



Interpreters and Translators 2020

Industry Developments and Workforce Issues

Industry Overview.¹ Language services provided by skilled practitioners are critical in supporting communication needs of non-English speaking members of WA's culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, newly emerging languages communities, Indigenous language speakers and the Deaf. Suitably skilled interpreters and translators play an integral part in supporting fair and equal participation and access of all people to government and other programs, services and processes. These occupations fall within the four-digit ANZSCO Social Professionals set of occupations, which as a group are projected to grow by 18.1% over the five years to 2024, according to the latest national labour market outlook.² ABS 2016 Census figures point to employment of interpreters predominantly in the Professional, Scientific and Technical Services (56%), followed by Education and Training (17%), Health Care and Social Assistance (12%) and Public Administration and Safety (9%). Employment of translators is predominantly in the Professional, Scientific and Technical Services (77%).³ A comparison between the Censuses (2006, 2011 and 2016) shows growth of 29% and 17%, respectively, in the number of people working as interpreters and translators in the State across the 10-year period. Western Australia's share of interpreters and translators employed in the State was 8.5% and 6.4% in 2016.⁴ It is important to note that these numbers do not capture people working in the sector outside of their primary occupation. As such, it is likely the actual numbers of people working across those two professions in WA are greater than the figures captured in the Census.

The interpreting workforce continues to be highly casualised, fragmented and ageing. An international survey of people performing linguistic work (interpreters and translators)⁵ points to a significant number of respondents being contractors, with the majority of their income coming from labour hire firms, known as language service providers (LSP). Findings align to the remuneration, employment conditions, professionalism, service quality and training issues which continue to challenge the sector. National figures point to 41% of translators being employed on a full-time basis.⁶ In Western Australia, there tends to be an even split between the number of translators working for LSPs and those working as independent practitioners employed directly by clients. Only a few translators hold another job and if part-time, continue to work as a translator. In comparison, a greater number of interpreter professionals hold another job, either inside or outside the language services industry, with half of the Auslan interpreters working in education. Many interpreters work in language services to supplement their income from a primary job. Until recently, the sole income from language services was deemed to be insufficient to live on.

Critical Shortages. Recent discussions with industry and relevant peak bodies point to a continued and growing critical short supply of interpreters and translators in Western Australia. Increasingly, LSPs are unable to service job requests due to insufficient availability of adequately experienced translators and interpreters, skilled across a breadth of domains. Most of these workers are contractors of a number of

¹ Industry advice provided to the Financial, Administrative and Professional Services Training Council, 2019.

² Australian Government, Department of Jobs and Small Business, Labour Market Information Portal, [Employment Projections, 2019 Occupational Projections – five years to May 2024](#).

³ ABS, 2016 Census, ANZSCO 6 Digit x ANZSIC 1 Digit spreadsheet provided by DTWD.

⁴ Australian Government, [Job Outlook – Interpreter](#).

⁵ CSA Research, [The State of the Linguistic Supply Chain 2020](#), January 2020.

⁶ Australian Government, [Job Outlook – Translator](#).



LSPs with the latter all drawing on the same pool of practitioners. The National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters' (NAATI) recent industry development fund application⁷ points to WA not having sufficient interpreters and translators to meet service needs, in Aboriginal and emerging community languages. Service delivery is complicated by the number of contexts and languages in which services are required. The continuing challenges are: how to keep pace with the ever-changing language needs of a culturally diverse nation; how to meet the growing demand for professional translator and interpreter services for different purposes; and how to develop a stable and skilled workforce with the capability and capacity to meet the needs of the community now and in the future.⁸

Sign Language. The growth in demand and lack of supply of credentialled interpreters continues to increase dramatically, with major shortages across the State and especially in rural and remote areas, and with Indigenous Western Australians, who do not communicate in Auslan, but via local sign languages.⁹ The Australian Sign Language Interpreters' Association's (ASLIA) 2018 survey¹⁰ of Australia's interpreting community and service providers pointed to 24% of practitioners looking at leaving the sector or tapering down their work within three years. Conditions, pay, regularity of work, education and professional development were cited as key issues affecting interpreters. At the time, 12 sign language interpreter agencies reported increased difficulty filling jobs, predicting a steady increase of demand for services to 2020 (up to 266%).

