The changing role of specialist support professionals for deaf students in higher education

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Abstract

This article reports the findings of a small-scale study that explored the role of specialist support professionals (previously known as 'language tutors') working with deaf students in higher education. The purpose of the research was to explore how the support given by these professionals has been affected by recent changes to the Disabled Students' Allowance grant, provided by the Department for Education, along with restrictions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. An online survey was used to gather data from specialist support professionals (SSPs) across the UK, and the findings are discussed in terms of three key themes: the benefits, challenges and expectations of the SSP role. To tackle the challenges, which include isolation, vulnerability, uncertainty, and a lack of sustainability, the authors conclude that a national review of the role is required, to investigate the training, qualifications, recruitment, and working practices of SSPs. This review would lay the foundations for the development of a professional association for SSPs working with deaf students, thereby equipping SSPs with the means to raise awareness of their role among higher education institutions and deaf students, and foster a productive relationship with the Department for Education.

1. Introduction

Many deaf university students in the UK are supported outside the classroom by a specialist support professional[1] (or SSP) as part of their non-medical help (NMH) support, which forms one element of their Disabled Students' Allowance package. Most students are allocated a finite number of hours support per year, which they timetable to suit their academic needs and assessment deadlines. Whilst there is no one prescribed format for these specialist support tutorials, it is clear that the SSP role has undergone substantial changes in recent years. These changes have largely been due to the modernisation of the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) (Newman, 2020), and to remote working in light of the COVID-19 lockdowns. At the same time, many of the training, staffing and recruitment problems highlighted 16 years ago by Barnes (2006) are still evident, including that SSPs have no national occupational standards, no specialised professional association, and no specific training course or development pathway. Since the DSA reforms began impacting SSPs and their students in 2016, some of these problems have been compounded. Students are expected to cope with a frustrating maze of paperwork in order to access their support, some of which has been called "demeaning" (Newman, 2020: 168). These issues were discussed in some depth by approximately 20 participants at the UK's first two national workshops for SSPs, hosted by the University of Central Lancashire in 2018 and 2020. This article reports the findings of a study that gathered data from

[1] As noted in Figure 1, the full name of the role is 'Specialist Support Professional for Students with Sensory Impairment – Deaf Students'.

SSPs about their role and recent experiences of supporting deaf students. The purpose of this data collection is to inform professional and policy decisions in this area. In 2019, the quality assurance processes of NMH support were transferred from the independent Disabled Students' Allowances Quality Assurance Group (DSA-QAG) to the Department for Education (DfE), and in 2022, the House of Lords published a report on the status of DSA provision (Holmes, 2022). Therefore, this study is an opportunity to furnish the government with more specific evidence on how the recent changes are affecting one role in particular, the SSP role, which directly impacts deaf students who rely on academic support sessions in order to fully access their university courses.

2. Literature review

2.1 The specialist support professional role

The role of an SSP typically involves having weekly or fortnightly one-to-one support sessions with individual students, which are usually one or two hours in length and can be described as 'student-led'. They may involve "clarification of assignment briefs, advice on essay structure, guidance on referencing, translation of written text into sign language, clarification of vocabulary, amending the student's written English, and modifying course materials and exam questions" (Barnes, Dodds, Haddon, Mowe and Pollitt, 2005: 73). SSPs may work either monolingually or bilingually (using English and British Sign Language), in accordance with the student's linguistic needs and preferences (ibid.) Before the COVID-19 outbreak, sessions tended to be held in person in the university library or other on-campus study area, although online and remote provision of tutoring for deaf students was increasing (Gehret et al., 2017; Toofaninejad et al., 2017). Online provision became the default on 23 March 2020, when COVID-19 restrictions came into force in the UK. At that time, DSA Operations at Student Finance England emailed providers to advise that needs assessments and NMH support, including SSP support, could be carried out remotely.

Research by Barnes (2006) found that an SSP's role involves three main areas of work: 1) English teaching (how academic writing should be crafted, how to structure an assignment, how to use signposting and transitional words and phrases, and how to proofread and check grammar); 2) scaffolding (sounding out ideas, giving practical examples, extending vocabulary, and discussing quotes from the literature); and 3) translation (BSL to English and vice versa, literal translation, 'enhanced' translation including judgement calls, offering examples, helping to scan through articles and select parts to translate, putting text into plain English, checking understanding, back translation, and negotiation). Barnes et al. (2005), and Barnes and Doe (2007), are careful to point out that SSPs are not proof-readers, but instead assist the student with explanations of how readability could be improved, including discussing word choice and punctuation, so that the student learns how to correct their own writing.

