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**The protection and promotion of sign languages and the rights of their users in Council of Europe member states: needs analysis**

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*La protection et la promotion des langues des signes et des droits de leurs utilisateurs dans les Etats membres du Conseil de l'Europe : analyse des besoins*

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## Abstract

This paper describes the needs of sign language users in Europe and offers practical and concrete recommendations which aim to grant this linguistic minority full access to and participation in society based on equal rights.

It starts with a description of the idea of *Linguistic Human Rights* which serves as basis for the perspective of Deaf<sup>1</sup> sign language users taken in this paper. An insight into the discussion of defining and understanding Deafness is provided. Four chapters describe central aspects of *language acquisition*, of *Deaf education*, of Deaf sign language users as *citizens* and of *free access* through technology. In conclusion twenty-five *recommendations* regarding language policy, education, democratic participation and self-determination of sign language users are presented.

In summary, it is necessary to take measures to protect, promote and support the fields of research, use, teaching and learning of the national sign

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<sup>1</sup> It is a convention to capitalize the D in order to differ between merely 'non-hearing' 'hard of hearing' deaf people and those who form a cultural community defined by the knowledge and use of a signed language: Deaf people. People with a severe hearing loss but no community membership and no everyday use of a sign language are usually not addressed with the capitalized Deaf.

language/s of every country. Furthermore, it should be secured that education for Deaf/hard of hearing sign language users is offered in a bilingual mode with the national spoken language and the national signed language as both the subject and means of communication. The focus of policy concerning Deaf/hard of hearing sign language should lie on securing equal opportunities by providing equal educational options, primarily by training fully bilingual teachers, preferably native sign language users. Finally, it will be necessary that states come up with specific action plans to secure civil and human rights for users of sign languages.

## **1. A question of perspective**

Deaf people are the creators, preservers and users of the signed languages of Europe and other parts of the world. This text focuses exclusively on rights of *Deaf sign language users*. (It does not include in its focus the growing number of hearing people who learn sign languages and are in varying degrees and ways associated with the Deaf community for various reasons, see Jokinen 2001).

### **1.1. Prerequisite: Linguistic Human Rights**

This text is based on the concept of Linguistic Human Rights (LHR) as described in Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (1995). The LHR ideal and idea on an individual level means:

- the right to positively identify with one's language(s),
- and to have others respect this identification, no matter if it is a majority or minority language,
- the right to a native language,
- the right to learn it,
- the right to have it developed in formal schooling by being taught through it,
- the right to use it in official contexts (school, hospital, police, naming of children, religion),
- and the right to learn one of the official languages of the state.

On a collective level Linguistic Human Rights include the right:

- of minority groups to exist (the right to be “different”),
- to enjoy and develop the language and create educational settings in which one can influence/control curricula,
- to teach the language,
- to be represented in political contexts as a group,
- to be able to independently and autonomously handle and decide on community matters with regard to culture, education, social affairs and religion,
- to have financial resources to achieve such aims.<sup>1</sup>

The authors explain:

*“People who are deprived of Linguistic Human Rights may thereby be prevented from enjoying other human rights, including fair political representation, a fair trial, access to education, access to information and freedom of speech, and maintenance of their cultural heritage.” (Skutnabb-Kangas, Phillipson 1995:2).*

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<sup>1</sup> see Skutnabb-Kangas, Phillipson 1995:12 and Skutnabb-Kangas 2000:498.

In other words, Linguistic Human Rights are the prerequisite for several human rights. And Sign Languages are the key to social integration, as Stevens writes:

*“Instead of solely viewing deafness as a ‘deficit’ or medical condition in need of repair, more attention should be paid to improving access in all spheres of life: education, work, communication, etc. In this context, sign languages are a pivotal key to social integration. Hence the issue of sign languages recognition becomes a true question of human rights.” (Stevens 2005:2)*

Again, one important precondition for Linguistic Human Rights for Deaf people is the official recognition of sign languages:

*“Recognition of a Sign Language will not solve all problems of its users at once - and maybe not even in the nearer future. But legal recognition of Sign Languages will secure the social and legal space for its users to stop the tiresome work of constant self-defence and start creative, self-defined processes and developments. Legal recognition of a language will give a minority space to think and desire and plan and achieve the many other things its members think they need or want. Basic security in*

*the form of language rights will influence educational and other most relevant practices deeply.” (Krausneker 2003:11)*

The proclaimed rights for individuals and collectives are taken to be goals to be achieved by nation states. The current legal status of sign languages in individual countries has been documented by the Council of Europe (for a description see Timmermans 2005).

