

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> York St John University		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> UoA26 Modern Languages and Linguistics		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Improving Access to Higher Education for Deaf People		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2011 - 2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Dr Dai O'Brien	Senior Lecturer, BSL and Deaf Studies	2014 - present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2014 - 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>This case study outlines initiatives on different levels (policy, institution, professional organisation, community) that have made HE more accessible to deaf people. Based on his research around the experience of deaf people in HE, O'Brien has:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. contributed to the enactment of the British Sign Language (BSL) Scotland Act 2015</li> <li>2. contributed to the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between the British Deaf Association and Heriot Watt University,</li> <li>3. influenced the British Association of Applied Linguistics conference policy and local UCU policies,</li> <li>4. established a conference series ("Bridging the Gap") which engages academic and non-academics, and</li> <li>5. delivered training to deaf people and professional interpreters.</li> </ol> <p>Through these initiatives, positive change has been made at all levels in improving deaf people's access to HE.</p>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>O'Brien's interest in improving deaf access to HE lies in his own experience facing barriers to participation in HE. Partially based on his post-graduate work, O'Brien's co-authored paper [3.6] gave insights to multiple barriers deaf people faced to involvement in HE. Barriers included conflicting loyalty to deaf communities and HEIs due to perceived incompatibilities of working for 'hearing' institutions and retaining deaf cultural values. Deaf academics, or aspiring deaf academics often lack the approved forms of capital to succeed in academia due to poor education and lack of access to English. Finally, wider society's attitudinal barriers throw up barriers to deaf success in HE.</p> <p>In 2014 these findings inspired discussions within YSJU about access to HE for deaf students and staff. Hall, working with O'Brien and the Language and Identities in InterAction (LIdIA) research group, instigated a research project to investigate other HEI's policies relating to indigenous UK languages used in assessments. Only one UK HEI had current guidance on how to submit work in BSL. The research resulted in principles and guidelines to improve outcomes for deaf students by arguing for their right to submit academic work in BSL, without being placed at disadvantage. There has been little previous research in this area. Research feeding into these guidelines included focus groups with language and linguistics and equality and diversity staff in YSJU discussing the distinction between language as a medium or target of assessment. The output of this research process was the LIdIA Position Paper 01 [3.5], which has been viewed (in English and BSL) almost 400 times.</p>		

Building on this, in August 2014 O'Brien led a focus group with deaf academics and deaf non-academics for the 'Know Your Bristol on the Move' AHRC funded project which explored the impact that 'deaf-centredness' would have on emerging research which focuses on deaf people, deaf communities and sign languages. This research resulted in four principles of deaf-led research which were felt to be central to ensuring that deaf people were at the heart of research about their languages and their communities. These principles are the primacy of sign languages, advancing deaf people's influence on the field of Deaf Studies, identity preservation and community development. O'Brien presented these principles at an international conference in 2015 [3.4] and in a book chapter in 2017 [3.3].

Subsequently, in 2017 O'Brien began researching deaf academics' experience of working in academia, funded by the SRHE Newer Researchers Prize. This involved the innovative approach of eco-mapping and walk-through interviews with deaf academics working at different UK HEIs. Findings explored specific physical and social exclusions experienced by deaf people working in HE, and best practices (such as physically changing the workplace for better visual reach and working with BSL/English interpreters) that enabled them to feel valued and included in their HEI (see [3.1] and [3.2]). O'Brien also organised a conference in YSJU, 'Deaf Spaces in the Workplace', bringing together the most recent research on deaf people's employment, which was attended by almost 100 people.

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

The research was funded by the AHRC (part of £475,000 for *Know Your Bristol On The Move*. PI Prof. Robert Bickers, October 2013-September 2015, [3.3]; [3.4]) and the SRHE Newer Researchers Prize 2017 (£3000 for *The Spaces and Places of Deaf Academia*. PI Dr Dai O'Brien, June 2017-December 2018, [3.1]; [3.2])

[3.1] O'Brien, D. (2020) Mapping Deaf Academic Spaces. *Higher Education* 80 (4) Pages: 739-755. DOI: 10.1007/s10734-020-00512-7

[3.2] O'Brien, D. (2020) Negotiating Academic Environments: Using Lefebvre to Conceptualise Deaf Spaces and Disabling/Enabling Environments. *Journal of Cultural Geography* 37 (1) Pages: 26-45. DOI: 10.1080/08873631.2019.1677293

[3.3] O'Brien, D. (2017) Deaf-Led Deaf Studies: Using Kaupapa Māori Principles to Guide the Development of Deaf Research Practices. In Kusters, A., De Mulder, M. and O'Brien, D. (Eds) *Innovations in Deaf Studies: the role of deaf scholars*. London: Oxford University Press. [Listed in REF2]

[3.4] O'Brien, D. (2015) Deaf-Led Deaf Studies: Using Kaupapa Māori Principles to Guide Development of Deaf-Led Research Practices. Presentation at Deaf Academics Conference. Leuven, Belgium. [Deaf-led Deaf Studies.pptx \(wordpress.com\)](#) Accessed on February 9<sup>th</sup> 2021

[3.5] Hall, C. J., O'Brien, D. and the LIdIA Policy Forum (2015). Making Higher Education More Deaf-Friendly. LIdIA Position Statement and Position Paper 01. York: York St John University. Available online at: [www.yorks.ac.uk/lidia/policy](http://www.yorks.ac.uk/lidia/policy).