'Scaffolding' is a significant and quite extensive activity within the SSP role – and one which is often not clearly understood by others. Scaffolding includes organising workloads, breaking down tasks and explaining what is expected in

university-level assignments. A critical part of scaffolding is the substantial amount of backfilling of world knowledge to make up for the lack of incidental learning (Convertino et al., 2014), due to many deaf students' poor access to information throughout their education. This inadequate access to learning can lead students to present work which can be seen to be opinionated and biased or, conversely, very superficial. SSPs, therefore, often find themselves helping students shift towards being able to present different sides of an issue or argument and seeing the value of doing this, which involves teaching critical thinking skills. In addition, gaps in reading skills can cause particular difficulties for deaf students and their SSPs, especially where the student is trying to synthesise material that they do not fully understand:

> "The sentences that tutors had trouble with, the ones that that they read over and over and focused on, were instances of deaf students' attempts to paraphrase written material from textbooks, research materials, or the internet. It is difficult to paraphrase something one does not understand"
>
> (Babcock, 2011: 103).

It has been noted in the literature that the SSP role requires a unique mix of characteristics and abilities. Barnes et al. (2005) report that in a practitioner discussion about the qualifications, skills and traits that SSPs should ideally have, it was agreed that they should be bilingual in English and British Sign Language (if working with BSL users) and have qualifications in both; have some knowledge of translation theory; have a good understanding of deaf people and deaf culture; understand the university system; be qualified to teach; have knowledge of the subject for which they are giving support; and have high expectations of deaf students. Studies from the USA suggest that the SSP's communication skills are also of central importance. In a study by Lang et al. (2004: 198), the most significant similarity among the perceptions of American deaf students who were attending tutoring sessions was the high level of importance that they placed on their SSPs' ability to 'communicate easily and fluently' with them. SSPs' work is also sometimes couched in terms of offering reassurance, encouragement and motivation. In a paper about providing specialist support to four deaf first-time authors, Webster (2021: 208) reports that one of them said it helped him to develop his skills and motivation, stating that, "It is a joy reading exactly what you wanted to emphasise but struggled to. Reading feedback with all your points well laid down motivates you to keep writing".

2.2 Policy changes to the Disabled Students' Allowance in 2016 and their implications for SSPs and deaf students

In April 2014, plans were announced to modernise DSA (Newman, 2020) and to initiate changes that would have far reaching effects for disabled students, NMHs and higher education providers (HEPs). The main thrust of the reform was to reduce DSA spending and to further implement the reasonable adjustments and anticipatory duties as set out in the Equality Act of 2010, namely by requiring HEPs to provide support for students with milder disabilities (Student Finance England,

2016) and enhancing the concept of inclusive teaching and learning across the HE sector (Shillcock and Underwood, 2015, cited in Newman, 2020).

A major policy change was the implementation of the NMH Quality Assurance Framework, which stipulated that only NMHs who were registered with DSA-QAG and subscribed to their quality assurance framework could be employed to work with disabled students (Student Finance England, 2016). Whilst quality assurance and minimum standards were to be welcomed across the sector, this policy had further ramifications for SSPs, a lot of whom, at the time, were working in a self-employed capacity as freelance sole traders. Needs assessors were made responsible for choosing NMH suppliers and could select only those who were registered individually with DSA-QAG, or booked through a DSA-QAG-registered agency of NMH providers. In addition, they had to provide two pricing quotes, with the implication being that the cheapest quote would be chosen. This, in effect, took the onus of supply and quality assurance of support away from the HEP, at the same time removing the personalised matching of students with SSP according to linguistic skill, background subject-knowledge and deaf learner experience. In practice, it also appeared very difficult for sole traders to get chosen from the register of NMHs. Furthermore, these specialist support workers, who (ideally) would be working for an accredited NMH provider, were required to hold certain specified qualifications and/or belong to an accredited professional organisation and undertake continuing professional development (Newman, 2020). However, as previously mentioned, there is no straightforward training path for SSPs working with deaf students, and they have no dedicated accredited qualification, nor specialist professional organisation to support their profession. The minimum mandatory qualifications as set out by DfE also heralded the new name of Specialist Support Professional for Students with Sensory Impairment - Deaf Students. The qualifications that SSPs must hold in order to work with deaf students are shown in Figure 1.

Band four		Mandatory Qualifications	Teaching Qualifications	Professional Body membership
Specialist Support Professional for Students with Sensory Impairment - Deaf students (HI)		Advisory Teacher for Deaf Students OR Advisory Teacher for Students with Multi-Sensory Impairments OR Teaching qualification (see next column) and Registered Qualified British Sign Language (BSL) Interpreter OR Teaching qualification (See next column) **plus** specialist qualification in relevant subject e.g.	Teaching qualifications will be accepted at Level 4 and above, including: • Associate Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (AFHEA) • Certificate of Education (Cert Ed) • Diploma in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (DELTA) Level 7 • DTTLS (Diploma in teaching in the lifelong learning sector)	None specified
		• Deaf Studies • English, • Linguistics • Deaf literacy specialist qualification • Deaf Awareness qualification (specific to language acquisition) etc.	• Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE/PgCert.ED) • Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) in Primary Education • Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) Post Primary education • Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education (PGCHE) • Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP) • Postgraduate Certificates in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education • Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) • Qualified Teacher Learning & Skills (QTLS) • Diploma in Education & Training (DET) • Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (PGCTLHE)	

