

Diversity in Communication

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Managing the shortage: A quantitative-qualitative study on the scale and effects of the severe lack in sign language interpreting resource in the German market

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This study provides an insight into the extent of the shortage of sign language interpreters in Germany and the impact this has on the co-operation and workflows between hearing sign language interpreters and their deaf clients. There is a considerable lack in sign language interpreters in Germany; on average, each deaf person can only receive around 18 hours of interpreting services per year. In the context of growing demands for participation and inclusion, for example in education, and the accessibility of events of all kinds, we see a growing tension between the two groups. With almost 800 respondents, this study provides insight in the relationship between hearing sign language interpreters and their deaf clients. It focusses on various application scenarios and shows, among other things, that the shortage is currently reflected in the area of acute medical emergencies and that the current free market will not cover this shortage.

Keywords: accessible communication; communicative inclusion; deaf sign language users; sign language interpreting

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1 Introduction

This study investigates on an empirical basis how the lack in sign language interpreting resource influences the cooperation of hearing sign language interpreters and their deaf clients.

Around 80,000 deaf people live in Germany (Deutscher Gehörlosenbund e.V. [“German Association of the Deaf”], 2024). The Federal Centre for Accessibility (n.d.) assumes that there are 200,000 users of German sign language, 80,000 of whom are deaf people. The difference relates to hearing people who are proficient in German sign language, for example interpreters, hearing children of deaf parents (CODA; Singleton/Tittle 2000) and learners of German sign language as a foreign language (Metzger 2008). Sign language is not a regular subject in German schools and there is no publicly funded system of sign language courses for deaf, non-deaf or hearing people. Sign language courses are available as private courses and are usually taught by deaf people (a comparative review on hearing and deaf teaching GSL teaching staff in Ruth/Seeliger-Mächler 2023). There is a shortage of such courses. Accordingly, the proportion of people in mainstream society who can proficiently use sign language themselves is low.

Written communication also remains a barrier for many people with prelingual deafness: many live with considerable limitations in their written language skills (Hennies 2009, 2020, 2024; Krammer 2001, Deilen 2022). Deaf people are dependent on sign language interpretation for a large number of everyday communication situations (Maaß LM 2023).

Sign language interpreters in Germany are generally self-employed. They receive academic training at universities and universities of applied sciences or are prepared for a state examination at private institutes (Benner/Herrmann 2020, 2024; Maaß LM 2023: 115ff). Interpreting assignments in the areas of administrative procedures, education and working life as well as in the medical field are funded by public bodies, e.g., various authorities such as the job centre, the school authorities or the integration office, but also by social insurance providers such as healthcare insurance providers, long-term care insurance providers or pension funds. It is not irrelevant who the deaf people approach to receive funding for interpretation, rather a specific organisation is responsible for each specific context. Knowledge of the types of funding is rather complex expert knowledge, and the confusing situation regarding the funding of sign language services is a challenge for those involved.

The entire private sector is essentially excluded from this public funding (Benner/Rode 2008: 40f.). There are a few exceptions for specific occasions in certain individual federal

states, but no nationwide entitlement. So, if deaf people need sign language interpreting for family celebrations or funerals, to volunteer for a charity or to take part in cultural events, there is only a very limited possibility of claiming state resources. The interpreting must then often be commissioned and the considerable costs borne privately.

In addition, there is a considerable shortage of qualified interpreters for German sign language: there are currently only around 800 sign language interpreters for the approximately 80,000 deaf people in Germany (Maaß LM 2023: 120). Based on 230 working days of 8 hours per day, each deaf person in Germany can therefore use around 18.4 hours of interpreting services per year in purely mathematical terms. The discussion of the results later on will show that the mathematical approach is still far too optimistic. The deficit of sign language interpreters in Germany is objectively very pronounced.

