long-term goal.

We also don't know if mandatory registration is a reality. If it is a pipe dream, we may have to work towards a single recognised registration system. This at least would give one voice; one route to qualification; and clarity to the public, including the deaf community, that this is the only acceptable register. It would give strong leadership – and would also prepare the profession for the possibility of mandatory registration in the long term.

Interpreters (NUBSLI). Interpreters can register with all three registration bodies, or with none of them. In addition, we have a variety of routes to becoming an interpreter, and people will have personal opinions on which route produces good interpreters.

Unfortunately, this is all perplexing for the end users of the service. A review of the interpreting landscape in Scotland was commissioned by the Scottish Government and undertaken by Queen Margaret University. The final report was published in 2019 and makes several references to this confusion, saying: 'Concerns around standards and professionalism come from both inside and outside the interpreting profession, with a desire for greater consistency between different routes to registration. There is also a need for transparency and impartiality over registration processes and for registration bodies to implement robust policies and procedures to which the BSL community has access.(p110);' adding that: 'There are ways to mitigate the confusion extant with NRCPD and SASLI/SRLPDC at present' (p114). However, it has been five years since this was written and the issue is still not being properly discussed.

There appears to be a situation where there are too many cooks, but no head chef, as despite



In order to develop the profession over the next 20 years, we need to agree on a common



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strategy, rather than the sailing with the wind approach of the past. A do-nothing approach is not an option. We need to hold a proper discussion about the future. Key players from the interpreting and deaf communities need to sit around the table, providing oversight and being a strong decision-making body for the path ahead.

Beyond allegiances to becoming allies

This would mean putting current allegiances aside and becoming allies to create a safe space, acknowledging the differences of opinion that will occur while allowing all views to be respected. Strategic thinking and altruistic decision making are imperative. The decisions that are taken must put the deaf community at the heart, but, equally, interpreters have to be at the centre of this too. We want a profession of interpreters that are happy in their career and supported in their progression.

This idea was also presented as part of the EdSign lecture series (*Are the current registration arrangements for the registration of BSL/English interpreters working?* February 2023) as well as at the ASLI Conference. These presentations are intended to catalyse discussions about what appears to be the elephant in the room. Interpreters need to feel confident to have open exchanges of ideas about the bigger picture of

the profession, and to not feel constrained or judged by wherever they have chosen to register, or whichever organisations they have joined. On an individual level, having these discussions increases awareness with colleagues and forms a narrative of what direction the profession wants to move in, allowing the possibility of a single national registration system to be explored with an open mind rather than an allegiance to what has gone before.



Start the conversations;
Reset, refresh, reframe

Will you, as an individual, have that conversation with your colleagues and the groups you are affiliated to in support of reframing how we view the interpreting infrastructure and thereby become an ally to the future of the interpreting profession?

REFERENCE

<https://deafaction.org/ceo-blog/revisiting-the-interpreting-landscape-in-scotland/>