Figure 1: Mandatory qualifications for SSPs working with deaf students under DfE

These qualification requirements pose a number of problems for SSPs. Firstly, the ad-hoc nature of the role means that it is mostly a part-time position, and many SSPs did not hold teaching qualifications at the point of the changes. It can also be argued that a qualification to be a schoolteacher does not qualify one to work as an SSP with deaf students in HE. In fact, one can argue that the majority, if not all of these teaching qualifications are inappropriate for the work an SSP undertakes with deaf university students. There is a small and dwindling number of qualified advisory teachers for deaf students (or teachers of the deaf) across the education sector (CRIDE, 2019), the vast majority of whom work in schools and not in HE. Following the criteria set out in Figure 1, someone with a PGCE in Primary Education and specialist qualification in English is qualified to register as an SSP – whilst arguably having no experience of the pedagogy of deaf learners, deaf awareness, BSL, translation between BSL and English, or even higher education itself.

These changes in effect have forced many SSPs to become ineligible for registration, despite having many years' experience of supporting deaf students, being highly qualified in BSL, having degrees and higher degrees in linguistics or deaf studies, and so forth. Whilst quality assurance is to be applauded and welcomed, in a sector where there is no structured career path for the role, the prescriptive nature of the mandatory qualifications has led to a much smaller pool of available SSPs. This shortage of SSPs is compounded by the very complex, arduous and sometimes irrelevant bureaucracy and paperwork surrounding regulation for registration and audits (for details see DSA-QAG, 2018). For SSPs working through agencies, this might not be a problem, as administrative staff may perform this role. However, Newman (2020: 138) found that the way agencies generally deal with NMH support workers since the policy changes took place had involved "increased bureaucracy, with the need to complete and keep significantly more student-related documentation" and having to supply more evidence about qualifications, training, and professional memberships. For SSPs who are sole traders, however, the requirements brought about by the policy changes involve a complex and lengthy paperwork exercise which takes a great deal of time and money. Audit fees and obligations to provide proof of insurance and Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks also create additional costs in a profession which can make small returns dependent upon students booking sessions and indeed showing up. SSPs are not recompensed if a student cancels them anything up to 24 hours before the session and all further sessions for the semester are cancelled without recompense after a student misses two sessions. Again, this has led to more freelance SSPs leaving the profession and thus leaving more deaf students without the specialist support they require and with insufficient numbers of SSPs for agencies to book.

3. Method

In summer 2021, the authors undertook research to investigate the role of SSPs working with deaf students in higher education, and how the support they provide has been affected by the changes to DSA provision and COVID-19 restrictions. An online survey was determined to be the most efficient data collection method, as the SSP workforce were locationally dispersed across the UK. The survey was created

using Qualtrics and consisted of eight questions with a combination of fixed-choice answers and open-ended questions. The survey questions explored the SSP's employment status; how their deaf students learnt about the SSP role; the skills they work on with deaf students; the format of sessions during the pandemic; changes to the SSP role and challenges experienced; and their perception of the benefits of this type of support for deaf students. Ethical approval for this research was granted by the University of Central Lancashire's Ethics Committee. The first page of the survey contained the participant information and consent form, and all data collection was anonymous.

The online survey remained open for 12 weeks, from August to November 2021, and a snowballing approach was used to disseminate the survey link to existing SSP contacts and email groups, educational support organisations and online forums. In total, 14 SSPs responded to the survey. The quantitative data was analysed descriptively, and the qualitative data was categorised, following the basic principles of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), to enable the identification of key themes across the data.

4. Results

This section explores the responses to each of the eight survey questions in turn, both quantitatively (for the first four questions, in 4.1 to 4.4) and qualitatively (for the other four questions, in 4.5 to 4.8). A discussion of the results follows in section 5.

4.1 Employment status

Of the 14 SSPs who responded to the survey, 10 were freelance workers. Three of those also did agency work, and one also worked for a HE institution. Two SSPs indicated that they only worked for agencies, and two selected 'other' but did not provide details.

4.2 How deaf students learn about the SSP role

As illustrated in Figure 2, the majority of SSPs believed that deaf students learnt about the SSP role through discussion or information provided by the SSP, or through discussion with the needs assessors. Two respondents indicated 'other' and commented: "I don't know" and "not aware of others to answer roles I can do and ask their goals".