## **1.2. Linguistic minority and disability: difference or deficit?**

It has been a matter of debate whether Deaf people form a linguistic minority group or are to be defined by their hearing loss, i.e. their “disability”. Due to lack of space a discussion of the term “disabled” cannot be given here. However, the author assumes that *disability* does not describe individual, physical abilities or limitations thereof but is a complex phenomenon that should be understood primarily by its social functioning, implications and aspects. The controversy whether Deaf people are disabled or a linguistic minority exists with regards to sign language users, not only in everyday discourse but especially in official, legal contexts and matters of the state. The relevant international literature on Deafness, Deaf rights and Deaf history clearly identifies fundamentally different perspectives of sign language users that can be detected throughout theory and practice. A short,

generalised summary of these views shall be provided here in order to enable a deeper understanding of the issue:

### **One perspective: Deafness as a deficit**

This perspective focuses on the fact that Deaf people do not hear (well). Deficit-oriented approaches focus solely on the hearing deficit and see deafness as a medical abnormality that shall be cured as fast and best as possible. These – often medical – views of deafness usually aim at eliminating deafness and “integrating” Deaf people into the hearing world by using all technical and medical aids available. This view is rooted in a medical understanding of the human being that points out deficits and aims at eliminating unwanted "otherness". It is problematic because it creates an enormous pressure on Deaf people to assimilate and to act and live as “hearing as possible” and has caused a great degree of "colonisation" of Deaf communities (Ladd 2003). One effect of this is that those Deaf adults who insist on maintaining their community and who fearlessly cherish their culture are in many countries denounced as ignorant deniers of technical advancement and unworldly by doctors and educators alike. The Deaf advocate Helga Stevens describes this accurately:

*“Many professionals active in the ‘deaf field’ (doctors, parents, teachers, etc. most of whom are hearing) continue to view*

*deafness as an 'impairment', as a 'problem' which needs to be cured and solved by all means. In the so-called deaf field the medical model of disability is unfortunately still widespread. This means that the 'problem' lies within the individual, in our case the deaf child or person. It is him or her who needs to adapt to society. S/he needs to conform to 'normality'. This means s/he should be like a hearing person. Learn to speak and get a CI."*  
(Stevens 2005:2)<sup>1</sup>

The most problematic effect of the deficit-oriented approach is that it created the claim that there “are no more deaf children” because the “malady” can be repaired by surgery. Those professionals who define deafness solely as “the maximum degree of hearing loss” guide all children and teenagers who have just a little bit of hearing towards the group that is “just hard of hearing”. Those educators and doctors subsequently argue that there is “no need” to use a sign language. The mere existence of sign language communities is often ignored and peoples’ need or *preference* for a signed language is belittled. The resulting problems will be discussed in the following chapter.

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<sup>1</sup> Author's comment: CI is the abbreviation for Cochlear Implant, a surgically implanted hearing aid. For more see Preisler 2002.

## **Another perspective: Deaf people as a linguistic minority**

A social/linguistic definition of “deafness” is one of difference rather than deficit. It includes anybody whose hearing ability is such that they cannot acquire spoken language naturally or has difficulties in mastering everyday information and communication via a spoken language. For many of those people it is truly only a visual language that can be acquired and used easily.

Deaf people usually form communities where membership depends on language competence and use. Deaf sign language communities exist in every country of the world and have survived decades of discrimination, of pressure to assimilate linguistically due to ignorance and disrespect towards their language. However, signed languages have remained an integral and irreplaceable part of their community lives. The linguistic/social view of Deafness respects these facts and understands Deaf people in the network of communities rather than as individual non-hearing people.

