



JOINT STATEMENT FROM SLIANZ AND AUT (NZSL-ENGLISH INTERPRETING PROGRAMME) TO MEMBERS AND STAKEHOLDERS

Regarding: the introduction of a short generic certificate pathway for NZSL-English interpreting through the establishment of NAATI

26 April 2023

[NZSL version link](#)

SUMMARY STATEMENT

We believe that opening up a short certificate pathway for NZSL-English interpreting is dangerous. It will produce interpreters who do not have the sophisticated ethical or cultural skills needed to work competently and safely in the community.

Aotearoa is in a unique position with a degree-level entry requirement to work as a qualified NZSL-English interpreter. Removing this standard invalidates decades of investment by the Deaf community, interpreters, and educators.

The initial purpose of introducing NAATI was to raise interpreting standards in Aotearoa. If the generic interpreting certificate pathway goes ahead, it will do irreversible damage to professional standards and the safety of the Deaf community and to the interpreting workforce.

This decision is not legitimate until a transparent process of consultation with the wider interpreting profession has occurred.

BACKGROUND

In 2020, MBIE announced that NAATI would be introduced as a standard for spoken language interpreters in NZ, but NZSL interpreters were excluded due to already having a recognised degree qualification system.

In December 2022, the NZSL Board announced that NAATI would be introduced in New Zealand for NZSL. Throughout consultation with NAATI and ODI, many NZSL interpreters and educators voiced concerns that a NAATI testing system could provide a pathway for untrained practitioners who have sign language skills to become NAATI-certified.

This same concern was also put to ODI in writing from the SLIANZ Board. In response, ODI and the NZSL Board assured us that they shared our concerns, and that the established entry level for NZSL interpreting (degree-level) would be protected. It was stated that the only people who could test for NAATI certification were those with the NZSL-English Interpreting BA degree, or a DipSLI, or suitably qualified overseas interpreters.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

In February 2023, the SLIANZ Board and AUT were informed by ODI that, contrary to previous information, the introduction of the NAATI system will introduce a pathway for any fluent signer to undertake a short course and then sit a NAATI test, at the same level as degree-qualified graduates. This pathway consists of a Sign Language Proficiency interview (SLPI) to a specific level that the NZSL Board will set, followed by a one-semester generic interpreting certificate (the same as spoken language interpreters, without NZSL/Deaf content).

AUT and SLIANZ immediately provided a joint response to ODI and the NZSL Board outlining the serious ethical risks of this new pathway. We were given 20 minutes at the NZSL Board's March meeting to express our concerns. We asked them to abandon NAATI if this alternate pathway cannot be eliminated for NZSL, or at least to engage in consultation with the community, interpreters, trainers, and other stakeholders before considering such a significant change.

AUT and SLIANZ's concerns that were presented to ODI and the NZSL Board are summarised here:

- These certificate courses are not sign language specific. There is no requirement for any NZSL or Deaf culture content.
- This move equates language fluency with interpreting ability. A hearing person from a Deaf family, for example, may have NZSL fluency but not the ethical and linguistic awareness to be a competent interpreter, without practical training.
- Interpreters coming through this pathway will be missing essential skills taught and assessed on the 3-year programme including: cultural knowledge, Deaf community-relevant ethical decision-making, NZSL-specific interpreting skills including linguistic knowledge, bimodal interaction management, reflective practice, self-care, team interpreting, and supported work experience. There is no short-cut to developing these sophisticated skills.
- The ethics taught on certificate courses is at an introductory level, and is not specific to working with the Deaf community as a vulnerable sociolinguistic

minority. These interpreters would not be taught how to manage the innate hearing/Deaf power imbalances that exist in our everyday work.

- These interpreters would not study the history of Deaf people, nor the effects of colonisation of the Māori Deaf community, nor the impacts of language deprivation and audism. They would not be expected to engage with the Deaf community, Deaf teachers, or expert NZSL interpreters during their study.
- These interpreters will be at high risk of burnout and vicarious trauma without the tools to manage the complex challenges of NZSL-English interpreting.
- People booking and using interpreters may not have an understanding of how different levels of training equip interpreters for different types of assignments, or the risks to wellbeing when working with interpreters who are less trained.
- The AUT degree is a key safety mechanism, in that the programme is accountable to the community to produce graduates who are ethically safe to practice. If the alternate pathway goes ahead, this safety mechanism will no longer exist (except for AUT NZSL programme graduates).
- Establishing a cheaper, shorter pathway to qualification may undermine viability of the degree, with long term detrimental effects on professional standards.

IN SUMMARY

Creating new opportunities to grow interpreter numbers and increase accessibility to training are important conversations that we would welcome. However, such a significant overhaul of the industry should not have been rushed.

SLIANZ and AUT are disappointed that this decision was made despite our serious concerns based on expert knowledge of what it takes to produce competent entry-level interpreters.

The alternate pathway to qualification is in the reverse direction of what most countries have spent decades working to move beyond, with the establishment of comprehensive degree-level training¹.

Implementation of NAATI testing (materials and assessors) will rely on the expertise of interpreting professionals and NZSL experts. It cannot be assumed that the necessary cooperation will be available without overall agreement on the parameters of the accreditation system.

Any work on the NAATI system for NZSL needs to be paused until there is open and transparent consultation with all stakeholders about the alternate pathway.

SLIANZ and AUT will continue to be involved in advising MBIE, ODI, and the NZSL Board, and advocating for our members, stakeholders, and graduates.

¹ See WASLI Education Guidelines, pages 8-10:
<https://wasli.org/special-interest/interpreter-trainers>