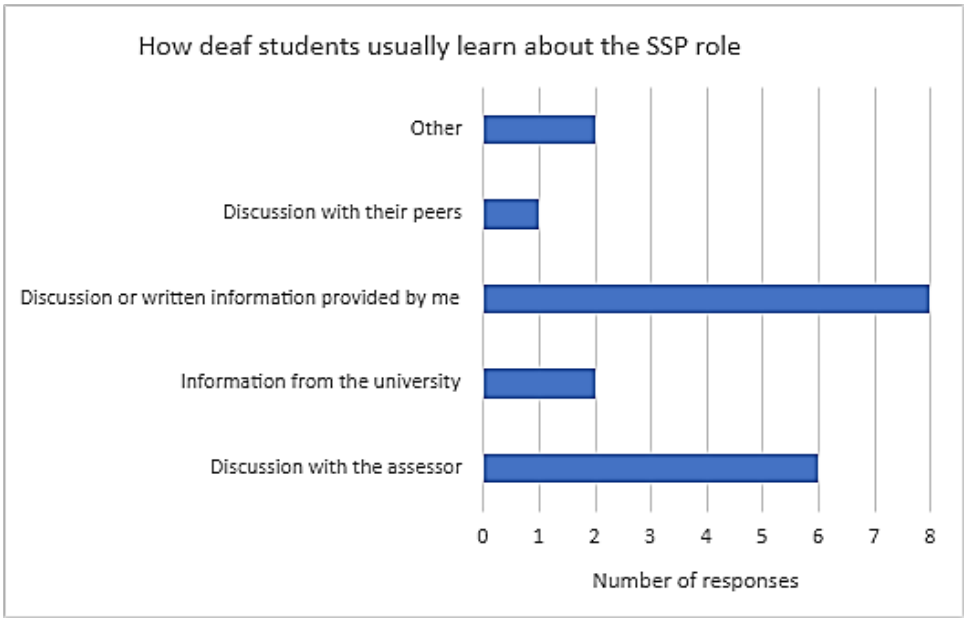

Figure 2: How deaf students learn about the SSP role

4.3 Skills that SSPs work on with their deaf students

As illustrated in Figure 3, the SSPs identified that they work on a wide range of skills and tasks with deaf students. All 14 SSPs indicated that they work on English grammar skills and explain assignment questions to the deaf students. The majority of SSPs (13) help deaf students with understanding written English, planning and structuring assignments, and developing research skills. In addition, 12 of them identified that they had discussed ideas with their students and supported them to develop referencing skills and academic writing skills. There were two comments about 'other' skills, which included "understanding deafness and accessibility (I am a teacher of the deaf and audiologist)" and "practising presentation and pronunciation (students who use voice)".

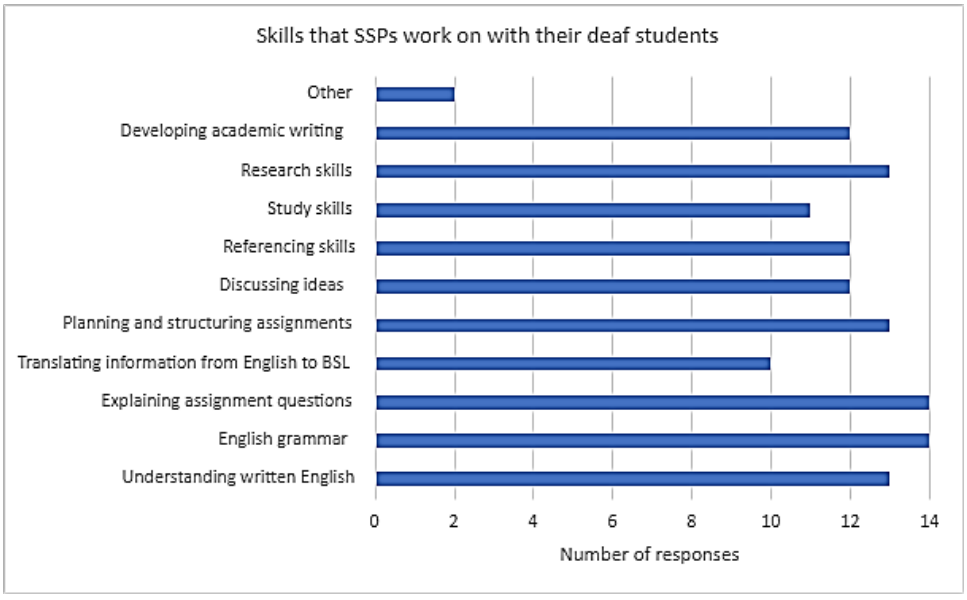

Figure 3: Skills that SSPs work on with deaf students

4.4 The format of support sessions during the pandemic

The SSPs were asked how they had worked with deaf students during the 2020/21 academic year, which coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic. As illustrated in Figure 4, the majority of SSPs had provided remote support and only three indicated that they gave face-to-face support during this time. The most common platforms for remote support were Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype and WhatsApp.