This shortage has an impact on the organisation of sign language interpreters in the various fields of application. These were examined in a study in which we conducted a large-scale survey on the situation of sign language interpreting at the Research Centre for Easy Language in 2022. In this study, hearing sign language interpreters and deaf sign language users were presented with matching questionnaires that had been generated with the help of expert interviews. The questions concerned specific situations with interpreting from the experience of the study participants, as well as the general situation of sign language interpreting in Germany. The first publications on the study concern the methodology (Maaß LM 2022) and a comprehensive evaluation of the specific interpreting situations (Maaß LM 2023; Maaß LM2025 in preparation). This article looks specifically at the effects of the shortage of interpreters on the appointment of interpreters, their problems and the sensitivities of the two groups in this regard.

2 Theoretical Background

The relatively young discipline of research on sign language and later on sign language interpreting in Germany has its roots in the 1960s at the University of Hamburg (Prillwitz 1990: 137). Sign language interpreting in German-speaking countries is still largely under-researched. This is due to the fact that sign language interpreting has not been an academic subject in Germany for very long (Benner/Herrmann 2020; Benner/Herrmann 2024). For Austria, there is the study by Grbić (2023), which examines sign language interpreting as a profession in a historical perspective and also integrates it into the translation professions as a whole. For Germany, Maaß LM (2023) provides a comprehensive description of sign language interpreting and its domains. Internationally, research on sign language interpreting is particularly well established in the USA, where it appears mainly in the context of social justice approaches (see, for example, Murray et al. 2020). Empirical studies on a larger quantitative basis are only available to a limited extent.

Existing studies often rely on interviews and include only small numbers of participants (for an overview of the literature, see Maaß LM 2023: 77ff).

Grbić (2023) focusses on hearing interpreters rather than deaf clients. She traces the development of the profession and relies primarily on interviews with sign language interpreters. She enquires into the educational pathways and self-image of interpreters and places her data in the context of the development of the profession. One of the larger studies that takes both sides into account was presented by Napier et al. (2020). In the Napier et al. study (2020), 101 deaf sign language users from three European countries were questioned in the form of 38 individual and group interviews in sign language and 21 sign language interpreters in 3 group interviews, which also took place in sign language. The study analyses the professional situation of deaf people in three European countries and also looks at the role of sign language interpreting. It is evident that - despite all the differences between the individual countries - there is insufficient funding for interpreting in a professional context, which is a prerequisite in particular for good collegial communication and good performance on the job.

Sign language interpreting belongs to the field of translation research (Maaß LM 2023, Maaß LM 2025 in preparation; Benner/Herrmann 2020). It mainly takes the form of simultaneous interpreting, whereby information is transferred from the auditory to the visual channel. This overcomes the perceptual barrier that auditory information presents for deaf people (Rink 2020, Rink 2024).

Accessible communication is an approach used in translation research: according to Maaß C/Hansen-Schirra 2022, translation can be conceptualised as a means of removing communication barriers. In a specific case, more than one barrier is regularly removed: in addition to language barriers, interlingual translation often also deals with cultural barriers (Maaß C/Rink 2022; Maaß C 2024). In sign language interpreting, at least one language barrier is also dealt with in addition to a perceptual barrier: sign languages are separate language systems and interpreting between spoken languages and sign languages is therefore interlingual. Accessible communication has also been theorized from the perspective of multimodality, for example in various works by Hirvonen for audiodescription for the blind (for example, in Hirvonen/Viljanmaa 2024). The study on whose data this article is based is the largest survey of its kind internationally, as it integrates the perspectives of both hearing sign language interpreters and their hearing clients on a large quantitative basis.

