
Deaf students transitioning from classroom to online learning

Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic was a sudden disturbance for humanity the world over. In a matter of days, people were asked to stay at home, maintain social distance from each other and eventually readjust their daily routines based on the public health measures put in place to prevent the spread of the virus. Public and private sectors have had to readapt their systems in order to continue providing their services. At Bridge Interpreting; a sign language interpreting provider, we had to go through the same re-adaptation process when the lockdown was first announced in Ireland on the 12th March 2020. Based on the Covid-19 contingency plans which we had drawn up in the weeks before the lockdown, we began our re-adaptation process to working remotely and maintaining contact with the rest of the world through digital platforms. From that day; any events, lectures and appointments had to be organised and planned online as a temporary solution, where this was an option for our clients.

Adjusting services for Deaf students

One of our services is to provide Irish Sign Language (ISL)/English interpreters and Education Support Workers (ESWs) to Deaf students and students with other disabilities in higher education. In order to continue to provide access and to make sure that students can attend their lectures online, we liaised with disability officers and other staff members to ensure the best tools for accessibility. We had to make sure that Deaf students had continued access to interpretation online. Some interpreters, ESWs and Deaf students were able to adapt to the new situation pretty easily, while others found it more difficult and not as straightforward. As well as ensuring appropriate access was possible online, we also had to make sure that Deaf students and our ISL/ English interpreters and ESWs had the appropriate support. In collaboration with various colleges, we worked together to ensure the best accommodation for the college staff, Deaf students, ISL/English interpreters and ESWs. The move to the online world was a major change and a completely new adjustment for everyone; for us in the office, for the ISL/ English interpreters and ESWs. Although for Deaf students this transition was undoubtedly more challenging. Deaf people within the Deaf community have to face many barriers that hearing people might take for granted. Imagine how challenging it must be for Deaf students learning from home who may want to simply attend an event or a guest lecture at the very last minute. It is not as readily accessible for them as it is for their hearing peers. The need for eye-breaks is also a challenge in this new online world. We all know the importance of taking regular breaks when doing computer work. Hearing students can take these eye breaks and simply listen to the content. A Deaf student does not have this escape as, if they do so, vital information may be missed. While this is also the case in face-to-face signed interaction, the need for eye-breaks becomes heightened when watching interpretation remotely as the computer screen can cause eye strain. Adding to this, staying at home can become more isolating for Deaf students and communication becomes more problematic. Hearing students can effortlessly pick up the phone to talk to and support fellow peers. Deaf students do not have the same option. In order to combat this, working with disability officers from higher education, we set-up a system which allowed us to keep in contact with Deaf students; checking in on their progression and listening to what they needed in order to effectively support and assist them.

Supporting HEIs and Colleges

At Bridge Interpreting, our key priority is to continue to assist and support the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Further Education Colleges in ensuring that Deaf students and students with other disabilities have the same access and equal support as their peers. This network was vital to make sure that Deaf students were kept in the loop and that they were progressing with their assignments and assessments. There were a number of ways in which these students were supported online to ensure continuity:

- ISL/English interpreters were provided online during lectures.
- Video-recorded lectures were translated and either emailed or uploaded on Moodle depending on the college's requirement
- Assessments were translated from English written course materials into ISL.
- ESWs attended lectures and tutorials online by taking notes and sending them to the students.
- ESWs were also requested to support students by proofreading assignments remotely.

Interpreters, ESWs and Deaf students reported no one preferred online platform (Zoom, Skype, BrightSpace, video-recording). Preference depended very much on how the lecture/class was presented.

Supporting students with difficulties accessing broadband

Concerns have been raised in the media regarding students who may have poor access to broadband or no access to a computer in their home during this pandemic. Whilst this may be a concern for many hearing students, there is the added challenge in ensuring that Deaf students continue to access their courses through ISL interpretation. Given the visual nature of ISL, Deaf students need to have access to high-speed broadband. Without this access, education continuity becomes increasingly more challenging. While it is possible to send class notes in the event of poor broadband, Deaf students may find accessing these notes more difficult than their hearing peers as, in many cases, English literacy levels may be lower.

Positive collaboration

When transitioning from secondary school to their first year in higher education, Deaf students go through a significant milestone. After adapting to the new environment and a new system such as; being in class with other hearing students, working with an ISL/English interpreter and a new education system, Deaf students may have just been getting used to this new environment. Now, a second transition; moving to online learning was sprung upon them in a very short time. Thanks to the support and collaboration of disability officers, lecturers, interpreters, technology, ESWs, and a great degree of flexibility and adaptability, we have been able to find ways to assist students in this new online environment to achieve the best educational outcomes during a time of great uncertainty.

For further information please contact Lucia Venturi at admin@bridgeinterpreting.ie



Amy Durkin

Bridge Interpreting

[@AmyDurkin2](#)

Having completed my undergraduate degree in Deaf Studies I have a great interest in the right of equality and access for the Deaf Community. Through my role in Bridge Interpreting, this focus is on the right of access and equality for Deaf students as they transition into higher education. I am currently undertaking an MA in International Relations with a specific focus and interest on human rights and social justice issues. Working part-time with Bridge Interpreting this year affords me the opportunity to stay active in the Deaf Community and utilize my knowledge from my undergraduate degree while also enhancing the skills I am gaining throughout my MA.



Lucia Venturi

Advocacy Executive Officer, Citizens Information Board

[@venturi02](#)

Lucia Venturi holds a Bachelor in Deaf Studies (Hons) from Trinity College. After graduating, she worked as a research assistant at the Centre for Deaf Studies (TCD) and contributed to a number of papers and publications. In 2017, she received the Employment Based Programme Scholarship from the Irish Research Council (IRC). From 2017 to 2019 she carried out a research master (M. Litt) about the development of a support service for Irish Sign Language (ISL) Interpreters. Currently, she works as the Advocacy Executive Officer at the Citizens Information Board (CIB).