SUBJECT: INTERPRETING CONFERENCE “SUPPORTING DEAF PEOPLE – AN INTERNATIONAL ONLINE CONFERENCE FOR INTERPRETING PROFESSIONALS.

THEMES: TRAINING, ETHICS AND PROFESSIONALISM AND EDUCATIONAL INTERPRETING.

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TITLE OF PAPER:

“NEVER MIND THE QUALITY/WIDTH, FEEL THE WIDTH / QUALITY!”

- The development of a training, qualifications and registration system for BSL / English Interpreters.

1. BACKGROUND
It is universally agreed that there is a shortage of BSL/English Interpreters and current estimates are that it would require a ten-fold increase in order to bring the number of interpreters in the UK up to the standard of countries such as Finland. Without a Government-led initiative to address this shortage within a long-term UK-wide plan, the situation is unlikely to significantly improve. The absence of official recognition of BSL means that there is no statutory basis for the training, qualification and registration of interpreters. The promotion of access for Deaf people to employment, education, training and a wide range of goods and services through disability and other legislation, will dramatically increase the demand for interpreters yet there are no equivalent measures to increase the supply of interpreters to meet this demand.

The shortage of interpreters produces a tension between pressures to improve the quality of interpreting whilst also aiming to increase the quantity or numbers of interpreters. At the same time, the profession of BSL/English interpreters is relatively new. Since interpreters are a scarce resource, it is possible for someone without the necessary knowledge and skills to make a good living as a so-called interpreter, without in fact having been trained or being registered with a regulatory body. This situation is compounded by the lack of awareness of users, (Deaf consumers and hearing service users) as to their expectations of a quality service. At the same time, a number of interpreters are leaving the field or moving into positions where they are unable to continue to provide a direct interpreting service such as in management or training.

It is within this context that CACDP, the Council for the Advancement of Communication with Deaf People, operates, as both an awarding body for qualifications in communication skills used with and by deaf people, and as a registration body for a number of professionals who provide communication services.

2. THE ROLE OF CACDP IN RELATION TO BSL/ENGLISH INTERPRETERS
CACDP is primarily an awarding or examinations body and currently offers qualifications in BSL which are either general (i.e. examinations aimed at those learning BSL as a ‘foreign’ language for leisure or interest reasons) or linked to
employment (i.e. National Vocational Qualifications). In the past, CACDP also offered an examination for interpreters wishing to qualify. This is being replaced by a National Vocational Qualification in interpreting. CACDP currently holds and administers the national register of BSL/English interpreters for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. As an awarding body, CACDP is subject to the requirements of the regulatory bodies concerned with curriculum and assessment, which for England is the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA).

CACDP is an umbrella organisation with members drawn from other organisations in the deaf field as well as individuals wishing to promote communication between deaf people (in the widest sense) and hearing people. Within the organisation there are staff employed to carry out the policies of the Council, including those which apply to interpreting. CACDP has a BSL/English Interpreting Qualifications Committee and has recently established an independent Registration Panel (see 4. below). In 1998-9 an extensive consultation exercise took place under the auspices of the Committee and this resulted in a new Registration Policy, approved by the CACDP Board of Trustees which is to be implemented in 2002.

In recent years, a structure of training and qualifications has developed and the relationship between this and registration is currently being clarified through the work of CACDP in conjunction with the Consortium of Interpreter Training providers, a group made up of the leading providers of interpreter training in the UK and the newly formed Registration Panel.

3. TRAINING AND QUALIFICATIONS IN RELATION TO REGISTRATION
Until the introduction of the new Registration Policy for BSL/English Interpreters in 2002, CACDP is still operating a registration policy which originated in 1992. However the registration system is in transition and a number of activities are taking place to support the introduction of the new policy. The most important of these is the mapping exercise.

Inherent in registration is the recognition or approval by CACDP of a number of interpreter training courses or programmes. The basis of CACDP’s recognition of programmes under the new policy is a mapping exercise conducted between March 2000 and July 2001. The mapping exercise was agreed between CACDP and the Consortium of Interpreter Training Providers as part of the process whereby recognition is given to the contribution which the courses and their associated qualifications make to the overall training and qualifications structure in interpreting. The mapping is also part of process whereby the development of a variety of routes to registration is being encouraged. Since there are both academic and practical components to interpreter training, this will give choice to those wishing to become interpreters, as to the whether they undertake their training on a full or part time basis, as school-leavers or mature students, and through a university or work-based route.