3 Data and Method

The survey was conducted in two steps (Maaß LM 2022; Maaß LM 2023): In step 1, expert interviews were conducted with the leading self-advocacy and professional organisations on the side of interpreters and deaf sign language users. These were designed and later transcribed in the form of research-based teaching with students of the Master's programme in Accessible Communication at the University of Hildesheim (also: Research Centre for Easy Language, Germany; for the Master's programme, see Maaß C et al. 2022). In addition to the self-advocacy and professional organisations, individuals from both groups were interviewed in problem-centred (Witzel 1982) semi-structured (Kurz et al. 2007: 465) expert interviews. The responses revealed converging themes in both groups, that can be categorised as follows (Maaß LM 2023):

- (1) Ordering
- (2) Good and bad assignments
- (3) Behaviour of those involved
- (4) Attitude towards the profession
- (5) Feedback
- (6) Training and qualifications
- (7) Political demands

In the next step, two questionnaires were derived bottom-up from the experts' responses: A questionnaire for the hearing sign language interpreters and a questionnaire for the deaf clients. The questionnaires were designed to converge so that the answers could be related to each other. This means that we have the perspectives of both hearing sign language interpreters and deaf clients on the same topics and thus gain insight into whether their views are in agreement or not. An ethics vote was obtained for the survey from the Ethics Committee of the University of Hildesheim (Statement No. 2209/1; details on the study procedure and the motivation behind the methodology in Maaß LM 2022 and Maaß LM 2023).

Both questionnaires were made available digitally via www.SoSciSurvey.de. SoSciSurvey is a well-established, internet-based and EU-data protection-compliant survey tool that can process large amounts of data. The questionnaire for deaf customers was provided in comprehensibility-optimised German and with a completion aid in German sign language. Questions included various forms: multiple and single choice, categorisation on scales or probability answers; it was possible to enter additional free text for each question and for each set of questions. Deaf participants were also offered the opportunity to send in sign language videos. A data protection concept was developed for analysing the videos collected in this way: It envisaged that for example that impartial interpreters

were provided for the transcription of the incoming sign language videos and only the transcribed, anonymised responses would have been included in the evaluation. However, no video was sent in by the 446 deaf participants, i.e., they did not take the opportunity to send in sign language videos, but completed the questionnaire, including extensive free text responses. Only a few deaf participants made use of the completion aid in sign language.

The questionnaires comprised around 80 questions for each of the two groups across the category sections outlined above. In order to make the large volume of the questionnaires more processable and acceptable for the participants, the survey was divided into two parts. The second part was tackled by 121 hearing sign language interpreters and 107 deaf clients. The questions discussed in this paper belonged to the first part of the survey, namely the category "Ordering".

Participants were recruited via relevant social media channels. In favour of data protection and accessibility, it was accepted that participation was completely anonymous. However, the extensive free text submissions on both sides suggest that at least the majority of the participants were part of the two addressed target groups.

4 Results

Of the approximately 800 hearing interpreters working in Germany, 325 people took part. In the group of deaf people (approximately 80.000 in Germany), 446 people took part. As mentioned above, the results reported in this paper derive from the category "Ordering". For a more comprehensive presentation of the results with reference to specific interpreting situations, see Maaß LM (2023) and Maaß LM (2025 in preparation). The aim of this article is to illustrate the effects of the shortage of sign language interpreters on the German market. It aims at the ordering processes, for example at the usual or necessary lead time for concrete orders. And it looks into the effects the lack of available interpreter hours has on how both sides perceive their respective situation and their counterparts.

There is a considerable shortage of sign language interpreters in practice. Firstly, it is interesting to see whether both groups are aware of this shortage. Overall, 58.6 % (another 8,4 % for 'sometimes') of the deaf participants confirmed that there are too few interpreters in Germany and 53,9 % (another 11,1 % for 'sometimes') stated that there are too few interpreters available in their region in particular. The participating hearing interpreters also agreed with this assessment: 68,2 % (another 16,4 % for 'sometimes') stated that they were fully booked and 48,4 % (another 24,4 % for 'sometimes') also said that they were working more than they actually wanted to in order to cover the existing

demand. The latter figure is particularly worrying, as only 72 % of participants state that they will probably or very probably still be working as a sign language interpreters 10 years from now (another 6.5 % for 'maybe'). In particular, they fear health problems (e.g. concerning joints and the locomotor system), which will make it impossible for them to continue practising the profession:

„Ich weiß nicht wie lang ich den Beruf machen kann, wegen der gesundheitlichen Auswirkungen (Stress, Überbelastung von Händen, Armen, Schultern...)“

“I don't know how long I can do the job because of the health effects (stress, overstraining of hands, arms, shoulders...)”