Aboriginal Languages. In the last financial year, provision of services in WA Aboriginal languages by Aboriginal Interpreting WA (AIWA) increased 625 per cent. WA Supreme Court and CCC findings into failure by police to use Aboriginal language services has led to an upsurge in requests for translating services from courts and police. There is also growing demand for print and audio-visual material to convey information to Aboriginal audiences. There is no workforce skilling available for Aboriginal languages in translating. No RTOs are prepared to offer full Diploma courses, nor to offer training in Indigenous languages to address small, adult learner groups in diverse languages. As such, AIWA reports having to rely on the high-risk measure of workers learning on-the-job under supervision. Capacity to provide skilled supervision is limited by a lack of senior professionals in all locations, who are themselves in high demand for interpreting and translating assignments.¹¹

National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). The rollout of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) has meant more opportunities for Auslan users to access the community and undertake social activities, due to funding allocation for communication assistance through interpreting services. The increased demand for interpreter services under the NDIS scheme continues to add strain on Deaf interpreting services already experiencing critical shortages and prolonged wait times to access interpreting services for up to three months.

ASLIA has expressed the criticality of the need to increase the pipeline of interpreter supply and the availability of interpreting services, to meet both NDIS and non-NDIS demand. The main challenge is the ability to attract and adequately train a new pipeline of Auslan-English interpreters to meet the imbalance between the current demands and the available supply. Currently, WA only has nine Auslan-English interpreters at Certified Interpreter level and 54 at Certified Provisional Interpreter level.¹² Certified Provisional Interpreters conduct lower level community interpreting, while Certified Interpreters are the minimum requirement for legal and medical settings. Access Plus WA Deaf is one of two WA-based organisations providing Auslan-English interpreting services to the sector. Between 2017 and 2019, comparative figures show a growth of 52% in total hours serviced by Auslan-English interpreters (from 6,781.5 to 14,074 hours). Simultaneously, data shows a 65% increase in the hours they were unable to service across the same time frame (from 1,450 to 4,144 hours). The NDIS roll-out will come into full effect by July 2020, which will further exacerbate demand

⁷ National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters, *Industry Project Development Fund – Project Application (Western Australian Interpreter Training Fund)*, June 2019.

⁸ Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers Australia, *Lost in Translation: Barriers to building a sustainable Australian translating and interpreting industry*, 2012.

⁹ Aboriginal Interpreting WA.

¹⁰ Australian Sign Language Interpreters' Association, *Are you Available? Interpreter and Employer Survey 2018 Results*, September 2018.

¹¹ Aboriginal Interpreting WA, March 2020.

¹² National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters, March 2020.



Ageing CALD Population. Discussions with NAATI also point to an anticipated growing need for interpreter and translator services among our ageing CALD population, as they lose their English. According to the 2016 Census, there were more than 63,000 Western Australian's from CALD backgrounds aged 65 years and over. Our population continues to age. Between 2011 and 2016 the number of 65+ year old CALD seniors increased annually at 4.7%, while the number of those aged 85+ more than doubled (an increase of 10.3%). For the 65+ age group, the top ten birthplaces were all non-English speaking countries. This anticipated growth in demand for language support services amongst older Australians aligns to documented need for assistance increasing with age in core activities of self-care, mobility and communication, and the phenomenon of older migrants reverting to their mother tongue.¹³

Between 2011 and 2016 there was an increase of 16.5% in the number of people in WA born overseas. For the first time, those born in non-main English speaking countries exceeded those from main English speaking countries.¹⁴ As the diversity of the State's population continues to grow, so too does the diversity of languages being spoken. The 2016 Census profile of people's linguistic diversity points to more than 240 languages being spoken in WA. Close to 18% of people living in the State speak a language other than English (LOTE) at home, an increase of almost 35% since 2011.¹⁵ 14% reported having low proficiency or not being able to speak English at all.¹⁶ Except for Italian, the largest LOTE groups comprised Asian and African languages. Mandarin, Vietnamese, Korean and Karen were in the top ten language groups of people with low English proficiency, also represented in the top ten language groups with the highest percentage of people with low English proficiency.¹⁷ Unmet demand remains language specific and shifts with each wave of migration. The number of language combinations offered is limited and does not satisfy the needs of different minority groups.¹⁸ Lack of suitably skilled and qualified interpreters in Aboriginal languages continues to be an issue in regional/remote WA.