[3.6] O'Brien, D. and Emery, S.D. (2014) The Role of the Intellectual in Minority Group Studies: Reflections on Deaf Studies in Social and Political Contexts. *Qualitative Inquiry* 20:1 Pages: 27-36. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800413508533>

### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Deaf people face huge barriers accessing HE in the UK. While research on this subject exists, deaf people have little access to, or power to change this discourse. Firstly, deaf people are rarely involved in research planning. Secondly, findings are often not circulated

back to deaf communities in accessible formats. Finally, the paucity of deaf people working in HE means that deaf people cannot shape these discourses from within.

The realisation from O'Brien and Emery [3.6] that deaf people faced barriers to access at all levels of HE inspired them to found the Bridging the Gap (BtG) conference series. This series is non-academic and brings academics and deaf communities together so deaf communities can gain a greater understanding of research and interact with researchers directly. It was founded by O'Brien, Emery and Dr Nicola Nunn. BtG events were hosted by UCLAN in 2014, YSJU in 2014, University of Manchester in 2015, University of Brighton in 2016, Heriot Watt University in 2017, and University of Wales in 2019, all of which aimed to 'bridge the gap' between deaf people and HE/research. BtG has grown to include representatives of several different HEIs in the UK and representatives of different deaf community groups and charities.

The LIdIA Position Statement [3.5] was published in 2014 following the first BtG conference and has been used as evidence in the Scottish Government's 10<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee in 2016 [5.1]. It was held up as articulating a "lucid rationale and vision to emulate" for universities in Scotland to follow. This contributed to the discussion of the expectations and actions of universities in relation to the BSL (Scotland) Act 2015. The Act required 'authority' plans (including colleges and universities) to be published by 2018. These plans outline how students who use BSL are supported and are reviewed annually by the Scottish Funding Council to ensure access is provided not just to current students, but also new students in the transition from school to HE, improving their educational outcomes (links to plans for most HEIs in Scotland can be found on the [SFC website](#), others can be found on individual HEI websites). Through providing rationale and vision, the LIdIA Position Statement [3.5] contributes to that process. This has a concrete impact on the accessibility of Scottish universities for deaf students now and in the future.

Following the 2017 BtG conference at Heriot Watt University, a Memorandum of Understanding was formed between the British Deaf Association (BDA) and Heriot Watt University [5.2], which was signed in 2018. The Chairperson of the BDA attended and was struck by how the event created connections between HWU, visiting academics and deaf communities. Over 100 people attended each day of the conference (previous conferences had attracted between 30-80 attendees). The MOU established a "formal framework for mutual understanding and cooperation between the BDA and HWU", including "support and co-operation with local deaf clubs/societies/schools" to ensure an authentic deaf input into any research, and to make sure that research benefits deaf communities directly. This was the first MOU of its type between the BDA and a leading HEI. Since then, HWU and the BDA have put forward a co-written funding bid to the ESRC. At the time of writing, the proposal had received positive feedback from reviewers, but a final funding decision had yet to be made [5.3].

In 2018, YSJU hosted the British Association of Applied Linguistics annual conference, and research findings from [3.6], [3.5], [3.4] and [3.3] underpinned the decision to ensure that this conference was accessible to deaf presenters and delegates. £8,000 was budgeted to pay for signed language interpreters, a threefold increase over BAAL 2017 [5.4]. This resulted in a significant increase in deaf participation at the conference, including two colloquia focusing on sign languages, a plenary delivered by a deaf academic in BSL, and a screening of a short film about deaf communities made by O'Brien. BAAL 2018 provided 10 tickets free of charge to local deaf people [5.5]. There were positive comments in the conference feedback about the quality of the sign language interpreters and the unique interest of having, for example, a signing deaf plenary presenter. Academics at Swansea University were inspired by the presentations they saw from deaf academics at BAAL 2018 to incorporate sign languages into their BSc Applied Linguistics programme, and to build stronger contacts with Swansea's deaf community for the benefit of their undergraduate student's experience on both their degree programmes and for extra-curricular engagement

with the local BSL community [5.6]. The BAAL 2019 conference also set aside a budget to pay for BSL interpreters and created a robust BSL plan for future conferences [5.7].

O'Brien's recent SRHE-funded research has resulted in his local branch of University and Colleges Union adopting brand new guidelines for welcoming deaf staff into HEIs, and he is working to get these guidelines adopted on a regional/national level [5.8]. O'Brien has also delivered several workshops on these findings to deaf young people through school visits and professional BSL/English interpreters through webinars delivered for the Association of Sign Language Interpreters (ASLI) during 2019 and 2020, focusing on how to successfully work together, particularly focusing on academic environments [5.9].

**5. Sources to corroborate the impact** (indicative maximum of ten references)

[5.1] Document: Scottish Parliament Equalities and Human Rights Committee meeting agenda 1 December 2016

[5.2] Document: Memorandum of Understanding, British Deaf Association and Heriot Watt University

[5.3] Testimonial: Director of Centre for Translation & Interpreting Studies in Scotland, Director of Research, School of Social Sciences, Heriot-Watt University

[5.4] Document: Copy of BAAL 2019 final budget

[5.5] Statement from BAAL Annual Meeting Co-Chair 2018.

[5.6] Testimonial: Lecturer and Professor of Applied Linguistics, Department of Applied Linguistics, University of Swansea.

[5.7] Document: BAAL Executive Committee Meeting Minutes 24 May 2019, 28 August 2019; email correspondence from BAAL Chair; BAAL SIG Co-ordinator's Report, December 2019.

[5.8] Testimonial: YSJU UCU Equality and Diversity Officer

[5.9] Survey Data: Feedback forms from ASLI webinars.