This would further exacerbate the considerable shortage that already exists. In addition, there is currently a sharp decline in the number of applicants for studies in the field of sign language Interpreting at almost all German training institutes.

When asked why the participating hearing interpreters want to leave their profession, the second most frequently mentioned reason is the bad atmosphere between deaf clients and hearing interpreters. This is also reflected in the free text responses to the questionnaires. One hearing interpreter commented:

„Manchmal denke ich wir sind die Müllablage für x Jahre Frustration.“

“Sometimes I think we are the rubbish bin for x years of frustration.”

The following free text commentary also goes in this direction:

„Ich gehe mittlerweile nur noch zu Einsätzen wo ich mich als Mensch und dolmetschende Person wertgeschätzt und respektiert fühle. Wenn gl mit " ich bin Auftraggeber und deswegen muss du das und das machen " äußern oder dies mitschwingt gehe ich zu solchen Terminen nicht mehr hin. Ich wertschätze andere Personen im Setting, sei es gl, hd Kunde. Das nehme ich für mich auch in Anspruch“

“I meanwhile only go to assignments where I feel valued and respected as a person and interpreter. If gl [deaf person] says “I am the client and therefore you have to do this and that” or this resonates, I no longer go to such appointments. I value other people in the setting, be it gl [deaf], hd [hearing] client. I claim that for myself too“

A deaf participant says in turn:

„Eine Frage was macht Dolmetacher/in im Schlaraffenland?“ (sic. The spelling is not corrected).

“One question: what does an interpreter do in the land of milk and honey?”

Overall, 28.6 % of the interpreters state that they no longer want to work full-time in the profession (another 16.8 % for 'maybe'). An additional 12.4 % would like to change their profession completely (another 3.2 % for 'maybe') and 8.8 % make an adequate salary a basic prerequisite for remaining in the profession (another 10.5 % for 'maybe'). There is unmistakable frustration among interpreters here, as the following free text comment shows:

„Ein sehr großes Problem beim Gebärdensprachdolmetschen ist mangelnde Wertschätzung durch viele Beteiligte und der ständige Rechtfertigungszwang. Ich möchte mich z. B. nicht ständig dafür rechtfertigen müssen, dass ich nach einem Studium als selbständiger Dolmetscher einen Stundenlohn berechne, der deutlich unter z. B. eines Handwerkers oder eines anderen Akademikers liegt, den ich aber berechnen muss, um von meinem Beruf leben zu können.“

"A very big problem with sign language interpreting is the lack of appreciation from many people involved and the constant need to justify myself. For example, I don't want to have to constantly justify the fact that I charge an hourly rate as a self-employed interpreter after my university degree that is significantly lower than, for example, a craftsman's or another academic's, but which I have to charge in order to make a living from my profession."

When asked about possible reasons for quitting, 21.7 % (another 28.3 % for 'sometimes') cited the high physical strain and 16.1 % (another 29.4 % for 'sometimes') the negative feedback from the community.

As described above, in purely mathematical terms, 18.4 hours of interpreting services are available annually for each deaf person, which corresponds to around 1.5 hours per month. However, this calculation already includes travelling time to the assignments, time for preparation and follow-up, time for invoicing and bookkeeping for the interpreter, time for further training or supervision and all other aspects of the interpreter's job. The calculation also assumes that all interpreters are employed full-time and work eight hours a day, five days a week. However, the survey data shows that this does not correspond to reality and that, on the contrary, the situation is likely to worsen, as many interpreters are planning to reduce the number of interpreting hours they offer (see above). In addition to the proportion of part-time interpreters and interpreters in rural areas with long travelling times, the results of the survey also show that the job structure plays a major role.