Industry Workforce Priorities

Importance of Qualifications. Professionals Australia's advocacy for experienced, qualified translators and interpreters in the industry continues to be relevant. There is a continued need to ensure professionalism of the occupations, maintenance of high standards of service and recognition of qualifications and experience. Similarly, *The State of the Linguistic Supply Chain 2020*¹⁹ emphasises the importance of formal education rather than lateral movement into the field from other professions. It points to a lack of understanding from clients about the nature of the work and contracting conditions creating greater pressure to offer services at lower prices. In Australia there is no or only a negligible market differential in what people get paid based on qualifications or experience. This lack of remuneration structures and levels does not help incentivize potential candidates for training.

The need to address complexity of work, skill demands and adequate training continues to affect the sector. Interpreters and translators work in a wide range of contexts (such as health, social welfare, legal, education, immigration, international trade and relations) and rely on more than just bilingual competence. It is therefore critical that they are well trained/educated, competent and experienced. Required levels of competence and experience can vary greatly, depending on the context and complexity of the service required. As such, language professionals require different levels of skills, contextual and thematic knowledge, cultural awareness, and a working understanding of ethics,

¹³ Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries, Office of Multicultural Interests, WA Diversity and Statistics, [At a glance: Multicultural Seniors in WA](#).

¹⁴ Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries, Office of Multicultural Interests, WA Diversity and Statistics, [Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Western Australia – 2016 Census](#).

¹⁵ Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries, Office of Multicultural Interests, WA Diversity and Statistics, [WA's Cultural Linguistic Diversity – 2016 Census](#).

¹⁶ Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries, Office of Multicultural Interests, WA Diversity and Statistics, [Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Western Australia – 2016 Census](#).

¹⁷ Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries, Office of Multicultural Interests, WA Diversity and Statistics, [WA's Cultural Linguistic Diversity – 2016 Census](#).

¹⁸ Bloomsbury Academic, [Community Translation](#), Mustapha Taibi and Uldis Ozolins, 2016.

¹⁹ CSA Research, [The State of the Linguistic Supply Chain 2020](#), January 2020.



legislation and policies.

Interpreters are facilitators of spoken and signed communications between parties who do not share a common language. They transfer spoken or signed languages into another spoken or signed language, which requires instant transfer in the presence of the person(s) requiring this service, hence rated as requiring a very high skill level to perform the role.²⁰ Reports such as ASLIA's recent Disability Royal Commission submission highlights the importance of matching the quality of the interpreter to the needs of the client, citing incidences where inappropriate skill levels and capability gaps result in ineffectual interpreting conduct across more complex settings in government, health and the justice system. Some interstate language service providers (including TIS National) have discontinued interpreter job matching some time ago. This process has been replaced by an interpreter portal which uses mobile phone software to broadcast jobs to their contractors to be grabbed on a first-come-first-served basis. Following the release of the Recommended National Standards for Working with Interpreters in Courts and Tribunals,²¹ the Consolidated Practice Directions of the WA Supreme Court were updated to reflect the requirement that interpreters engaged by WA courts should, in the first instance, be credentialed at Professional or Certified Interpreter level and hold Advanced Diploma qualification or higher.²² This has created a greater demand for practitioners who hold a minimum of Advanced Diploma qualifications, further supporting FAPSTC's 2015 report findings of a need for Advanced Diploma level qualifications in Interpreting in Western Australia.²³

