

‘There is still a lot of work to be done’

The authors of the 2021 Census of SLTIs in the UK present a demographic snapshot of the profession and point to overcoming challenges in achieving a truly representative profession

Due to a lack of general information about how the sign language translation and interpreting (SLTI) profession is structured in the UK, and concerns about the lack of diversity and equality of opportunities in the profession, ASLI commissioned a census survey study in October 2020.

We constitute the cross-institutional research team, led by Heriot-Watt University and established to ensure that a diverse research team from different backgrounds was involved in the delivery of this project. We also set up an advisory group so that we could consult with representatives from key stakeholders across the sector, including other SLTI professional membership or registration organisations, deaf community organisations, sign language teachers, interpreters of colour and deaf sign language interpreters/translators.

The goal of the census survey was to establish a baseline profile of sign language interpreters and translators who are training

and/or working in the UK. As such, the Census sought a snapshot of the demographic profile of SLTI practitioners in the UK in order to inform the planning and forecasting of the workforce, to inform education and training needs and to identify gaps in community representation.

We developed a census-style questionnaire in consultation with the advisory group and with reference to relevant literature and other censuses. The survey was administered online using the Qualtrics survey tool, and the call for respondents was circulated through the advisory group memberships, through social media and the research team networks. In total, complete survey responses were received from 690 practitioners from across the UK (43% of the potential sample).

We analysed the survey responses using SPSS statistical software specifically to look at the relationships between female versus male respondents; ethnic minorities¹ versus White British respondents; respondents who identified

‘Rather than BAME or BME, the term ‘ethnic minorities’ is used throughout this report to capture the characteristics of translators and interpreters, as per UK Government Race Disparity Unit convention: <https://civilservice.blog.gov.uk/2019/07/08/please-dont-call-me-bame-or-bme/>

as LGBTQIA+ versus ‘Straight’ with respect to the following: part-time versus full-time work, caring responsibilities, high-status work (ie, conference and TV in-vision work) and route to qualification (higher education versus vocational).

In this article we provide a brief overview of the findings, a discussion of the profile of the SLTI profession in the UK based on the findings and a summary of the recommendations for actions for key stakeholder organisations.

Summary of findings

The survey resulted in 822 responses, of which 690 (83.94%) were completed in full, so our analysis focuses only on completed responses. With respect to the demographic profile of SLTIs, the majority of respondents are hearing (92.5%), with only 3.62% identifying as being deaf or hard-of-hearing. Another 3% choose to self-describe and focus on their status as sign language users, so it is difficult to ascertain whether they are hearing or deaf.

A total of 99% of respondents live in the UK and Northern Ireland. Greater London (18.4%) followed by the South East (11.88%) and Scotland (11.88%) are the regions with the most interpreters and translators. Birmingham, followed by Bristol and Edinburgh, are the most populated single-postcode regions, most likely because they are close to current or former university interpreter education programmes. From this census data, it appears that sign language translators and interpreters are less diverse than the UK populace as the majority

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of SLTIs were born in England and 93.75% of respondents were born in the UK. Office of National Statistics reveal that the figure for the UK populace is 86% (ONS, 2011).

The mean age of SLTIs is 44 (the youngest respondent was 18 and the oldest was 76) and the profession overall is 82.02% female, 16.81% male, 0.43% non-binary/genderqueer and 0.28% transgender. A total of 679 out of 690 respondents identify with the sex they were registered with at birth. When looking only at deaf practitioners, however, the gender balance is 60% female and 40% male.

