

Overview Report

A questionnaire compiled by Charlotte Addison, BSL Officer from Deaf Action, was sent out in June 2020 to BSL using students in Scotland with the purpose of finding out what their experiences have been like at college and university. From these findings, Charlotte compiled a report with recommendations which will:

- Go to the Scottish Government to be included in their BSL National Plan progress report next year
- Go to all FE/HE institutions in Scotland to help them review their BSL Plan implementations

To capture responses from a diverse group, we offered a choice of questionnaire formats:

- Direct text messaging
- Facebook Polls
- Comments from the Student Hub Facebook Group
- One to one online interview (in English and BSL)

The demographic of students providing feedback to the Scottish Government was:

- Aged between 16 – 30
- Students currently attending college or university
- Prospective students joining college or university in August 2020
- Future students – those interested in joining college / university when they will leave school

Do FE/HE institutions support BSL students with accessing coronavirus information?

This question was texted to BSL using students who are members of the private Facebook group “BSL Information Hub for Students”. 12 students responded.

- Four students said that they did not receive any information or support from their college/university
- Three students said that their college/university provided an online interpreter so that
 - They could be kept updated with what was currently happening and what to expect soon
 - Two students said having that was fantastic, but they had issues video calling due to a poor Wi-Fi connection. This impacted the student’s opportunities to communicate / work online and caused mistakes or miscommunications.
 - The lecturer could explain what was happening with future lectures
- Five students received emails in written English from their college/university. The students had differing opinions on this, for example:

- One student felt that the English text was very long and contained a lot of information. It would have been beneficial if it had been provided in BSL.
- Another student felt that the information provided was not sufficient to give them a full understanding and none of it was in BSL.
- A third student commented that every time their university released new information, they translated it into BSL and send it to the students.

Two very positive examples of good practice were submitted by students attending two different colleges/universities:

- These colleges/universities enabled full access by providing a BSL interpreter and notetaker online under all circumstances.
- The students were given structured time to learn online to replace the typical classroom face to face setting.

The feedback frequently suggested a lack of support for BSL using students during this time. The disruption caused by colleges and universities focusing on the transition to online teaching particularly impacted BSL using students as their needs were often side-lined.

The BSL using students stated that the BSL (Scotland) Act seemed to be a low priority and some students were not receiving even basic information in BSL.

We encourage all colleges and universities to set up a network to support each other and create 'best practice' guidelines based on the processes at colleges/universities with exemplary BSL access.

Do you know who your College/University BSL Lead Officer is?

This question was posted via Facebook Poll on the private Facebook group "BSL Information Hub for Students".

Students were given the choice of three answers – 'yes, I know who the BSL Lead Officer is', 'no, I do not know', or 'I am unsure'.

- Total of ten replies
- Six students replied no, they do not know
- Four students replied unsure

Communication Access from your College/University:

a. What is your preferred method of communication for information provided from your college/university?

Students had three answer options: BSL and English, English only, or BSL only.

- Total of nine replies
- Eight students prefer to have information provided in both BSL and English

- One student prefers English as their method of communication

b. Should your college/university provide BSL access for all information, or should they only do this for information that is relevant to you?

Students had two answer options: the college/university should provide full information no matter what, or alternatively, the college/university should only provide information that is relevant for me

- Total of three replies
- All three students stated that they should be provided with BSL access for full information

c. Are you confident enough to ask your college/university to provide their information in BSL for you?

Students have three options: yes, no, or unsure.

- Total of two replies
- One student replied yes
- One student replied unsure

Have students received information about what is happening with their assessments due to coronavirus?

A discussion took place on the 'BSL Information Hub for Students' Facebook group, providing an opportunity to talk about what had happened with their assessments. The discussion also provided an opportunity for other students who, as noted in question one, felt they did not receive information relating to Covid-19 and the impact it would have on their studies and assessment.

- Four students participated in the discussion about their assessments:

It was a good discussion with a lot of contribution from the students. Some examples of the comments given:

- 1. Finished all my assessments
- 2. Our graded unit is cancelled as it's a contact-based assessment, so we are getting estimated grades instead
- 3. We had a face to face role play exam which was cancelled and changed to a video submission which I was happy about - not having to answer on spot questions

Interviews with BSL students

There was a total of eight participants

- Four students elected to do the interview online and through BSL
- Four students preferred to receive questions in English and answer in English in their own time

How has your college/university work been going?