Translators are also rated as needing a very high skill level to perform the role as they require the ability to write and read languages fluently.²⁴ Translators must have the knowledge and skills to meet their role and that their training includes curricula on community translating and specifically addresses community contexts. They need to hold strong cognitive, analytical, behavioural and psychomotor abilities and attributes such as memory, concentration, critical thinking and the ability to identify and solve translation problems.²⁵ Two important international academic publications, one authored in Australia, and work done by ISO to develop a quality standard for translating²⁶ are causing a shift in perception about the competence of translators, particularly in community languages.²⁷ Translation is increasingly being understood as a process in which competent translators are a key element. There is a need for formal training and qualification of translators whose first language is not English, to achieve fit for purpose translations of government information supplied to minority communities. It is critical that the competence of the translator meets the needs of the quality assurance process applicable to producing translations that are fit for purpose and audience.²⁸ Inappropriate skill levels and competency gaps result in ineffectual translation across the board, particularly for complex texts produced in government, health and the justice system, to name a few

National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters. NAATI is the credentialing authority for translators and interpreters in Australia. In 2018, NAATI ceased their system of accreditation and commenced a new certification system. According to NAATI, the national certification system is designed to confirm that a candidate demonstrates the skills needed to practice as a translator or interpreter, to set national standards aiming to strengthen access and equity for minority groups and individuals, and to give credibility to agencies that engage translators and interpreters.²⁹ Certification places more emphasis on education, training, and ongoing professional development than the pre-2018 model of accreditation.³⁰ The model provides pathways to different types of certification at different levels and specialisations across spoken languages, Auslan and Deaf interpreting. These include

²⁰ Australian Government, [Job Outlook – Interpreter](#).

²¹ Judicial Council on Cultural Diversity, [Recommended National Standards for Working with Interpreters in Courts and Tribunals](#), 2017.

²² The Supreme Court of Western Australia 2009 (as updated on 20 January 2020), [Consolidated Practice Directions](#).

²³ Financial, Administrative and Professional Services Training Council, *Translating and Interpreting Taskforce Report*, December 2015.

²⁴ Australian Government, [Job Outlook – Translator](#).

²⁵ Bloomsbury Academic, [Community Translation](#), Mustapha Taibi and Uldis Ozolins, 2016.

²⁶ ISO, [ISO 17100:2015 Translation services – Requirements for Translation Services](#).

²⁷ Bloomsbury Academic, *Quality in Professional Translation*, Joanna Drugan, 2013.

²⁸ Bloomsbury Academic, [Community Translation](#), Mustapha Taibi and Uldis Ozolins, 2016.

²⁹ National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters, [Annual Report: A Connected Community without language barriers 2018/19](#).

³⁰ National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters, [The Certification System](#).



Certified Translator, Certified Conference Interpreter, Certified Specialist Legal Interpreter, Certified Specialist Health Interpreter, Certified Interpreter, Certified Provisional Interpreter. Pre-requisites for admission to a test include English proficiency, training, ethical competency and intercultural competency. Under the new system, interpreters and translators with NAATI certification credentials must provide evidence of continuing work practice and professional development (PD) every three years to recertify. The compulsory PD requirement has led to a range of entities offering webinars, on-line presentations and short courses for a fee. According to the Western Australian Institute of Translators and Interpreters (WAITI), the value of these to the profession is at times dubious, further isolating practitioners due to a lack of peer-to-peer contact and support.

NAATI also issues Recognised Practising Translator and Recognised Practising Interpreter credentials in emerging or low demand languages (currently it does this for over 120 languages). Recognised credentials are not part of certification (but are listed in NAATI's directory of certified practitioners) and, anecdotally,³¹ are the cause of much confusion among service users, both clients and agencies alike. No LOTE screening test or other skills assessment is required to acquire these credentials. Furthermore, NAATI does not require recognised practitioners to sit a NAATI test when testing in their language becomes available.

Transition to NAATI certification for those possessing accreditation closed in December 2019 and NAATI is no longer accepting transition applications. Those holding NAATI accreditation rather than the new certification may be ineligible for Federal Government contracts that specify NAATI certification or may receive less work from LSPs who give preference to interpreters and translators with certification under the new system. In practice, these preferences are only applicable to languages where sufficient numbers of certified practitioners are available. However, certification is not compulsory and in WA many practitioners chose not to transition, particularly those who hold Permanent Accreditation (under an accreditation system prior to 2008). Most of the practitioners awarded this Accreditation have a formal qualification as an interpreter or translator. Anyone who holds a Permanent Accreditation has not needed to transition to the new certification.³² This Accreditation continues to be valid and although practitioners are not listed in NAATI's online directory, could be verified on NAATI's website until 24 April of this year when NAATI discontinued verification in contravention of earlier commitments.³³

NAATI have also undertaken an Indigenous Interpreting Project which aims to increase the number of credentialled Indigenous interpreters in Australia, focusing on priority regions. At March 2020, there were 180 Indigenous interpreters and/or translators³⁴ holding a NAATI credential and practising in 37 Indigenous languages across Australia.³⁵ NAATI have also set up an Industry Development Fund to address industry issues, such as capability, capacity building and innovation: their 2019/2020 priority is to offer testing in more languages.