Interpreting assignments are usually carried out by a team of two interpreters if the interpreters

- (1) cannot control breaks or interruptions in the assignment,
- (2) are required to interpret for more than 60 minutes at a time, or
- (3) are required to interpret a conversation between four or more people.

Accordingly, frequently two interpreters are commissioned for one assignment. This double staffing further reduces the available resources considerably.

Some areas are also drawing above-average amounts of the overall resource. One example of this is the education system: For sign language-orientated deaf students in mainstream schools or hearing-orientated schools for the hearing-impaired (which usually teach in spoken language with the help of hearing technology such as hearing aids instead of sign language), two interpreters are deployed as a team for several hours a day. The same applies to deaf university students or trainees on vocational training programmes.

On closer inspection, the available interpreting hours per deaf person in Germany are therefore considerably lower than the 18.4 hours per person per year schematically calculated at the beginning of the paper. It can be assumed that many thousands of the deaf people in Germany have to manage almost entirely or completely without the services of sign language interpreters and are considerably restricted in their right to accessible communication, participation and inclusion. In addition, the area of private life is almost completely excluded from public funding or is subject to major obstacles. This applies, for example, to such interactions with the hearing majority of society as attending the funerals of close family members, talking to the coach of the children's sports club or signing a contract for a new mobile phone tariff.

This means that there is fierce competition for the limited resources of sign language interpreters. This is also reflected in the ordering process for sign language interpreters. The timing of the order plays a major role here. One of the questions in the survey was when deaf people typically make a request for interpreting. The deaf participants stated the following:

- (1) More than 6 months before the appointment: 10.3 % (another 12.1 % 'sometimes')
- (2) 6 months before the appointment: 10.3 % (another 17.2 % 'sometimes')
- (3) 3 months before the appointment: 29.2 % (another 28.4 % 'sometimes')
- (4) 1 month before the appointment: 54.4 % (another 23.6 % 'sometimes')
- (5) 2 weeks before the appointment: 48.9 % (another 23.6 % 'sometimes')
- (6) 1 week before the appointment: 32.1 % (another 21.9 % 'sometimes')
- (7) Spontaneously: 19.5 % (another 19.8 % 'sometimes')

Most orders are therefore placed one month to one week before the appointment; the fewest requests are sent out six months before an appointment. This contrasts with the responses of the hearing interpreters. They were asked when deaf people should make

a request so that there is a very high or high probability that there is free capacity on the part of the interpreters. The interpreters' answers are reproduced below:

- (1) More than 6 months before the appointment: 88.0% (another 4.7 % 'sometimes')
- (2) 6 months before the appointment: 86.3 % (another 7.7 % 'sometimes')
- (3) 3 months before the appointment: 65.8 (another 31.2 % 'sometimes')
- (4) 1 month before the appointment: 22.6 (another 55.3 % 'sometimes')
- (5) 2 weeks before the appointment: 6.0 (another 38.3 % 'sometimes')
- (6) 1 week before the appointment: 3.4 % (another 17.9 % 'sometimes')
- (7) Spontaneously: 2.6 % (another 12.8 % 'sometimes')