The mapping exercise looked at course outcomes (knowledge and skills) in relation to national interpreting (registration) standards, which express the minimum standard of competence, and professional practice expected of an interpreter. This standard is currently required of a ‘Qualified Interpreter’ but under the terms of the new policy, such status will be defined as a ‘Member of the Register of BSL/English Interpreters’. Membership of the Register is envisaged as being the professional qualification in interpreting as distinct from the qualifications such as recognised interpreting degrees, diplomas and certificates which may or may not get an interpreter to the required standard.
CACDP only looked at the courses or programmes about which information was provided by the training providers. From the mapping exercise undertaken so far, there are also two University qualifications which enable interpreters to achieve the standard required for Membership of the Register. Other qualifications in interpreting enable those undertaking training to progress between points on the registration structure. Some start from the perspective of someone already having achieved the required standard in BSL and then needing to train in interpreting. Others develop both language and interpreting skills and knowledge in parallel, within the course. Once courses or programmes have been recognised or approved by CACDP, the Registration Panel (see 4. below) will require a regular review and validation process to be undertaken with some kind of involvement in the Examination Boards or equivalent.

The national interpreting (registration) standards are based on the National Occupational Standards in Interpreting and Translation at Level 4 (the level of the national qualifications framework which refers to qualifications at degree level or equivalent) produced by the standards setting body – the Languages National Training Organisation (LNTO) and approved by the QCA. The National Occupational Standards in Interpreting and Translation (NOS) also underpin the National Vocational Qualification in BSL/English Interpreting, one of the routes to Membership of the Register. The national interpreting (registration) standards are currently in draft form but will be approved by the Registration Panel in time for the introduction of the new Registration Policy. There are also National Language Standards which apply to British Sign Language and English. The standard of BSL expected of a Member of the Register is a minimum of Level 4. The required standard of English is defined as Level 5 but the qualifications or assessments in English expected of interpreters which reflect this, have yet to be agreed. The fact that the National Occupational Standards are related to both the standards of registration and the standards of the NVQ, gives CACDP’s work in this area a position which is recognised by for example, the Lord Chancellors’ Department. From the end of 2001, under the terms of the National Agreement, only Members of the Register are to be used for legal interpreting.

As part of the development of NVQs in interpreting, there will be assessment centres established which will have a vital role in providing not only the actual NVQ assessments but also assessments and guidance leading to this. Some may also provide training opportunities. Assessment centres are approved by CACDP under the QCA-specified Quality Assurance system. It is anticipated that these centres will also play a part in any assessments needed to maintain one’s registration.

Through CACDP’s mapping exercise, the national picture of interpreter training is becoming clearer. The full picture will eventually be made up of complete courses, free-standing modules and modules from other related courses such as Deaf Studies degrees. Information will then be available for students of interpreting as to what is available, for whom, where, with what entry requirements and what outcomes. There should be a clear progression through from the minimum requirements through to Membership of the Register. ‘The map’ will initially show the existing situation and where the gaps are. Armed with information as to what is needed to fill the gaps, one will then be able to argue for additional funding to develop existing courses, establish new courses and support students.
4. THE REGISTRATION OF BSL/ENGLISH INTERPRETERS.
CACDP is an awarding body and a registering body. There are thus potential conflicts of interest which are being addressed through for example, internal reorganisation. CACDP also recognises assessments and qualifications which it does not award itself but where these are shown to meet the required standard. There are a number of references in the new Registration Policy to certain entry criteria as “the CACDP (name of qualification) or equivalent” where the equivalent qualification has been or will be mapped in relation to same standards are those underpinning the CACDP assessment. This work is being supported by the development of a new national qualifications framework and national standards.