Most Deaf sign language users have a strong (conscious or unconscious) identity as a linguistic minority, foster Deaf culture and are well organised from regional to an international level (Deaf clubs, national associations of the Deaf, European Union of the Deaf, World Federation of the Deaf) – which

distinguishes them from people who are termed “hard of hearing”.

This view is also supported by the historical fact that the Deaf have formed a group and have been organised internationally since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (and possibly before) and also the fact that group membership was, and is, based on the knowledge and use of a signed language and the related culture. This view is concisely summarised by a collective of authors:

*“Deaf communities are best understood as language minorities rather than a group of disabled people. Deaf communities have experienced a savage form of linguistic oppression which has sought to replace their languages but which has also, often, deprived Deaf communities of access and literacy, access to education, to knowledge about shared collective history and culture. Sign languages have endured in spite of this oppression, which has fostered in its turn a strong community spirit and collective identity.” (Ladd et al. 2003a:20)*

Most discriminations against and disadvantages of Deaf people are based on (spoken) language competency (or lack thereof) and not on the hearing deficit. Nevertheless, barriers are another central aspect relevant for understanding sign language users' situation. Deaf sign language users are

excluded from certain services and information based on their physical disability to hear - just like other groups of people with disabilities. For Deaf people to have access to full information sometimes requires acoustic signals to be transformed into visual signals. That means there is a certain aspect of full access to information that lies outside the realm of language. The term "audism" - discrimination based on the ability to hear - actually includes any kind of exclusion, maltreatment and threat and can be observed in many ways.

After long discussions the European Union of the Deaf (EUD) decided that the linguistic view of Deafness can be teamed up with the disability aspect and stated that both apply: Deaf people view themselves as a cultural and linguistic minority. But they encounter barriers put up by society, suffer from lack of access and are therefore also "disabled". (EUD 1997: 10ff)

Thus, it can be concluded that Deaf sign language users are a linguistic minority and also a group of people with disabilities. Why is this understanding crucial for policy makers? Many countries which treat Deaf needs merely within the framework of disability ignore the linguistic aspect – maybe because they simply do not "fit in". Within disability frameworks there is often no space, no tool, no terminology and no expertise to deal with a linguistic minority. Reducing Deaf sign language users to a

matter of disability does not account for their needs, on the contrary:

*“Not enough is known about status of Deaf sign language users and the Deaf culture and history because policies have persisted in categorising Deaf people as disabled against all evidence.” (Ladd et al. 2003b:74)*

Any classification that does not include both aspects (linguistic minority and disability) would imply ignoring part of sign language users' reality. With these basic clarifications in place lets move to the topic of language acquisition.

## **2. Language acquisition**

*Deaf children exposed to signed languages from birth acquire these languages on an identical maturational time course as hearing children acquire spoken languages. Deaf children acquiring signed languages do so without any modification, loss, or delay to the timing, content, and maturational course associated with reaching all linguistic milestones observed in spoken language (e.g., Charron & Petitto 1987, 1991; Petitto 1984, 1985, 1987a, 1988; Petitto & Bellugi 1988 ; Petitto & Charron 1988; Petitto & Marentette 1990, 1991) – a finding that is also corroborated in the important findings of other researchers (e.g., Bellugi & Klima 1982; Meier*

*1991; Newport & Meier 1985). (Chamberlain et al. 2000)*

For any child that does not hear well, natural language acquisition by ear is difficult. Language learning via written text in school can result in full literacy but does certainly not substitute pre-school, age-adequate, natural language acquisition processes. There is evidence that the human brain suffers numerous negative consequences if age-adequate language input is denied. In the attempt to secure age-adequate access to linguistic structures for a Deaf child, it is only logical to make use of the visual mode and the visual (signed) languages available in the world - instead of insisting on learning only a spoken language which the child is unable to access or decode easily. By way of a visual language, any child can acquire grammar and vocabulary in the time period it should (from birth on, as Chamberlain et al. have proven and described in fascinating detail in 2000) - and not only after s/he has been diagnosed, fitted with hearing aids and trained to read/lipread.

The second factor pivotal for understanding language needs of the Deaf is the fact that second language learning functions are based on the first language. There is a fundamental need for an acquired first language (or two first languages) as a basis to learning further languages, like any spoken/written language. Cummins (2003) has shown that this is also true for sign language users.