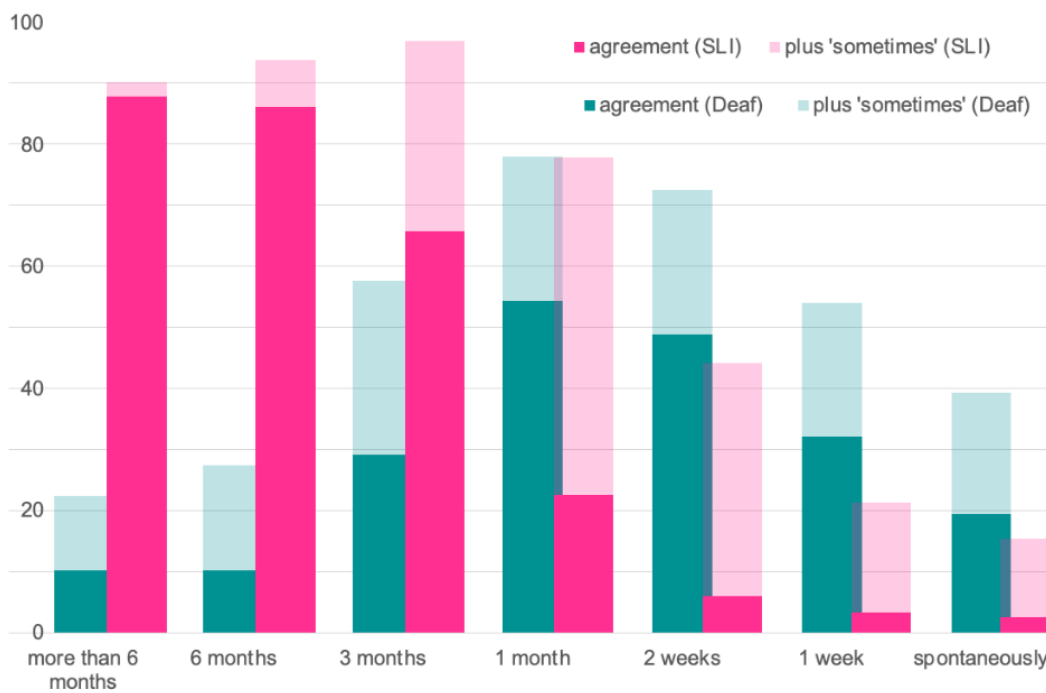


Figure 1. Order date

It can be seen that a request six months before an appointment is most likely to be successful. Requests made one month before the appointment have a much lower chance of success and requests made two weeks, one week or even less in advance are almost hopeless. This shows a considerable difference to the responses of deaf clients.

These figures are even more dramatic when we look at the nature of the spontaneously requested appointments. Here, 33,0 % (another 20.1 % für 'sometimes') of the deaf people who took part stated that these spontaneous requests were for acute medical emergencies for which they needed to ensure accessible communication. Concrete figures on how many acute medical emergencies this specifically concerns cannot be determined:

50.6 % of deaf participants stated that they do not send any enquiry at all when they are looking for interpreters spontaneously (another 20.2 % for 'sometimes'). They assume that there is no chance of a successful assignment and they therefore do not make the effort. Another reason given by 39.7 % for not making a request is that they do not send one for assignments that they consider to be of short duration (another 22.6 % for 'sometimes'). In contrast, only 4.2 % of the participating interpreters stated that they would not accept appointments with a short duration (another 11.0 % for 'sometimes').

Although it is possible that some interpreters give an answer here that they consider desirable and are not in reality available for short assignments, this reading is unlikely: the interpreters show a very strong service orientation across all answers in the survey and explicitly see themselves in the role of ensuring communication in as many contexts as possible. Their own comfort is clearly not the main motivator. When asked whether it is worth looking for interpreters for short assignments, the two groups differ markedly in their responses. There is clearly a need for dialogue between hearing sign language interpreters and their deaf clients in order to dispel such misunderstandings.

Further reasons for not commissioning a service are shown in the free text responses by deaf clients:

„Termine zu kurzfristig, Kostenübernahme Klärung dauert zu lange [...]“(sic)

“Appointments too short notice, clarification of costs takes too long [...]”

