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Organisational Information

The Centre for Deaf Studies (CDS) is a constituent member of the School of Linguistic, Speech and Communication Sciences at Trinity College Dublin. Established in 2001 with a mandate from the Higher Education Authority to develop and deliver undergraduate programmes in Deaf Studies, ISL teaching and ISL/English Interpreting. This is a direct attempt to build capacity in the areas of ISL teaching, ISL/English interpreting and in general understanding of Deaf Studies. Another key objective of the Centre since inception has been the development of a research profile for Deaf Studies in Ireland. To this end, capacity building in terms of research expertise has been imperative, and attention has been given to the support of Deaf colleagues and graduates of CDS who wish to engage with postgraduate work. The Centre has a longstanding relationship with the Irish Deaf Society, and a representative of the Society sits on the Centre's Management Committee. Strong relationships also hold with other key stakeholders in the general field of deafness, though this is an area that also requires further nurturing in future years in order to maximize the potential for collaborative work and research programmes that are meaningful for the Deaf community.

The Strategy – What is in place

The CDS deliberately seek to establish a Deaf-culture centred working environment, where ISL is the primary language for day-to-day interaction while English is the language of record-keeping. Given this, many initiatives are Deaf-led, for example, our innovative development of a European Language Portfolio for Irish Sign Language. CDS also seek to harness new technologies to maximize efficiency with respect to ISL use in learning, teaching, research and administration (e.g. the use of iCHAT and Bonjour messaging to interact with colleagues and students in-house, nationally and internationally as this allows for real-time video conferencing with a SL as the language of interaction; CDS collaboration with the Blanchardstown Institute of Technology (ITB) in exploring on-line delivery of aspects of our programme, etc.).

Working with the Disability Support Service at Trinity College, CDS tap into European Social Funds to facilitate access to interpretation, new technologies and text to sign translation for students. The organisation supplement funded programmes of translation of key texts in summary form to ISL with student work on the translation of key articles from across the curriculum. Thus far, they have some 50 translated titles available on VHS, or more recently, on DVD. This serves as a point of access to academic information in ISL for Deaf staff and students alike. However, it is true that there are more funding possibilities in place for supporting

Deaf people as students than there are for supporting Deaf people as staff members (be that academic or other), suggesting that implicitly, the notion of Deaf academic members of staff has not yet been conceptualized as a real possibility by the universities, and that across the board, no real understanding of the situation of Deaf ISL users as employees exists amongst employers and funding agencies whose remit it is to support employment (e.g. Department of Enterprise and Employment).

In terms of staffing, there are three full-time academics at the Centre, two of whom are Deaf. Of the twelve part-time and occasional lecturers for 2007-8, seven are Deaf. Thus, there is a very healthy balance of Deaf-hearing input at the Centre, putting us at the forefront of Deaf academic engagement in Deaf Studies Centres of a similar nature across Europe. This contrasts with an intake of approx 30 students in any given year (though the Centre aims to increase this to 45 in 2008-9), where a very small number of incoming students are themselves Deaf. In part, this is because some 12 places are offered on the ISL-English Interpreting Programme annually (with no Deaf candidates to date) and of the remaining places, the most difficult to fill, for a variety of historical (educational) and politically contextualized reasons (namely, the lack of any requirement for professional qualification for ISL teachers amongst policy makers at present) mean that it is difficult to recruit candidates to the ISL Teaching programme, which is primarily aimed at attracting Deaf students.

Barriers and obstacles to promote access for Deaf people in employment and access to services

The lack of institutional funding for access services for staff is problematic: for example, while students who are Deaf, hard of hearing, or who have a disability, may seek support from the European Social Fund (ESF), Deaf staff cannot secure specific funds that are geared towards ensuring they can have full participation in their workplace. This contrasts negatively with the UK situation where Deaf staff members can seek ‘Access to Work’ funding. As a result, the question of who pays for interpretation or translation (English text to ISL DVD) or other supports is often raised. This is clearly unsatisfactory and adds undue stress to the day-to-day working lives of Deaf colleagues.