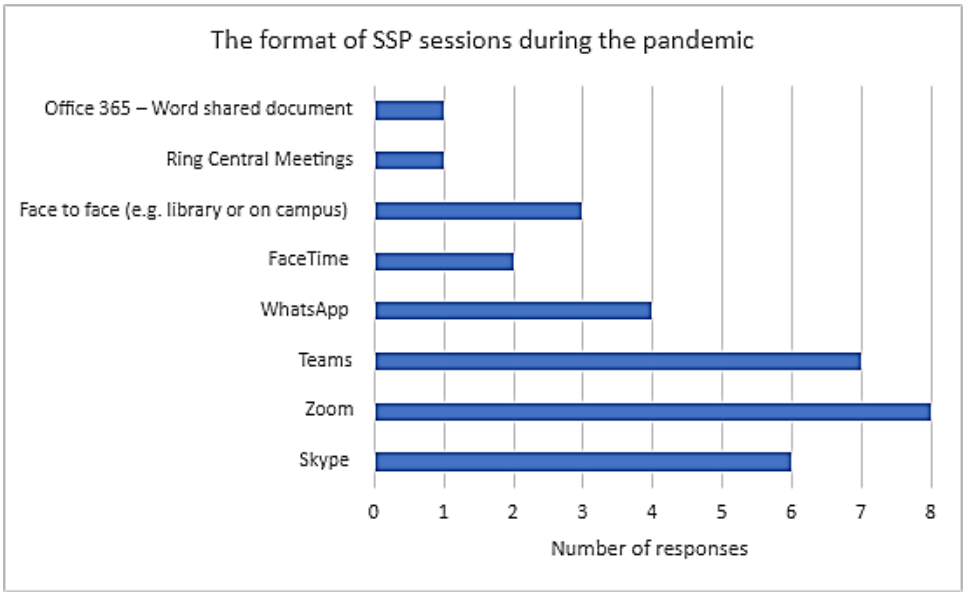

Figure 4: The format of SSP sessions during 2020/21

4.5 How SSPs explain their role to deaf students

SSPs explained their role in a range of ways, such as letting the student ask questions and by providing a letter, set of slides, work plan, learning plan, policies, and/or initial contact sheet. Overall, there were two main themes in the explanations that they reported giving to students about the SSP role, namely advising them that the sessions are student-led, and clarifying the limitations and boundaries of the support. Regarding the latter, one SSP pointed out first and foremost that the role is "not subject specific". The common focus on limitations is interesting as it suggests that SSPs feel compelled to define specialist support by what it is *not.* Some SSPs covered both themes together:

> "I explain it is their time to make use of and the main roles I can support [them] with, what I am and am not able to do."

> "I tell them that I am there to support them in the way they feel they need support, that they are adults and responsible for the choices they make but that the work is theirs, not mine, and therefore I can only work with what they provide. I also advise that they need to refer to their tutors for specialist subject knowledge."

> "I explain that my role is to ensure their academic skills are up to standard. I would be led by the learner on dates and times of 1-1 support. I also explain that I am not their tutor but support them with study skills."

Other SSPs said that they ask the student what their goals and/or needs are, and emphasised that the student is 'in charge' of the sessions:

> "I tell them that the sessions are student-led, and normally focussed on aspects of reading or writing English that they want support with, typically in relation to their assignments and coursework."

> "I explain that my role is very flexible and tailored to meet their needs – that in effect they are in charge of how we work together."

> "I explain that my role is to support the student with their English language and academic skills, and that the support sessions are guided by their needs."

Finally, some also mentioned advising students about the administrative aspects of the sessions, which is perhaps unsurprising given the increased paperwork and auditing requirements discussed earlier:

> "I ensure that we follow the guidelines from DSA and the company I work for."

> "During the first session, I also clarify the paperwork that needs to be completed regularly (e.g. timesheet and email confirmations of booked sessions)."

4.6 Changes to the processes for support allocation and the SSP registration

Regarding the changes to the allocation of support and SSP registration process in recent years (section 2.2), four of the SSPs reported that they had not been affected by these changes; one SSP noted that they were "new to the role" and another stated "I have been lucky as I work for the company for 4 years, so no issues." One respondent also explained that although they had recently registered as a freelance SSP, they had not been affected by the changes as they already had an existing working relationship with their clients:

> "I have only recently switched from working for an agency to freelance SSP support so am mainly working with previous students and universities I know from previously. Where they want to continue working with me, the needs assessor has ensured that that should be possible. I've not been put down as SSP for any students that I either didn't already know or where the disability advisor didn't recommend me."

However, several survey respondents identified that changes in recent years had resulted in issues with the process of allocating support work, funding for deaf

students, and the registration and audit process for SSPs. For example, one freelance SSP described how they had been affected by recent changes to the support allocation process:

> "Originally, I was under the impression that registering as a sole trader would enable me to work flexibly with more deaf students and avoid some of the issues experienced when working with support agencies (e.g., poor communication with agency staff and lower pay). However, assessors now select SSPs from a list and provide two quotes for SFE, and the cheapest SSP is matched with the student. This matching process is about the hourly rate and does not take into account the skills of the SSP or the specific support needs of the student […] In addition, the current process of matching students with SSPs is unclear – sometimes an assessor makes contact with me to enquire about availability, which provides the opportunity to check that I am the appropriate SSP for the student, but often the assessor has just put my name forward to SFE without checking my availability or skills (e.g. BSL level)."

