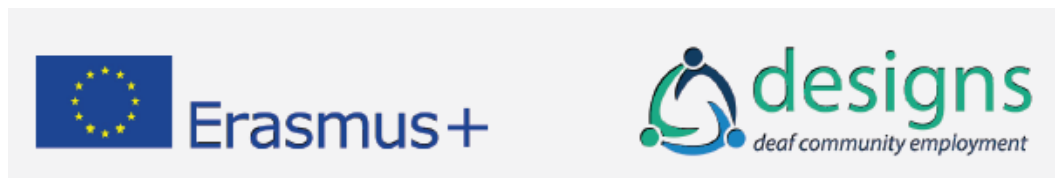

Outcomes from the DESIGNS Erasmus+ European Project

AHEAD was a proud consortium partner in DESIGNS, an Erasmus+ project running from January 2017 until August 2019. AHEAD first introduced readers to the programme in [AHEAD Journal 6](#). The aim of this project was to promote and create improved access for Deaf sign language users in employment settings. To achieve this goal, the DESIGNS team brought together seven partners from four EU countries: AHEAD, the European Forum of Sign Language Interpreters (EFSLI), the European Union of the Deaf (EUD), Humboldt University (HU) of Berlin, Trinity College Dublin (TCD), and Heriot Watt University (HW) in Scotland. (Deaf with a capital D is used in this article to represent those who are Deaf and use sign language as their language and their preferred means of communication.)



Key Issues Uncovered from the Research

Each partner is a renowned expert in respective fields of Education and Training, Employment, Sign Language Interpreting, and Deaf Community Advocacy. Together, we identified a series of gaps in societal and policy structure which contribute to the significant barriers that Deaf individuals face in employment settings. These gaps were prevalent in all countries and hold across all three stakeholder groups (Deaf people, interpreters and employers). Five particularly important gaps have been identified and are as follows:

- knowledge
- organisational culture
- experience
- feedback
- systems

These gaps have contributed to high unemployment rates of Deaf persons and Deaf youth in comparison with other population groups in the European Union.

Upon classifying these five areas to be of particular significance, we exchanged knowledge and identified best practice, and made a series of recommendations around bridging each gap:

Bridging the Knowledge Gap

Deaf signers require support while still in education around the process of transitioning into the workplace. This should include discussion around working in hearing dominant settings, expectations, cultural norms, custom, and practice.

Deaf graduates need to know about the kinds of work-related supports that are available to them and what they have to do to avail themselves of these. They also need input around working with interpreters in workplace settings, unpicking what this means for how they are represented and perceived and what this may mean for their career progression. Opportunities to practice working in interactive settings via interpretation would also be helpful. These sessions could be recorded to facilitate close review. Such practice sessions would also offer highly beneficial opportunities to interpreters to secure feedback and inform their practice too.

Bridging the Organisational Culture Gap

Deaf signers need induction into the workplace and may require additional guidance regarding custom and practice, cultural norms of the organisation, and expectations. This may go hand in hand with mentoring, a requirement that should help also to bridge the knowledge gap, and ease the challenge of negotiating an institutional culture with a hearing dominant workforce.

Employers must recognise that Deaf employees can feel isolated and should try to foster a workplace where hearing employees are actively encouraged to include Deaf sign language users in office 'chit chat'.

Deaf and hearing employees should be encouraged to actively engage with each other.

Stakeholders – Deaf people and employers – need to recognise that interpreters do not share the 'insider' knowledge that they do. To facilitate effective interpreting, interpreters need time/material to prepare, so that they can best represent all parties for whom they are interpreting.

Bridging the Experience Gap

Deaf signers would benefit from opportunities to engage in mock interviews with interpretation so that they can work through how they negotiate their self-presentation via interpretation, how they handle disclosure of deafness and discussion of same.

Employers would also benefit from opportunities to engage in such mock interviews, with an opportunity for feedback on their response from Deaf interviewees and interpreters.

Mock interviews would also offer an opportunity for interpreters to receive feedback on their work into both languages, and on their presentation, which can impact on how a Deaf candidate is perceived. Further, as interpreters may have limited personal experience of interviews themselves, mock interviews also offer an opportunity for them to bridge their personal experience gap, as well as to consider how they will interpret effectively in interviews for specific fields of practice (e.g. engineering, education, accounting/finance, etc.).

Internships for Deaf sign language users at early stages in their career, with opportunities to secure mentoring and guidance from more senior level employees, will help to bridge the experience gap reported by Deaf people and employers alike.

Employers can support Deaf employees by offering job-related leadership training.

Interpreters may be called on to interpret for Deaf people from another country, who use languages that the local sign language interpreter is not competent in. To bridge this gap, we recommend hiring an interpreting team that includes a Deaf interpreter who can negotiate this linguistic distance. In such instances, the Deaf interpreter would interpret from the native sign language of the individual into the native sign language of the individual's host country. A sign language to spoken language interpreter would then interpret from this sign language into the natively spoken language of same. Of course, the financial implications of interpreting sessions such as these must be acknowledged; they may or may not constitute reasonable accommodation depending on the place of work.

Interpreters typically rarely have experience of working in situations where disciplinary proceedings are instigated, or where cases are referred to tribunals for settlement. Continuous Professional Development (CPD) opportunities provided by relevant education bodies that allow for 'mock' cases will help to future-proof competence development for such domains and also help to alleviate the stress associated with such high-stakes assignments.

Bridging the Feedback Gap

Employers realise that there are situations where 'them and us' can occur when there are major misunderstandings from either side. In order to minimise the risks and prevent these scenarios from happening, misunderstandings should be dealt with as quickly as possible. Provide feedback that is timely, focused, actionable, and accessible.