## **2.1. The right to a language**

The large majority of Deaf people do not grow up in a signing environment and usually experience a difficult path full of obstacles and detours before they acquire a sign language. They are born into hearing families with no knowledge of sign language and Deaf culture and in many countries their parents are usually advised not to introduce their child to a sign language community. Numerous Deaf children are denied the possibility to acquire a language age-adequate and barrier-free. For many of the children who are steered away from any sign language this causes late immersion into to a fully fledged, visually understandable language and consequently extreme delays in its acquisition.

## **2.2. The right to have a choice**

Many Deaf associations in the world demand the right to free language choice for sign language users – especially in the educational setting. In various Council of Europe member states education for sign language users is still purely or mostly offered in a spoken language. Speech is thought to be the most important goal of deaf education in order to integrate the Deaf into the hearing society. Research in the field of second language learning has proven that a naturally developed first language is needed to learn further languages. There is a need for a functioning language so that others can

be explained, understood and learned. And there is, obviously, a need to be taught in a comprehensible language. In most countries, however, there is no right for Deaf people to sign language as the medium of instruction.

### **2.3.The need for bilingual language competency**

For sign language users there is a daily need for bilingual language competency. The signed language serves to experience and practice barrier-free, unrestricted and pleasant communication. The spoken/written language is necessary to make oneself “heard” in the hearing majority community and “have a voice” there. Literacy is crucial for gaining access to written information and to education. Many Deaf people, however, have minimal to insufficient writing and reading competency and can be classed as functionally illiterate.

### **2.4.Parent counselling and support**

Hearing parents of Deaf children often lack any knowledge of sign languages or the Deaf community. They often make decisions based solely on "professional" advice which is grounded in the deficit-oriented, medical perspective (as described above). The medical counselling that parents receive often does not include information regarding the possibilities of sign languages and how much valuable support the Deaf community could provide.

They miss holistic views of Deafness and access to sign language. However, this biased information and perspective is not always the best for the child – because s/he subsequently grows up with a negative self image. S/he might experience efforts of doctors and parents to change her/him and turn her/him into a hearing person instead of getting loving acceptance of who s/he is. The child very often lives without full participation in family communication, because the family does not adapt to the child and does not communicate visually via a sign language (that could of course be learned for the child's sake).

No matter whether parents are hearing or Deaf: only they can facilitate and enable the basis and beginning of their Deaf child's sign language acquisition, which is of utmost importance. Therefore the better parents are informed, the greater are the chances that their Deaf child will have his/her true needs be looked after. In many countries parents only receive medical counselling and early intervention focused solely on spoken language.

### **3. Deaf education**

*There is a need for greater numbers of deaf language models in the classroom, and such models should demonstrate bilingual fluencies. Hearing individuals in the classroom also need to demonstrate bilingual fluencies, and higher*

*expectations for sign language skill can only enhance access to information in the classroom and language abilities of children with hearing loss. (Marschark et.al. 2002:228)*

### **3.1. Same standards**

Segregated educational institutions for Deaf people exist in every country. These schools for the Deaf are perceived as important places where sign languages are passed on and pupils interact with one another, feeling they are among equals. Sign language users who have been mainstreamed into hearing schools and classes frequently report influential and far-reaching experiences of isolation - as was documented and described by Oliva (2004). Therefore the sign language community does (unlike other disability groups) not oppose special education/segregated education in separate Schools for the Deaf.

Yet in many of those schools the curriculum, levels and degrees do not equal those offered in regular schools. For historical reasons (i.e. the old belief that Deaf can not possibly achieve the same as hearing) these curricula aim at much less than the standard school curriculum - a fact that is often criticised by the sign language community.

### **3.2. Bilingual competence**

Schools for the Deaf could be central in turning linguistically deprived Deaf children into fully bilingual adults who use two languages (one signed and one written) to a high level and can consequently function in both the Deaf and the hearing world. But in most countries this kind of sign bilingualism is never taught nor reached by most pupils. As mentioned above (chapter 1) the framework of Linguistic Human Rights perceives it as a crucial prerequisite for full participation in society that members of linguistic minorities have bilingual competencies.