Similarly, another respondent felt that limited information was provided by the assessor when matching SSPs with a deaf student:

> "I am now given very little information in the initial request for my services so I have to ask a lot of questions to make sure I am the appropriate person."

Two of the survey respondents reported that the current support procedures had caused funding issues for some deaf students, which resulted in a lack of support during their studies:

> "We've had to not work with students who wanted our help because the colleges and universities couldn't sort out the funding. One student received no support all year..."

> "At one time I worked directly with universities and had a mutually supportive relationship as part of a wider support team. Since the changes first came in, I lost most of my work to agencies I don't approve of or work for. Lots of students were left with deficits in budget, [and] much poorer or in some cases non-existent support..."

The responses show that some freelance SSPs found the registration and audit process to be repetitive, time-consuming and inconsistent. For example, one person noted "the really annoying business of constantly being asked for proof of qualifications, references and DBS". Furthermore, two respondents commented:

> "I have spent an unreasonable amount of time on paperwork, particularly for the audit. The rules and updates from DSA/DfE are often confusing and, like the audits, seem to be aimed at agencies that have dedicated admin staff."

> "The audit process (under DSA-QAG) was not suited to sole traders and was very inconsistent; when comparing my audit experience with colleagues, there were many inconsistencies in the paperwork and processes that were requested, and passed, by the auditors."

As a result of the recent changes, it was evident that some SSPs felt their role was no longer sustainable, as illustrated in the following comments:

> "I have since moved to another agency reluctantly but only to finish one student's support until they graduate. I am not and have never registered directly with SFE since the first changes came in. I have now completed level 7 PGCE and am awaiting results of a my QTLS but I don't see SSP as a way forward for myself anymore."

> "I feel that being a DSA-registered SSP is extremely difficult for sole traders, and probably untenable for people who are new to the profession. The number of SSPs appears to be dwindling due to the high barriers and obstacles that we now face, leaving students with no support. Because of the ever-present risk of being left unpaid due to the short-notice cancellation policy, I have had to prioritise other work."

4.7 Challenges of the SSP role

The survey also asked the SSPs what was the most significant challenge that they had experienced in recent years in their role. Their responses covered a range of issues which can be categorised into two overlapping themes: lone working challenges (isolation, lack of guidance, technology problems when providing sessions remotely); and professional challenges (students' lack of awareness or unrealistic expectations of the role, reductions in pay and/or hours, qualifications or registrations not being recognised, and having to do excessive amounts of paperwork for audits).

Four SSPs discussed challenges related to lone working. Remote work itself was the most significant problem for two of the respondents, one of whom mentioned technology issues as a major factor in this. A third said the most significant issue was 'witnessing a verbally abusive parent in the background of a [Microsoft] Teams call'. The fourth expressed that being isolated from a larger support structure was the biggest problem:

> "[The most significant challenge is] lone working and detachment from the bigger picture, [having] no direct contact with anyone in the university including the Disability and Academic team. Working in isolation makes things very difficult when there are glaring gaps in the students' pastoral and academic support so I have become a lifeline and a catch-all, particularly now most of the input is through recorded seminars etc. The student doesn't have an interpreting team and this is being completely overlooked. They are expected to liaise through email and make complex applications such as

> mitigating circumstances through the medium of English. The whole 'deaf knowledge gaps' issue is much more pronounced, yet the opportunities to flag this are significantly diminished."

Seven SSPs remarked on challenges related to the professional role, including its status and how others understand it. For three of them, the biggest difficulties respectively were the reduction in their income, not being paid for travel, and only having one student. Another said it was 'students sending work in at the last minute, before an extended deadline [creating the] need to keep asking about time frames etc'. The other four SSPs appeared to see the largest issue as being problems with the DSA procedures. One said the most significant challenge was 'getting assessors to notice my DSA registration', while two remarked on DSA/SFE's procedures for communicating with and auditing SSPs:

> "The most significant challenge has been keeping up to date with all of the DSA paperwork and missives and trying to make time for understanding the policies and rules for the audit. I am often worried about missing something or making a mistake that is going to end up causing me to fail an audit or be left unpaid."

> "I think the paperwork that is required for audit purposes is excessive (e.g. the booking confirmation emails and additional evidence when electronic signatures are used on timesheets). All this paperwork creates additional work for both the SSP and student, and the process needs to be simplified. Communicating with SFE is often very challenging and time consuming as we don't have a direct point of contact since DSA-QAG closed. [There has been] very poor communication from SFE/DfE since the closure of DSA-QAG, which leaves SSPs feeling unsupported and unsure about their registration status. Also, changes to the qualifications for SSPs have made it difficult for some tutors to register and continue with their role."