With regard to ethnicity, 89.56% of respondents identify as white, and 8.84% identify as within the Black or minority ethnic category. Within this category, the largest single ethnic group is from Black Caribbean heritage (*n*=16 respondents) followed by Black African/Caribbean (*n*=14 respondents) and Southeast Asian (*n*=10 respondents). The comparable figure from the UK Census in 2011 is that 86% of the UK population are white, while Asian ethnic groups (7.5%) make up the second largest group, followed by Black ethnic groups (3.3%). Again, the SLTI profession does not reflect the diversity in the populace (although there are more interpreters identifying as Black than Asian). With respect to sexuality, 80.14% identify as heterosexual/straight – a lower figure than the comparable census data that indicates that 94.6% of the populace identify as straight –

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confirming that there is a much higher proportion of LGBTQIA+ people within the SLTI profession at 14.49% of the profession (as opposed to 2.2% of the UK population).

A total of 477 (69%) respondents indicate that they do not have any disability or mental health conditions. Of the remaining 18.11%, 7.24% report a mental health condition and 5.07% report a stamina issue or breathing fatigue. A total of 1.73% reveal that they have a social or behavioural condition (associated with autism, attention deficit disorder or Asperger’s syndrome).

Fifty-six percent of respondents declare that they are parents, with 26.6% having one or more children under the age of 12. A total of 51.12% identify as having no religion and Christians make up a total of 38.11%, followed by Buddhist (1.2%), Jewish (1.15%), Muslim (0.43%) and Hindu (0.28%) respondents.

Signing backgrounds and registration

In relation to the language and cultural backgrounds of SLTIs, a total of 30.9% have a signing background, including 19.8% who reported at least one deaf parent. With regard to deaf practitioners, the majority come from a signing background and only 32% of deaf practitioners have no deaf signing background. The majority (84.2%) of deaf practitioners identified English as their preferred language and 64% considered both English and BSL their preferred language. The other ‘preferred language’ includes three signed languages (Irish Sign Language (ISL), Swedish Sign Language

(STS) and Australian Sign Language (Auslan)) for deaf SLTIs and five spoken languages (French, German, ‘Nigerian’ (the specific language from Nigeria was not made clear), Spanish and Welsh) for hearing SLTIs. A total of 87.82% of all survey respondents do not know another signed language, but one third of the deaf practitioners’ subgroup know another signed language.

With respect to registrations, 90.4% are registered with NRCPD, followed by 3.91% with RBSLI and 3.62% with SRLPDC (in Scotland). Questions focusing on professional membership reveal that 66% are members of ASLI, 22.1% are members of VLP, and 3.62% are members of SCOSLI. 39.2% also state they are members of NUBSLI.

Working patterns and routes to qualification

A total of 44.63% of respondents are full-time self-employed or freelance translator/interpreters without employees and 39.97% of respondents are part-time self-employed or freelance translator/interpreters without employees; a quarter of those have another employed position and are employed part-time (11.15%) or full-time 10.57%. The majority of those undertaking part-time study are also working. Twenty deaf SLTIs work in a self-employed capacity, but only ten do so full-time. Only three deaf practitioners work in an employed (in-house) full-time position.

In relation to training and qualifications, the data indicates that 57.9% have a vocational diploma and 42.9% have university qualifications.

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A fifth of respondents (19.27%) are enrolled on a training programme, 57.9% of these are on a vocational programme and the rest are on an academic training programme. The NVQ route is the most popular pathway to qualification, at 36.9%, followed by the UCLan and SLI/UCLan pathways, which together total 25.6%. For deaf practitioners, the vocational pathway is the most common at 64%, and 16% of deaf practitioners completed an academic course.

Half of all practitioner respondents have a qualification in a field other than translation or interpreting, covering a wide range of disciplines spanning business management, the sciences, performing arts, education, health and social care, liberal arts and humanities, law and other spoken languages.

When examining work patterns, interpreting between English and BSL is the most common pattern for 63.57% of respondents, followed by translation between English and BSL (14.26%), and from one signed language to another (0.59%). Fifty-two per cent of respondents have no experience of working with a deaf practitioner. Most of the deaf practitioners (48%) prefer to work with a human generated text (eg, STTR or re-speaker), a quarter (24%) prefer working with a hearing interpreter and most deaf practitioners do not have Access to Work (AtW) funding.