- Eight students stated that they have had great support from their college/university
- One student stated: *"I started university straight from school, contacted the disability service and said I was deaf, and they arranged interpreters and notetakers, I didn't have to arrange that myself, I was provided with the service. It went really smoothly."*
- Another student stated: *"One of the disability service staff had level 1 BSL. They would always book an interpreter, but it meant if something came up, I could pop in and manage to communicate with them directly."*
- A third student stated: *"It took me about 6 weeks to settle down, I was really uncertain at the start of lockdown, having to use Zoom, but I got used to it."*

Do you feel that your college/university has supported you during your studies?

- One student stated:
"Half and half. They have provided me with support but through freelance interpreters and this means I was getting different interpreters each week which meant I had to use my time to explain to the interpreters or they would stop class time to have the lecturer explain them."
- The other seven students said yes:
- one stated: *"if I do not understand something, I will ask the lecturer (through an interpreter) and the lecturer will explain it, so I can get on with it."*

Have you been involved in any engagement with your college/university's BSL plan?

- Two of the students have been involved with the filming of their college's BSL plan which went on their website
- The other six students have not been involved with the BSL plan for their college/university
- One student said that he was not asked to participate, he thinks his university just duplicated another university's plan, so there was not any visible discussion about it

Are you motivated to engage with your BSL Plan?

- Five students stated that they were motivated to engage with their college/university BSL plan

- Colleges/universities need to have group meetings with the Deaf students where it can be discussed.

- Two students feel unsure

- One of whom stated: *"I am 50/50. I feel like in my last year of study, I want to focus on that. I don't want any distractions, and because I don't like feeling under pressure."*

- One student responded that they were not really motivated to be engaged in their college's BSL Plan

Establishments with a cohort of BSL students appeared to have achieved a good level of input into the BSL plan and the plan reflected the views of a diverse group. In contrast, one student felt his university's BSL plan was too individual because he was the only BSL student in that university. This student was concerned that this could impact on future BSL students who had different requirements from him and highlighted the importance of having a peer group within college/ university to input into the BSL plan.

Some students feel that they lack the confidence to ask to be involved in the BSL plan or to ask for information in BSL, potentially these students have become accustomed to the college organising and directing the support. A more beneficial approach would be a two-way relationship where students feel more assertive and able to share their knowledge with the establishment for the benefit of all.

Do you think that being directly engaged with your BSL Plan is useful? Good/Bad?

- A lot of students stated that they found being engaged with the BSL plan very useful

- One student stated: *"I think it's useful because I can look at it and know what to expect, what they have to provide, like interpreters, and access."*

- Two students were apathetic towards the BSL plan and preferred not to be involved

Feedback from other students mentioned the importance of having the right person involved in the plan management and development. Realistically, it is difficult to find a person with cultural BSL knowledge to fulfil that role so colleges/universities should listen to student experience to improve the plans for all BSL students.

Do you think your college/university BSL plan will make a positive difference to you?

- Eight students responded yes, it will make a positive difference for them. For example:

- it will make post school education more accessible

- They felt they will be fully supported and that they will get the same opportunities as everyone else
- One student stated that they felt there was a difference in attitudes between the university they currently attend and the new university they are moving to. They felt that new university was more positive, supportive, and made sure that they had access to interpreters. Comparatively, their current university did not ask them what they needed for full access.

It appears that colleges and universities with a larger number of BSL students, and where these students have peers, are more likely to more understand how to support and provide for the student's need. Students from these colleges/universities are more likely to have the confidence to ask for interpreter provision and would feel confident to request a change in interpreter if it was required. It is encouraging that students felt aware of their rights to full and equal access within the college/university setting.

What gaps do you think your college/university BSL plan has if there are any?