The final comment included a mixture of the above challenges, encompassing isolation, referral procedures and hour allocations, and students' understanding of the SSP role:

> "Students are not always aware of the role or how useful it will be to them in HE. I wonder if sometimes they are so keen to seem independent and capable that some students underplay their need for this role. That can mean that some students only get allocated a small number of hours and that with time that will need to be increased. I've also had students referred onto me partway through their first year as their original provider has not been able to provide consistent support – I therefore wonder if there is an issue over agencies either over-promising or SSPs not being available. I recognise that I have been shielded from a lot of issues as I was working in-house for a larger organisation, which gave me more autonomy and control over the support and contacting university disability teams and tutors directly."

4.8 The benefits of specialist support for deaf students

The final question in the survey asked the SSPs to identify the most significant ways in which the support they provide is beneficial for their students. The analysis reveals that their answers covered three main areas: building language skills; building academic skills; and building confidence, independence and emotional wellbeing.

Only five of the SSPs focussed on language skills in their answer, despite SSPs being commonly referred to as 'language tutors'. One mentioned 'accessibility', while two others mentioned 'communication, both BSL and oral' and 'improved writing skills and spelling and more confident speech'. A fourth said that 'the support enables deaf students to develop their English language skills'. Finally, an SSP who is deaf themselves commented that:

> "They are working with a deaf adult who understands how the English language works and therefore has a good insight into how deaf students and adults structure language in a different way."

Five of the answers discussed academic skills, such as 'academic study skills', 'study, research, and academic writing skills', and 'understanding how to write academically and referencing'. Two of them indicated that the main benefit was that students learned the value of working with assignment criteria ('breaking down assignment demands and coaching the students to meet the criteria') and building a dialogue with their course tutors ('flagging up misunderstandings and pushing them to repeatedly refer back to the academics').

The most common response, however, was to frame the benefits in terms of psychological outcomes such as confidence, self-esteem, independence, and emotional wellbeing. Eight participants mentioned this, and six of the eight concentrated mostly or exclusively on this aspect. Two of the SSPs referred to the value of emotional support in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic:

> "They [students] have had a real difficult time throughout the pandemic and I have found the emotional support and mental health of my students has been a strong factor of the support I have provided. It has been as important as the academic support!"

> "Moral support is also important during the lockdown. I have met deaf students who were struggling with this. Laughter is the best medicine!"

Two mentioned that they benefit their students by acting as a 'sounding board for their ideas and interpretations of what they read' or 'someone they can sound things out with before we even start the academic work'. Another respondent said that SSP support enables students to 'achieve to the best of their ability'. Three stated that

they help learners to become more independent, and two of these also remarked on self-belief and confidence:

> "[The SSP support] teaches them to be more independent [and] gives them someone who they feel understands them and their issues and they can come to for support or to be signposted to other avenues of support. Most importantly, [it involves] helping them to gain confidence and feel that their work is reflective of their understanding and abilities."

> "The greatest benefit that it offers to them is increased confidence in their ability to learn and cope with the challenges involved in research and writing. […] [It] appears to strengthen their self-belief and foster greater independence."

5. Discussion

The findings of this small-scale research can be discussed in terms of three main aspects: benefits (building students' skills and confidence); challenges (e.g., related to lone working), and expectations (e.g., that the role is student-led and often defined by boundaries and limitations). These key themes are depicted in Figure 5. This section first explores the benefits and expectations, and then delves into the challenges, which can be seen to raise concerns regarding the sustainability of the SSP role. These concerns and areas for further exploration are then extrapolated into recommendations in section 6.

Figure 5: Some of the themes from the results relating to challenges, benefits, and explanations of the SSP role

This study has found first and foremost that there are considerable benefits to the provision of SSPs for deaf students studying at higher education level. This is important, given that deaf students continue to lag behind their hearing peers in a variety of academic settings and there are particularly high attrition rates from HE courses amongst this group (Stinson, Eisenberg, Horn, Larson, Levitt and Stuckless, 1999; Karchmer and Mitchell, 2003). These professionals have a key role in facilitating deaf students' access to HE and supporting them to develop English and academic skills, as well as the confidence, to become independent learners. Many students are unprepared for the academic work and independent study that is required at university and "early intervention and academic preparation…have an undeniable direct bearing on the academic success of deaf students in higher education" (Lang, 2002: 275). In a study of the transition to higher education of deaf students, O'Neill and Jones (2007) also emphasise the importance of preparing deaf students for higher education. Hence, many deaf students require the "supplemental tutoring" that Roybal (2011: 5) found to be lacking in a study of deaf and hard of hearing students' needs on leaving high school in the US. Spradbrow and Power (2000) note that academic tutoring is a necessity in the HE environment for deaf students, alongside other support services. Deaf students do not access information through incidental overhearing in the way that many hearing students

learn (Coulson-Thaker, 2020), and Lang (2002) reports that it has been long known that deaf students do not receive as much information in lectures as their hearing peers, even when sign language interpreters are provided, and suggests that "tutoring is one support service offered to accommodate this problem" (p. 270).