A new scholarship program funded by the Office of Multicultural Interests (OMI), NAATI and the Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators (AUSIT) addresses pre-requisites for admission to NAATI Provisional Certification testing. Babel International College is the only NAATI endorsed provider in WA delivering the NAATI Certification Skill Set (face to face). RMIT and TAFE SA are the other NAATI endorsed providers delivering the skill set online. The short course comprises only generic units and does not address the professional key competencies of English language skills, LOTE skills and the actual transfer skills necessary for interpreting and translating, which can only be addressed by training in the language specific units of competence of the Diploma and Advanced Diploma qualifications.

With over 7,000 languages world-wide, language-based shortages continue. According to NAATI's Annual Report 2018/19, they currently test about 23 languages³⁶ with a plan to test in approximately 60 languages by the end of 2022.³⁷ NAATI also issues Recognised Practising interpreter and translator credentials in languages of emerging or low-demand where NAATI does not offer testing. According to NAATI, agencies and clients who engage practitioners who hold a NAATI Recognised Practising

³¹ Western Australian Institute of Translators and Interpreters, July 2020.

³² Western Australian Institute of Translators and Interpreters, March 2020.

³³ Western Australian Institute of Translators and Interpreters, March 2020.

³⁴ National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters, March 2020.

³⁵ National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters, [Indigenous Interpreting Project](#).

³⁶ National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters, [Annual Report: A Connected Community without language barriers 2018/19](#).

³⁷ National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters, March 2020.



Credential will know that they meet the minimum experience and ability to interact as translator or interpreter within the Australian community.³⁸

Varied Standards of Service Delivery. Discussions with industry point to an environment that is less clear-cut. Onus is placed on the LSP and the paying client to ensure high standard of service by interpreters and translators who have the capability and capacity to meet the communication needs of community and relevant stakeholders. However, quality can be uneven and the qualifications and professional status of those providing language services are not uniform. When a shortfall of professionals is countered by using non-qualified personnel, the ensuring quality of service tends to vary significantly. Using services of volunteer or untrained contracted practitioners results in often poor, inappropriate, or less effective service delivery and introduces high risk for potential liability.³⁹ There are multiple reports in the literature about service delivery in complex settings by inexperienced and underqualified or unqualified practitioners, due to current market shortages and the drought of qualified individuals. Research into language service provision in legal and courtroom settings explores some of these issues.^{40, 41} Part of this can be attributed to critical shortages, low-cost or low-quality competition,⁴² inappropriate commissioning processes and inadequate control measures.⁴³ However, formal qualifications are integral to quality assurance. While the Department of Finance have a Common Use Agreement (CUA) with LSPs, the Western Australian Institute of Translators and Interpreters points to incidences of LSPs sending what is available when unable to meet what has been specified in the Agreement due to the serious supply problem. It is critical interpreters and translators have the knowledge and skills to meet their role and that their training includes curricula on community interpreting and specifically addresses community contexts.⁴⁴ Appropriately trained interpreters are more likely to maintain high standards of service and in turn contribute to government management of risk and reduced liability.

On an international scale, higher education studies dominate: 89% of linguistic workers (translators and interpreters) hold a Bachelor degree or higher as the highest level of education reached. More than half have formal translator or interpreter education.⁴⁵ In Australia, people working as interpreters predominantly hold formal qualifications at Diploma, Advanced Diploma, Bachelor and postgraduate levels, while a majority of people working as translators hold Bachelor and/or Postgraduate degrees.⁴⁶ This data, however, does not indicate the field in which these have been completed and the relevance of these qualifications to interpreting and/or translating. The University of WA offers a Diploma of Modern Languages and a Masters of Translation Studies. AIWT, Babel International College and Stanley College are the only providers offering the Advanced Diploma of Translating. A nationally endorsed Diploma of Translating exists under AQF. However, a Diploma level course equates NAATI Certification at the Provisional level only which is not available for translators. AIWT, Babel College and Stanley College offer the Diploma of Interpreting.