However, there is scope for facilitating Deaf colleagues in acquiring postgraduate qualifications and engaging in academic research, though this is often at a local level, meaning that the general lessons involved in supporting Deaf staff are not shared more widely. Despite these restrictions, we have facilitated sabbaticals for Deaf colleagues who are undertaking doctoral level research and facilitated a Deaf colleague by freeing up her work schedule while she undertakes a Masters degree. Ultimately, these actions are beneficial to the Centre as they facilitate the development of individual staff members, who in turn enrich the work of the Centre and bring new ways of looking at Deaf Studies to the Centre.

Reason and purpose for such initiatives

The historical basis for the establishment of the Centre lies in a combination of critical factors: (1) the (continued) shortage of interpreters, (2) the demand for professional ISL teachers, (3) the need for ongoing training to be established as an alternative to ad hoc programmes, typically funded by the EU and (4) the need for a stable academic home for the establishment of Deaf Studies related research.

The (continued) shortage of interpreters

The first training of professional interpreters took place from 1992-4 under the auspices of an EU Horizon Programme that involved the Irish Deaf Society, Trinity College Dublin and the University of Bristol. This programme trained 10 interpreters and 4 ISL teachers. Prior to this, there were no professional interpreters available in Ireland, with the result that access on every level was incredibly restricted for the 5,000+ Deaf ISL users in Ireland. On completion of the funding period, no alternative funds were secured to continue training. In the interim (1993), a six-month programme was run between the National Association for Deaf People in the Republic and the Royal National Institute for the Deaf (RNID) (UK). However, this was not satisfactory for a variety of reasons, most notably, given that it comprised only 2 weeks of direct input regarding interpreting issues. The next full-time programme offered was in 1998-9, again, an EU funded programme including the University of Bristol, Cork Deaf Enterprises and University College Cork (now NUI Cork), which also trained ISL teachers (3). Of these programmes, some 7 ISL teachers and some 30 interpreters graduated. While all of the ISL teachers are still actively involved in the field (indeed, are leaders in the field), approximately one third of the interpreters do not work in the field, though many work in cognate domains. To this end, by 2001, there were maximally, 30 professional interpreters and 7 ISL teachers in the Republic of Ireland.

Given the desire to increase the critical mass of skilled interpreters, there was a clear associated need to increase the need of ISL teachers who could bring potential interpreters to the ISL skill level required to interpret. Further, given the ambition of seeking ISL recognition and the implementation of bilingual ISL/English education for Deaf children, the requirement of having appropriately skilled ISL teachers becomes clear. Unfortunately, the requirement for qualification is still not set in stone: teachers of the Deaf are not yet required to have even the most rudimentary ISL skill before (or after) appointment to a school for the Deaf, ISL teachers employed by the Department of Education and Science to deliver ISL tuition to Deaf children in their homes are not required to have any professional teaching qualification, and there is no requirement to present any professional qualification in order to secure part-time teaching posts in colleges of

further education as ISL teachers. Until this changes, there is little doubt that the status of ISL and ISL teaching will not be on par with the teaching of Irish and modern languages.

Given that training, insofar as it existed, was *ad-hoc* in nature, the Deaf community, specifically the Irish Deaf Society, in collaboration with a number of other key parties, lobbied consistently from the early 1990s for the establishment of a Centre for Deaf Studies at Trinity College Dublin. They argued that it was essential to ensure that a “home” for Irish Deaf Studies be established, which would allow for the growth and maturation of key research and training that is impossible to foster in short-term projects. By the turn of the century, parents of Deaf children were also calling for the establishment of a Centre, most specifically linked to the call for the implementation of bilingual education for deaf children. While no fundamental policy shift re: Deaf education has emerged from the Department of Education and Science, the subsequent funding of several key projects that are Deaf-led or ISL focused, suggests that there is a turning tide with respect to attitudes towards ISL. However, as noted earlier, policy is required in order to influence a shift in practices and behaviours nationally with respect to the professionalisation of ISL teaching and acceptance of ISL as a language of instruction and as a language on the curriculum.

In establishing the Centre, from the very beginning we were clear that there must be a philosophy of respect for Deaf Culture and ISL. At the very minimum, those appropriately qualified Deaf people from across the Deaf community were invited to teach on a part-time or occasional basis. Staff – Deaf and Hearing- created the Centre’s ethos, and worked together to create the mission statement, which remains our point of reference for our activities. Furthermore, we committed to recruiting graduates of the Centre for teaching and research assistant work as opportunities presented themselves. This has proven to be a highly successful means of capacity building.