The results of this research study suggest that SSPs need to be flexible enough to tailor provision to the individual deaf student's needs, providing varying amounts of academic, emotional and motivational support. This includes working with the deaf student on any area of academic study that is required at the time of each booking and ensuring that the support is appropriate, and expectations are met; this will maximise the student's ability to study at the academic level required in higher education (Saunders, 2012). Understanding the educational background and language and communication needs of deaf students makes this role particularly important to the deaf student's ability to achieve their full potential during the course of their studies. The expectations of SSPs, however, have been found to be unclear and inconsistent from the perspective of this small sample. The respondents reported varying experiences in this respect, some noting that students have stated that the needs assessor had explained the role and some stating that the role had not been made clear at all, and the SSP thence explained the role. In fact, there may be a tension inherent in the findings that tutorials with SSPs are defined as student-led and at the same time defined through boundaries and limitations that students are told about in a somewhat haphazard and inconsistent way. In a review of DSA support in 2017, Wilson and Martin conclude that in order for the support provided to students to be effective, "a robust, joined-up system designed to fully support all aspects of the student journey is required" (p. 18). There is, at present, no systematic process for ensuring that deaf students are fully informed of how and when to use the support hours that have been allocated and the SSP may have to take control of this initially. Where an SSP does not initiate contact with the student, this may result in many weeks and even months of the first semester passing before the student makes contact, resulting in little time to become accustomed to the individual needs of the student before first assignments are due.

The findings with regard to the challenges faced by SSPs pose serious questions about the sustainability of the role. Analysis of these challenges indicate that the isolated working that comes with this role is leaving some SSPs without the support and guidance that is required during early career working and thereafter, particularly in light of the complex audits introduced in 2016. Only four of the respondents were engaged through agencies or HE institutions, where there may be natural support mechanisms of colleagues in place; the others may be isolated in the profession unless they actively seek other SSPs for support. Legally and professionally, many SSPs are on their own and must tolerate a large degree of vulnerability and uncertainty. There are no formal mechanisms in place for SSPs to enjoy any specific qualification, evaluation, recognition, or promotion. It is clear from the DfE data, the two national workshops for SSPs, and the difficulties that the authors had in finding respondents for this study, that SSPs are already a very small group, and many have left the role in recent years. Noble (2010) states that the specialist support role is one of the essential methods for dealing with some of the problems faced by deaf students in higher education, yet the concern of this study is that numbers may continue to decline unless these challenges are addressed. The

respondents' answers to the survey indicate that they approach their role with considerable care and professionalism, but SSPs remain unsupervised and unsupported by those in control of the DSA funding pots (DfE), who have so far failed to engage with them or take their views into account. This factor was noted in the report by Lord Holmes (2022).

6. Conclusion and recommendations

This paper has identified several concerns around the SSP role that necessitate further attention. These give rise to two main recommendations, namely, to undertake a national review of the SSP role and establish a professional association for SSPs.

Firstly, a UK-wide review of the SSP role should be carried out to investigate the training, qualifications, recruitment, working practices, and quality control of SSPs. It may also examine the experiences and knowledge of assessors, which along with deaf students are a group whose views were outside the bounds of this small study and should be explored in detail in future research. The review would also give the DfE a much-needed opportunity to "improve quality assurance for NMH", "set standards and provide oversight", and "consider ways to better understand the existing pool of support workers and how to support recruitment and retention", as identified in the March 2022 report published by the House of Lords (Holmes, 2022: 9). Such a review could form a natural impetus and springboard for the development of a professional association for SSPs working with deaf students.

Secondly, through establishing a specialist professional body, SSPs could address some of the challenges that the DSA policy changes have brought about by fostering a productive relationship with the DfE, and they could also raise awareness of their role among HEPs and needs assessors. For example, the professional association might help universities to provide inductions for deaf students so that they know what the role entails, what to expect in their tutorials, and how to get the most out of the support. The association could also be a mechanism for standardising audits and administrative processes, and play a central part in establishing qualification frameworks and routes, course manuals, and training programmes. Importantly, they would be able to identify and promote relevant CPD opportunities, especially with regard to mental health and emotional issues. Finally, having a formal network of SSPs would reduce the amount of isolation and vulnerability felt by those within the profession, and improve the sustainability of the role.

The authors acknowledge that some SSPs may have recently joined the newly formed Association of Non-Medical Help Providers (ANMHP), but this association covers the whole spectrum of NMHs and is not specific to provision for deaf students, so there may not be sufficient room or expertise in this association to adequately support the specific needs of SSPs who work with deaf students. Also, its existence may not be known to many SSPs who are working alone in the profession and do not have regular contact with other SSPs.

As long ago as 2006, Barnes noted that because the SSP role requires a unique mixture of skills and there is no single dedicated training programme for it, assessors and managers frequently have problems with staffing and recruiting SSPs. The findings of this study suggest that there has been little if any progress in addressing these problems, and the authors submit that it is time for the DfE to engage with SSPs both individually and as a professional group to identify ways to make the role attractive, sustainable, and robust enough to serve the needs of modern-day deaf learners.

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