NAATI testing is not designed to skill a workforce. It only sets a language specific benchmark for interpreting and translating in a limited range of languages. The mechanism is not a measure of behavioural competency. Qualifications, on the other hand, focus on the development of both specific interpreting and translating skills and complementary language and skill development. Ideally people should be both qualified and meet the NAATI credential requirements as was the case for the majority of interpreters in WA under the NAATI Accreditation scheme.

It is critical to develop and train experienced, qualified interpreters to ensure an appropriately skilled national workforce in the years to come, particularly as experienced ageing practitioners retire. Low qualification uptake poses significant barriers to skilling a critical workforce. Succession planning for new entrants to hold more than NAATI credentials is key. Pay differentials are needed which distinguish

³⁸ National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters, [Recognised Practising](#).

³⁹ Bloomsbury Academic, [Community Translation](#), Mustapha Taibi and Uldis Ozolins, 2016.

⁴⁰ The Journal of Specialised Translation, [Ensuring interpreting quality in legal and courtroom settings: Australian Language Service Providers' perspectives on their role](#), by Ludmila Stern and Xin Liu.

⁴¹ The Interpreter and Translator Trainer, [See you in court: how do Australian institutions train legal interpreters?](#) by Ludmila Stern and Xin Liu.

⁴² CSA Research, [The State of the Linguistic Supply Chain 2020](#), January 2020.

⁴³ Bloomsbury Academic, [Community Translation](#), Mustapha Taibi and Uldis Ozolins, 2016.

⁴⁴ Bloomsbury Academic, [Community Translation](#), Mustapha Taibi and Uldis Ozolins, 2016.

⁴⁵ CSA Research, [The State of the Linguistic Supply Chain 2020](#), January 2020.

⁴⁶ ABS, 2016 Census, [Census Qualification Level Mismatch](#) spreadsheet provided by DTWD.



those who hold formal qualifications and those who are only credentialed. It is important to incentivise uptake of formal qualifications and ensure access to relevant training in the State at Diploma level and above. Training needs to be affordable, relative to people's remuneration. VET qualifications are holistic sets of units of competency for skilling individuals in the competencies required for quality service provision. As the only providers of the Diploma of Interpreting (LOTE-English) and Advanced Diploma of Translating in Western Australia,⁴⁷ private RTOs should attract government funding to subsidise training costs and make it more feasible for students to undertake a formal qualification. The Diploma holds a holistic set of units of competency to skill individuals in the competencies required for quality service provision. However, as the VET translating qualifications continue to be used by international students to gain points for migration purposes, funding caveats would be needed to ensure government training subsidies are attracting (and are limited to) WA residents to undertake studies attached to language specific shortages.

North Metropolitan TAFE continues to deliver Auslan-English courses. Their delivery of the Diploma of Interpreting (Auslan-English), which is NAATI endorsed, can now be attained within a shorter six-month period due to a change in delivery to accommodate occupational supply shortages. It is suited for people who have completed a Diploma of Auslan, demonstrated Auslan proficiency skills, and some experience in interpreting. Access Plus WA Deaf offer classes in Basic, Intermediate and Advanced Auslan to fast-track skills at different levels to meet the growing demand.

Future Outlook. Strategies to address supply and demand need to focus on availability, access and cost of language specific training. According to CSA's international research,⁴⁸ the departure of qualified linguists (interpreters and translators) from the talent pool, combined with historic drops in enrolment in language studies is likely to create a shortage of resources. Tightening supply on top of growing demand for human language services makes it inevitable that most providers will face challenges in finding and retaining qualified staff in the future. The Australian Government anticipates a moderate growth in future demand for this occupation.⁴⁹

National 2016 Census figures point to an ageing female dominated occupation with 62% interpreters and 55% translators being 45 years or older.⁵⁰ The ageing workforce continues to create its own succession challenges, particularly given the lead time for occupational competence across different sectors and community groups. More needs to be done to create career pathways through training and to promote this occupation to young people and ensure an adequate pipeline of talented and qualified interpreters to meet the increasing demand.