„Ich weiß sowieso Dolmetscherin voll und kommt nicht dann mache ich selbst“ (sic)

“I know the interpreter is fully booked anyway and if she doesn't come, I'll do it myself”

„zu viele Dolmetscher arbeiten in Inklusive schulen, haben regelmäßige Aufträge, da sind im arbeitsleben oder beim Arzt oder Privattermine schwer zu belegen, Dolmetscher haben es nicht „nötig“ da zu arbeiten, weil haben ja regelmäßiges Einkommen durch inklusive Schulen.“ (sic)

“too many interpreters work in inclusive schools, have regular assignments, so it's difficult to book interpreters for my working life or at the doctor's or for private appointments, interpreters don't “need” to work there because they have a regular income from inclusive schools.” (sic) (client)

The following reasons are given here: the experience that the confirmation of cost coverage by the responsible authorities or health insurance companies is made at too short notice, that no opportunities are seen anyway and it is better to plan without interpreters, that the interpreters have a sufficient volume of work due to regular assignments at schools, so that they would not be available for other requests. The answers to other

questions reveal considerable uncertainty and tension between the groups interviewed on both sides.

5 Conclusion

The article is based on a two-part empirical survey (I - expert interviews II - online questionnaire with a large turnout in both groups) on the ordering processes in the field of sign language interpreting in Germany. It shows that there is a blatant shortage here, which has an impact on the sensitivities of the two groups and their relationships with each other. This is in line with the results of the study by Napier et al. (2020) for the working life of deaf people in three European countries, including Germany. Sign language interpreting has undergone a process of academic professionalisation over the past two decades (Benner/Herrmann 2020, 2024; Grbic 2023). However, a persistent problem is that academic training programmes cannot provide graduates quickly and comprehensively enough and for all geographical areas of Germany. The actual commissioners, that is: the deaf clients, are faced with a blatant shortage of service providers. This shortage of sign language interpreters is reflected in the need to order interpreters at least six months in advance of an appointment in order to be successful. Despite this considerable amount of lead time, however, a successful assignment is not guaranteed. Requests at short notice are far more common, as not all appointments can be planned with this kind of lead time. Requests at particularly short notice have little chance of success. Such short-term requirements arise, for example, in the case of acute medical emergencies. This scenario was mentioned most frequently by the deaf people who took part. There is a need here among deaf customers, but there is little prospect of interpreters being available.

Deaf clients are obviously aware of this limited availability; in a large number of cases, they do not place orders if the appointment is at short notice. As the free text responses show, deaf clients also suspect that interpreting services are unevenly distributed: in the opinion of deaf clients, interpreters prefer permanent, reliable assignments that can be planned for the long term, as is the case for assignments in the inclusive education system, and are therefore not available for short-term assignments that are also short in duration.

For their part, the hearing interpreters stated in the survey that they encourage their deaf clients to make enquiries even at short notice. They show a considerable service-orientation and willingness to work harder in all the areas covered by the survey in order to meet the glaring shortage that they are aware of. In view of the dramatic figures, however, this endeavour seems futile, at least beyond the individual case, in order to cover the actual demand. This endeavour, in turn, does not seem to be clear to at least

some of the deaf clients; they show a clear resentment about how difficult it is to place interpreting orders. There is a tendency among these clients to at least partially blame the interpreters and their preferences when accepting assignments for this situation. However, pragmatic approaches were also put forward in the free text responses:

„Kaum ein Dolmetscher sagt „Danke für den Auftrag“. Sollte selbstverständlich sein!“ (sic, deaf client).

“Hardly any interpreters say ‘Thank you for your order’. Should be obvious!”

The current system of freelance sign language interpreters will not adequately solve the shortage of interpreters. The market is massively undersupplied, too few new interpreters are entering the market and a significant number of existing interpreters are considering leaving the profession or reducing the number of their working hours. The already tense situation is leading to frustration on both sides, which further favours the resignation of interpreters from the profession. The tense situation is likely to worsen with this trend. It is foreseeable that the situation will not improve on its own without political and administrative intervention, such as the establishment of an on-call service for medical emergencies.

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