Outcomes and Successes

Since the establishment of the Centre, CDS have seen real and tangible shifts in access for Deaf people in Ireland, but are still nowhere close to saturating the demand for ISL teachers or interpreters. The centre have (in 2007) seen their 21st Deaf graduate conferred, and in total, have had more than 60 graduates from across three programmes graduate, the first students graduating in 2003. While this number may seem small, it reflects the nature of the challenge: there are relatively few potential candidates for inclusion in the ISL teaching programme who come from the Deaf community and have the academic history and desire to undertake a 2 year full-time programme in a context where there is no policy driven requirement for them to have a formal qualification in ISL teaching. Further, there are very few hearing people with appropriate levels of ISL competence ready to undertake ISL/English interpreter training given the dearth of opportunities that

currently exist for learning ISL in a formal manner. So, while modest to the outsider, the success achieved to date is quite significant when contextualised.

Another positive outcome arising is the establishment of an environment conducive to academic progress for Deaf people in the university, and across universities. Thus, as more Deaf students attended the Centre, awareness of how best to support Deaf students develops on-campus, and Deaf students began to consider undertaking other programmes of study beyond Deaf Studies (e.g. education, business, economics, social sciences, engineering, etc.). At the Centre, Deaf staff are engaging with post-graduate studies, for example, the first 2 Deaf PhD candidates in Ireland are both staff members at the Centre. Their success will be central to future development of the Centre's academic agenda: not only will their achievements mark personal milestones, but they also facilitate the supervision of other PhD students and open routes to funding streams that would otherwise not be available. So, in a real and tangible way, supporting Deaf academic development will pay dividends in the broader academicisation of the Community at large.

Additional outcomes arising from the undergraduate programmes are far-reaching: several graduates have continued with postgraduate studies in the areas of equality studies, linguistics, applied linguistics, anthropology and inter-cultural studies. Several graduates (Deaf and hearing) have subsequently been employed by the Centre as lecturers or in research assistant capacities. Deaf graduates of the Centre, along with other Deaf academics, have established the Irish Deaf Academics Association. The Irish Sign Language Academy, established by the Irish Deaf Society, would have been impossible to develop without the input from a critical mass of professional ISL teachers, the majority of whom have graduated from the Centre over the past 6 years.

The Policy – Why its in place

Quite simply, the Centre would not be the success that it is without the Deaf staff who are employed at CDS, nor the willingness of Deaf and hearing staff to engage in collaborative work towards developing a robust position for Deaf Studies in Ireland. Any venture that has at its heart issues to do with deafness must evolve in partnership with Deaf people. This may seem evident, but it is not without its difficulties: Deaf-hearing politics do enter the foray from time to time – but this suggests that staff feel comfortable in expressing their differing viewpoints openly

In relation to engagement with the university at large, CDS also serve a function (often implicitly) relating to educating the university about how to ensure that Deaf members of staff are as valued and included as their hearing counterparts – and it must be stated categorically that exclusion, if and when it occurs, is never intentional, but always a result of the fact that this is the first time that the university has had to engage with

Deaf people as members of staff rather than with Deaf people as students (i.e. there are established protocols and expertise relating to the latter, but not necessarily for the former). It, inevitably, takes time to allow paradigmatic shifts to occur. One way of doing this is by ensuring that Deaf academics are visible: for example, one Deaf colleague served as a College tutor, and so engaged with the central administration over a period of several years, raising awareness incidentally as she worked. Other colleagues (Deaf and hearing) deliver graduation day speeches in ISL as part of a concerted effort to raise consciousness about the language and its users. The hosting of conferences and public lectures on campus also creates awareness. But perhaps the most impactful of all is the simple fact of having a critical mass of people signing in public places across the university campus – over coffee, in the common room areas and at faculty meetings, or attending centralized staff events (training, parties, etc.). When hearing colleagues begin to press for the central administration to offer ISL classes to facilitate them in learning how to communicate directly with colleagues, we know that we are getting somewhere! But that still leaves the problem of having enough Deaf ISL teachers to go round. It seems that we still have a long way to go....