Domains and high-status work

The work done by practitioners as a whole is predominantly in AtW settings (33.88%), followed by medical appointments (20.6%),

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education – both further and higher – (11.59%), remote interpreting (10.97%), small ad-hoc meetings (7.83%), mental health appointments (7.65%), children’s education (5.55%), theatre (3.39%) and then training events, conferences/seminars, legal (2.04%) and religious events. In-vision TV work and legal domains (particularly court followed by policing) are the least desirable domains to work in. Other unpopular domains include political and musical events.

Male respondents are more willing to take on high-status work than female respondents, but there are no differences between ethnic minorities and white or LGBTQIA+ and straight respondents.

In sum, the census data reveals that, on average, the typical profile of a SLTI practitioner in the UK is a hearing, straight, white, British woman, aged 44, non-religious, with caring responsibilities, self-employed, from England, working predominantly as an interpreter (more so than as a translator), qualified either through the academic or vocational training system (or combined), registered with NRCPD and a member of ASLI. There has been a positive shift over the last 20 years since the last wide-ranging survey of the SLTI profession (Brien, Brown & Collins, 2002), in that there are increased numbers of practitioners who are deaf or from ethnic minorities, and a higher self-disclosure of LGBTQIA+ and disabled or neurodivergent statuses among SLTI practitioners, but there has been a consistent proportion of female:male practitioners. SLTIs are geographically spread and concentrated in Birmingham, Bristol, Edinburgh and London, but

the shift to more remote working online does not restrict SLTIs to working locally.

Recommendations

In our report we made an extensive list of 20 recommendations across five categories concerning: (1) diversity/representation in the SLTI profession; (2) marketing/promotion of the SLTI profession; (3) training/education of SLTIs; (4) SLTI practice; and (5) ongoing review. These recommendations include various actions such as targeting BSL classes for recruitment into interpreter education programmes, establishing an SLTI education network, ensuring diverse representation in any marketing materials, promoting SLTI as a career option to deaf children and requiring SLTIs to engage with equality and diversity topics as part of their CPD, as well as administering the census every five years.

Ensuring diversity and representation

The recommendations are mapped against suggested stakeholder organisations that would be well placed to action the recommendations, including the Association of BSL Tutors & Assessors, ASLI, Black Deaf UK, British Association of Teachers of the Deaf, British Deaf Black & Asian Ethnic Group, Deaf Ethnic Women’s Association, Deaf Interpreters Network, Interpreters of Colour Network, National Register for Communication Professionals with Deaf & Deafblind People, National Union of BSL Interpreters, Registration Body of Sign Language Interpreters, Scottish Collaborative of Sign Language Interpreters, Scottish Ethnic Minority Deaf Club, Scottish Register of Language Professionals with the Deaf Community and Visual Language Professionals. However, we recognise that there may be financial implications for these organisations to take on this work,

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or the recommendations may fall outside their remit. As such, these are *suggestions* and not a mandate for these organisations.

We also recognise that the responsibility does not end there. There are many predominantly hearing organisations and communities that can do more to raise awareness and promote the SLTI profession, for example, LGBTQIA+, ethnic minority, faith and religious organisations could be instrumental in improving representation from these groups. There is also scope to work more collaboratively with deaf-led organisations to ensure that the SLTI profession meets the needs of deaf communities.

Despite increased diversity in representation in some areas, there is still a lot of work to be done to achieve a truly representative profession. There is under-representation, particularly of deaf and South Asian practitioners and SLTIs with different faiths, and women of all backgrounds are under-represented in high-status work. As such, the SLTI profession continues to face challenges in ensuring a diverse and representative profession.

A copy of the full report can be downloaded from the ASLI website at: <https://asli.org.uk/census-report-2021/>, along with English and BSL versions of the executive summary.

This article was co-authored by Jemina Napier, Robert Skinner and Robert Adam (Heriot-Watt University), Christopher Stone and Sandra Pratt (University of Wolverhampton) and Chijioke Obasi (University of the West of Scotland).