Interpreters should request feedback from all key stakeholders. We recommend that opportunities to plan/review/appraise interpreting practices, and their impact on the interactions that occur, are built into workplace schedules in order to maximise the quality of outcomes for all involved.

Bridging the Systems Gap

Use of data - there is a need for disaggregated data from state bodies that allows for better understanding of the situation of Deaf sign language users so that we can better respond with evidence-based policy and practice.

Statutory funding is needed to underpin linguistic access to and at work for deaf sign language users across Europe. The British 'Access to Work' programme is considered a model in this respect.

Clearly outlined processes must be provided that allows Deaf people to know how long an application for funding will take to be processed. Processing times must be aligned to labour market demands or they risk further disadvantaging deaf signers in their careers.

State bodies responsible for tendering processes must ensure that quality leads provision when putting service agreements in place around sign language interpreting. International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) standards for community interpreting (2014) are available to guide in this respect, please follow this link for more information: <https://www.iso.org/standard/54082.html>. The Designs project guidelines are also a helpful tool.

Administration of payment of interpreters working via state bodies requires attention. Documentation and processes

must be streamlined and easy to follow to ensure that there are no undue delays in processing payment to interpreters/agencies.

The provision of interpreters to facilitate access and participation for Deaf employees in relation to the take-up of options available to hearing peers needs to be in place and better understood. These can include: accessing services via private health insurance, participating in external training funded by their company, and, indeed, engaging in part-time further education (e.g. masters or other professional qualification pathways).

How the programme developed opportunities to involve Deaf sign language users and collect evidence

The overall goal of this project was the facilitation of greater participation of Deaf sign language users in employment; DESIGNS created Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Continual Professional Development (CPD) resources in order to achieve this primary aim.

Between January 2017 and April 2019, 15 DESIGNS events were held wherein all the partners presented various aspects of the project to the deaf community across the EU and beyond. DESIGNS specialised training events and masterclasses were organised and tailor-made for sign language interpreters, employers, and educational institutions in Ireland, Scotland, Belgium and Germany. Deaf Community events were also delivered. Experts were given the chance to discuss their preliminary research results and deaf community members could share their experiences at the workplace. Dissemination also played an important part. All project partners disseminated information about DESIGNS at conferences, social media events, and seminars across Europe. Topics such as interpreter provision, the skills of the interpreter, the Deaf community and qualifications, the challenges of promotion and progression in a job were only a few of the topics that were presented on. Additionally, members of the Deaf community took the opportunity to take the floor and give accounts of their experience in employment settings. AHEAD were pleased to play a core role in these events. Most recently, AHEAD staff members Lorraine Gallagher and Caroline McGrotty were part of a live-streamed panel discussion in April 2019 which has a view count of almost 490.

Pictured below are key members of the DESIGNS team, including three AHEAD staff members, at DESIGNS most important event, which took place on the 9th April 2019. The event on the Employment of Sign Language Users in Europe was held in the European Parliament in Brussels and which was hosted by Helga Stevens, Member of the European Parliament.



Figure 1 Top row (left to right): Dr John Bosco Conama (TCD), Jo Ross (SL Interpreter), Fergal Dunne (AHEAD), Andy Carmichael (SL Interpreter), Dr Robert Adam (UCL), Chris Peters (HU), Dr Audrey Cameron (HW), Mark Wheatley (EUD) Bottom Row (left): Caroline McGrotty (AHEAD), Rachel Moisselle (AHEAD/TCD), Prof Lorraine Leeson (TCD), Prof Jemina Napier (HW), Marinella Salami (EFSLI), MEP Helga Stevens, Haaris Sheikh (Intersource Group/TCD).

This event was an opportunity to present the last stage of DESIGNS, and was the final public event before the end of this Erasmus + project, funded by the European Commission and coordinated by Intersource Group Ltd.

AHEAD's Plans to Implement the finding of the DESIGN programme

AHEAD were proud to be a consortium partner on a project of this scale, and we very much look forward to seeing the positive impact of it in future practice. AHEAD will be using the outputs from the DESIGNS project to train and educate Employers (multi-national and national), Careers and Disability/Access Service professionals in higher education institutions, and a European network of disability organisations we are involved in – The Link Network. We will also be embedding the materials from the Pathways to Employment and Progression and Promotion in work in our training materials for students and graduates, not just those who are Deaf, but to all students with disabilities.

AHEAD is particularly looking forward to using DESIGNS materials with graduates and employers who engage with our Willing Able Mentoring Programme (WAM). The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) funded WAM Programme is an initiative of AHEAD established in 2005 with the central objective of widening access to mainstream employment for graduates, while working with, supporting, and building the capacity of employers to create a more inclusive workplace. Participating employers collaborate with WAM to offer graduates with disabilities a paid and mentored graduate internship for a minimum of 6 months; since WAM's inception we have secured over 440 internships, of which 21 have been Deaf ISL users.



Rachel Moisselle

WAM Project Officer, AHEAD

[@aheadireland](#)

Rachel Moisselle graduated from Trinity College Dublin in 2015 with an honours degree in Deaf Studies. She is currently employed as a WAM Project Officer with AHEAD: Creating Inclusive Environments in Education and Employment for People with Disabilities. The WAM (Willing Able Mentoring) Programme engages both graduates with disabilities and employers with the aim of further integrating disability into the mainstream workforce and promote a more diverse labour pool. Previously, Rachel worked in Trinity as a Research Assistant on DESIGNS, a project which aimed to promote and create improved access for Deaf sign language users in employment settings. Her experience in both of these areas has given her a love for research and also a keen professional interest in diversity, equity, and inclusion advocacy.

This article appeared in the AHEAD Journal. Visit www.ahead.ie/journal for more information