While frustrations regarding pay and work conditions continue for those working in the industry, the growing demand for interpreters and translators has meant that attrition due to insufficient availability of work is less of an issue. A recent international report points to a great majority of translators likely and very likely to remain working in the profession to ages well beyond retirement age.⁵¹ The rise in work opportunities (particularly in relation to NDIS and Auslan-English/Deaf interpreting services and Aboriginal interpreting and translating services) is creating more sustainable career opportunities for interpreters.⁵²

COVID-19

Operational Impact of COVID-19. While the need for interpreting and translating services will continue to grow, the impact of COVID-19 and the subsequent government restrictions has seen significant cancellations of interpreting and translation services. On-site service delivery and most face-to-face (F2F) appointments have stopped. Conversely, this has meant a huge demand for online and telephone services. Financially, lack of F2F delivery has meant a significant loss of income for both individuals

⁴⁷ Babel International College and Stanley College, March 2020.

⁴⁸ CSA Research, [The State of the Linguistic Supply Chain 2020](#), January 2020.

⁴⁹ Australian Government, [Job Outlook – Interpreter](#).

⁵⁰ Australian Government, [Job Outlook – Interpreter](#).

⁵¹ CSA Research, [The State of the Linguistic Supply Chain 2020](#), January 2020.

⁵² Australian Government, [Job Outlook – Interpreter](#).



and service providers. Similarly, the loss of income has been further impacted by the shift to telephone interpreting which is remunerated at approximately half the rate of F2F delivery. Resulting issues with technology, communication, hours of work, service outcomes and increased levels of stress are having a negative impact on those in the sector.

According to WAITI, interpreters appear to have been more affected than translators, mainly due to the nature of their work. However, closure of and change to operating practices of relevant offices meant little, if any, document process for translators. The closure of national borders and international tourism has put a halt on the ability to earn income for those working in business and diplomatic domains. The severely diminished revenue, the challenges of online/telephone service delivery and the ongoing issue of training are affecting levels of optimism.

Training has also been impacted. People undertaking interpreting AUSLAN classes were unable to complete group classes due to venue shutdowns. For interpreting, F2F lessons were converted to online delivery and F2F assessments were put on hold until these were possible.

However, since the easing of restrictions, F2F interpreting has returned to almost pre-COVID-19 levels, specifically in the health and legal sectors.

Health Concerns. Health concerns and the need for social distancing have adversely affected the ability or willingness to provide F2F interpreting services, support work and training. A majority of the F2F work was ceased or cancelled, with many people reluctant to accept F2F assignments, particularly in medical settings or with clients they may not know. The F2F work has continued in hospitals and other health areas, and the Administrative Appeals Tribunal, although in a reduced capacity. To overcome some health concerns of exposure, WAITI advocated for the provision of PPE for interpreters and facilitated clear procedural instructions for F2F interpreting assignments in hospitals.

Challenges of Telephone and Virtual Interpreting. There have been many challenges for those providing telephone interpreting and communicating by use of virtual platforms. Other than a significant reduction in revenue/wages, the hurried implementation of technology and platforms has led to system and communication breakdowns. Across a breadth of stakeholders (government agency, non-government organisation staff and clients) there is a lack of familiarity with telephone interpreting techniques, requirements, and social conventions. Communication is less satisfactory potentially affecting outcomes, specifically in critical areas such as mental health. Use of technology was not always fit for purpose and most of the technology was inadequate. Many people do not have access to the right equipment and do not understand the operating systems being used. Much of the equipment needs to be upgraded but the expense is too financially burdensome. Characteristics such as age, gender, cultural background and loss of visual input (non-verbal components of a message to be interpreted) need to be considered when determining mode of communication. Reportedly, these are causing serious communication issues.