This paper has already referred to Membership of Register being the professional qualification in interpreting and the range of ways in which this will be achieved. What happens prior to this? In the past (and until 2002) there have been both a register of Qualified Interpreters and a register of Trainee Interpreters (RTIs). The Trainee Interpreter category covers people with a wide range of skills and experience. There are some RTIs who have the CACDP BSL Stage 3 qualification and who are starting interpreter training (which currently ranges from 2 weeks to 3 years duration) and others, also with the CACDP BSL Stage 3 qualification but who have been working in the field for a number of years. The new Registration Policy has sought to address this by establishing two new categories prior to Membership of the Register and by distinguishing between students of interpreting and those who have acquired the knowledge and are now practitioners working towards the standards required to become a Member of the Register. Each category has entry criteria (e.g. what is needed by way of training and qualifications which are related to the standards), registration requirements, restrictions and benefits. One issue still to be addressed is the relationship between the NVQ and the registration categories. The NVQ assessment does not stipulate training. One can achieve the required standard without having been on a particular course of study. The stage in the NVQ route at which an interpreter will be eligible to join one of the new categories, is yet to be decided by the Registration Panel.

Integral to registration are codes of ethics / practice and disciplinary procedures, requirements to maintain one’s registration (e.g. through continuous professional development), the enforcing of restrictions on practice where these apply and the need for supervision / monitoring to take place. The details of these aspects of regulation are to be agreed by the Registration Panel. An important development within interpreter registration was the establishment in March 2001 of an independent Registration Panel which has an ‘arm’s length’ relationship with CACDP. The Panel is made up of individuals and representatives in a number of categories – Deaf consumers, interpreters, agencies and other employers, professional associations, training providers and assessors. In future the Panel will ratify decisions as to who can be admitted to the Register, how one stays on the Register, who is to be removed from the Register etc. The Panel will validate the recognised courses or programmes, be involved in the complaints and disciplinary procedure and ensure that the processes associated with registration are in place. In the first instance it will be involved in agreeing the processes and systems on which its later decisions will be based. Administrative support for these processes and systems will be provided by CACDP.

Another role of the Panel will be to promote the Registration Policy and registration as a whole. They will communicate the importance of registration in terms of the professional status of interpreters, quality assurance for the users, the regulation of professional standards, an understood level of competence and professionalism and so on. However, the Registration Policy can only work in practice if it has the support of all stakeholders and if all parties sign up to it.
Clearly in the situation of a chronic shortage of interpreters, it is difficult to enforce this but progress being made such as in the legal area.

5. ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION
There were, and are still strong arguments for introducing the new Registration Policy but there are a number of factors already undermining this significant development. The new policy is emphatic about the need for a single national register in such a small field where there is enough confusion and duplication already without adding to this by the proliferation of registration systems. Yet at the time of writing this paper, the Association of Sign Language Interpreters (ASLI) is developing its own licensing system and talks about having its own register and regulating the profession. The history to this development is well-known and whilst one cannot put back the clock, any moves which bring together CACDP, ASLI and others in establishing one register with the best possible systems for progression and regulation, are likely to be well-received by the majority.

With one national register (for England, Wales and Northern Ireland) supported by all parties, it should be possible increasingly to enforce registration. But this will need the support of interpreters, employers, Deaf consumers and service users. Partnerships are important, between users and providers, between trainers and assessors, between employees and employers and so on.

It is widely known that there is a shortage of accessible training opportunities for those wishing to become interpreters. The Government would appear to be holding great store by the establishment of the new Learning Skills Councils to provide learning opportunities in centres and in the workplace, in order to attack skills shortages in a number of areas. Whether this will happen on a co-ordinated national basis and in relation to interpreters is yet to be seen. However there would appear to be a context within which training and development opportunities for interpreters could expand, provided this is approached on a national and not just local, basis.

The pace of developments within the areas of training and registration at present is so fast that information is quickly out of date. It is not easy to ensure that all who need to be are informed. The field is rife with rumour and suspicion. There are some deep-seated attitudes, structures and practices to be challenged. This is a period of rapid change but structures and attitudes are slow to shift. The new Registration Policy and associated developments will make little difference without a number of other changes: the development of true professionalism in interpreters; individual and collective responsibility; a commitment to the common goal of improved services for Deaf people; a change from the blame culture where CACDP has often been treated as the scapegoat to one where each person or organisation has a part to play but the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. These changes will not be easy to achieve but until these issues are addressed, the current situation will not improve and we will be asked to choose between quality and quantity as the title of this paper suggests. We do have an opportunity to work together to the benefit of all. If we do not respond to this challenge, the outcome is clear - Deaf people will be the losers.

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