- Five students felt that there were a few gaps in their college/university's BSL plans:
 - One student stated: *"I think it needs to be more known if they have a plan, maybe by contacting deaf students individually via email to say "we have this plan in place"*
 - One suggested having interpreters with a skilled focus on a specific subject
 - Another wanted to see BSL encouraged/promoted around campus
 - One student suggested that it *"Would be good if a free course in BSL could be offered to my classmates who might want to learn, that would encourage them to sign with me, it would be nice to have that."*

Is it easy to find out who is responsible for managing your college/university's BSL plan?

The interviews seemed to show that most of students do not know who is responsible for the BSL plan management within their college/university. Other students are unsure who the named individual is but have been able to guess via emails and support. Some students are confident that they would be able to find out who their responsible person is if they ask their disability service.

It has been shown that not all students know who the BSL Lead Officer is within their education establishment. Ideally, students and BSL Lead Officers would work together. Students may need to accept responsibility for finding out who is responsible for the BSL plan within their institution.

Recommendation: Colleges/universities should promote good working relationships with their students as it is very important.

What good experiences do you have from your college/university?

8 students reported having similar good experiences, for example, having interpreters when they've needed to talk with lecturers and college staff, which provides ease of communication.

One student stated: *"I've been able to plan my study, book interpreters, and be able to take responsibility for that, so that's been good. It wasn't until my 4th year that I realised I could book interpreters for University work that was outside of classroom time. Before then I was nervous to ask because I was concerned about budgets, but when I did ask, they said of course! And booked the interpreter."*

What bad experiences do you have from your college/university?

● Two students reported having a bad experience when communicating with college/university staff. The three main issues were:

- Lack of deaf awareness
- Not being prepared for having deaf students
- Poor communication between disability services and lecturers

● Five students reported having bad experiences with an interpreter. The main issues raised were:

- Unskilled interpreters in specific subjects: *"Kinda slow to catch up with the lecturers and fingerspelling words they don't know how to sign."*
- Having no interpreter. *"That was a struggle and I have to catch up with the lecturer next time on what I missed"*
- *"Different interpreters were interpreting my course, I could see it was too high a level for them, and they struggled with it, especially the technical jargon."*
- *"The interpreters were only signing brief information instead of relaying everything the lecturer was saying."*

Recommendations:

1. Promote opportunities to empower BSL using students so that they are aware of their rights with respect to the BSL plan and having full interpreting access. Students should be aware that they can request preferred interpreters. Students need to be aware of their right to access interpreting services, and the booking process should be made clear.
2. Deaf and hearing awareness should be promoted within colleges/universities.

Do you find the BSL (Scotland) Act website useful?

- Three students stated that yes, they find the BSL Scotland Act website useful
- One student stated that he has seen some of the website and that he thinks it is good. However, he had not looked at the information sections, just pictures and video clips

Do you find the BSL (Scotland) Act Facebook page useful?

A lot of the students stated that they found the BSL (Scotland) Act Facebook page to be very useful.

- One student stated: *"When Coronavirus happened months ago, I wanted to know what was happening, and the videos on the Facebook page were useful, I learned from them."*

Do you find the BSL Students Information Hub Facebook Group useful?

- Six students responded that they find BSL Student Information Hub Facebook Group to be useful
- Two students responded that they do not use Facebook much and have not seen this group
- One student commented that it was a *"good opportunity to contact deaf students to find out about their college/university experiences, especially with sharing bad experiences, and the dialogue has been positive."*
- Another student commented: *"It has taught me a lot of things I did not know about."*

Recommendation: Build a community of BSL students to encourage sharing of support and advice between BSL peers

Is there any other support or resources you would like to have?

A few students suggested ways to improve support and new resources, including:

- *"I feel like when I study there needs to be more security around deaf people as I personally am worried I won't get the support I need and miss out on lots, I also have the fear of being bullied from being deaf so I think tougher action needs to be in place if that was to happen."*
- *"I think all the audio videos should have English subtitles, but if there's BSL then extra subtitles can be distracting. If there's no subtitles, there should be an interpreter on screen."*

Recommendations:

1. BSL using students starting college/university would benefit from a BSL-friendly resource giving advice on what to expect when starting their course (including information on the application process, open days, funding and interpreter access)
2. Promote the support services to new Deaf students. Meeting with them will ensure the students are confident that the right support will be in place before their course starts