COVID-19 has caused stress for everyone involved. Some do not believe there is such a thing called a virus, that it is a conspiracy instead; others get frustrated by the inconvenience caused by the lockdown and other restrictions, all of which complicate interpreting sessions via phone and/or video even further with the interpreter being made the scapegoat in many instances.

Other Communication Issues. Serious communication issues are caused by age gaps: lack of awareness of younger staff/professionals that many older Australians from certain ethnic/cultural backgrounds do not understand common technology jargon and often do not even have a computer. (e.g. to the client: you need to reboot; which operating system are you using; click on the hyperlink – you will find a dialogue box).

Heightened Stress Levels. Interpreters have reported significant increases in levels of stress and adverse physical effects, flagging potential health issues resulting from extended telephone sessions. Many are overwhelmed with calls, working long hours. Social distancing has also impacted their ability to debrief with colleagues, leading to isolation and potential mental health issues. For many, the recent reliance on technology and dominance of telephone interpreting has highlighted the critical relevance of F2F delivery in the provision of quality interpreting services to adequately meet the needs of clients.

Government Assistance. Discussions with Access Plus (Auslan) have indicated that JobKeeper assisted their cash flow, enabling them to keep many of their staff employed. Eligible casuals have been able to provide additional hours to assist with project work. However, According to WAITI, none of the



WA language service providers (LOTEs other than Auslan) had applied for JobKeeper in the last quarter, unable to prove a 30% decrease. The few interpreters who were able to access JobKeeper, did so via a contractual employment with an interstate language provider.

Customer Best Interests. Projections on recovery and foreseeable barriers/workforce restraints are supply and demand of appropriately skilled staff once community restrictions are lifted. Many clients will be wanting services that they have been delaying due to current restrictions and service providers may not have the capacity to deliver. This was already a pressing issue prior to the pandemic. Key concerns for those in the sector: suitably qualified, trained and experienced professionals; services are delivered in the best interest of the customer rather than the bottom line (including mode of delivery); and support to all parties with the purchase, implementation and use of technology (including training).

Qualifications and Training. The real workforce restraint continues to be formally qualified (appropriately trained translator and interpreter practitioners) with training including new technologies and their pitfalls in a professional context. This includes implementation of new technologies for appropriate purposes. Reportedly, there are about 650 interpreters in WA, and only 100 (in only 21 languages) are able to work at the level required for courts and sensitive health encounters. NAATI's certification means people providing language services are doing so with or without qualifications and this has huge implications for service quality, appropriateness and standards. Formal training and skill set development of those practicing without formal qualifications should be reviewed to address some of the critical gaps.

There is a general shortage of properly qualified practitioners in languages of newly emerging communities and the elderly of non-English speaking backgrounds. Languages with supply problems in WA: Amharic, Arabic, Bengali, Chin, Dari, Dinka, Indonesian, Italian, Karen, Khmer, Persian (Farsi), Portuguese, Punjabi, Tagalog, Thai, Tigrinya, Vietnamese. Underlined languages have been an issue for many years. All LSPs (state and interstate) draw on the same pool of practitioners.

Challenges posed by technology (telephone/mobile and virtual; communication platforms) need to be addressed, both linguistically and in practical terms. The practitioner's Code of Ethics and Conduct should be reviewed in light of these changes. Awareness raising/training of government agency and NGO staff in the use of new technologies for interpreting and the role of interpreters in that context is vital to improve communication. Properly trained users of interpreting/translation services will result in best practice and consequently reduced cost due to effective use of time and resources. Training should include public sector agency staff who have contact with clients of non-English speaking background in working with interpreters face-to-face, by telephone and virtual communication platforms. At OMI's request WAITI developed a 3-hour workshop to address some of these issues.

It is important that formally qualified interpreters and translators who were awarded a permanent NAATI accreditation credential embedded in the qualifications remain visible and clearly identifiable on the NAATI website. In April 2020, WAITI has written to the Minister, the Honourable Paul Papalia, alerting him that the verification tool for interpreters and translators holding permanent NAATI accreditation has been removed from NAATI's website, meaning NAATI no longer verifies an accreditation credential of such qualified professionals, many of whom are trained and qualified in languages of high demand and short supply. Industry maintains its support for formal qualifications and sees growing deficiencies in NAATI's alternatives.