### **3.3. Deaf teachers**

In most European countries there are no or very few teachers and lecturers who are Deaf themselves. This leads to a situation where sign language using pupils have no role models for language and identity. It furthermore leads to a reality in which Deaf children in Schools for the Deaf get no linguistic input on a first language, adult level. Another consequence is the fact that in deaf education in many places little attention is paid to Deaf adult experts. Ladd et al. therefore demand “An end to the current widespread practice of non-Deaf people making decisions about Deaf people.” (2003b:68) and argue “The identity defined by Deaf

people themselves should have greater legitimacy than ones chosen by majority groups.” (ibid.)

With this in mind lets look into the field of the state and equal participation of Deaf sign language users in society.

#### **4. State affairs: The Deaf citizen**

*Deaf awareness must be put in place across a number of public sector arenas wherever public services require direct interaction with Deaf people. By way of example, there is an urgent need for sign language training and Deaf awareness for all police in Europe’s police forces. (Ladd et al. 2003b:70)*

##### **4.1. Language choice**

Citizens’ rights for sign language users are frequently not fully existent because of the lack in language based possibilities to have access to and take part in processes. Many administrations and civil servants are of the erroneous opinion that written information is well accessible for Deaf people because it is visible. There is no knowledge and understanding that for sign language users the official spoken language is actually their second language and many are only partially literate. The need to communicate and inform in a sign language is only very slowly understood and accepted.

## **4.2. The right to information**

Spoken language (Radio, TV) and written language (printed media and subtitles) are rarely fully accessible for many Deaf people. The right to information (e.g. via national television and sign language interpreters or signed homepages) is therefore mostly fulfilled only on a limited scale.

## **4.3. Telecommunication**

The use of telecommunication is only fully possible for Deaf people in the places where telephone relay services are provided. That is, interpreters in telephone relay centres transfer spoken language into text (text messages, fax, TTY, chat, e-mail) or into signed text (video telephone, chat) and back. Only such services enable any hearing person to communicate with Deaf people via telephone.

## **4.4. Fair trials**

Deaf people often endure court hearings and trials in which they can neither understand everything nor adequately express and represent themselves. This lack of understanding is often caused by faulty interpretations by "interpreters" lacking sign language knowledge. Another reason can be the Deaf persons embarrassment, pride or lack of linguistic competency (due to the schooling system).

#### **4.5. Medical and other important services**

Many services can only be accessed and used by sign language users if the necessary language prerequisites are taken care of. Medical and other important services rely heavily on a high level, functioning communication.

The responsibility for taking measures and enabling high-quality communication for sign language users as patients, clients, citizens can only be taken by the state. In all aspects of life described above, communication usually and mostly depends of availability and trainings of highly qualified professional sign language interpreters.

#### **5. A matter of free access: putting technology to use**

As mentioned above most aspects of discrimination, exclusion and disadvantages against Deaf sign language users are grounded in language. Nevertheless there are areas where information, safety and navigation can only be secured by putting to use any technology. These include all kinds of warnings and alarms (from announcements to fire alarm), emergency services, intercom communication and information etc. – for most of which exist visual versions and substitutes. Although they are available, they are not made use of in many places. Having merely touched on five fundamental aspects in the field of Deaf sign

language users, this paper now concludes with 25 practical recommendations for future measures.

## **6. Conclusions and 25 recommendations**

Sign languages are fully fledged, natural languages with the same function and variety as spoken languages. They are used and needed by Deaf communities all over the world. The fact that sign language users rely on a different language than the majority – and sometimes the fact that they have limited hearing – has led to a number of inequalities and discriminations. The following 25 recommendations concern the securing of rights in all fields of life for approximately 800.000 sign language users in Council of Europe member states.

### **Recommendation 1: Legal recognition of sign languages**

All countries should strive for legal recognition of their national sign language/s in their national laws and/or their constitution. This should include recognition as minority languages where possible. The goal and effect of these laws should be concrete linguistic rights for Deaf people in all domains of life.

## **Recommendation 2: Inclusion of the Deaf viewpoint**

Deaf people are *per se* able to live independently and to speak for themselves. The 'Deaf voice/viewpoint' should be supported, made available and be respected in the majority hearing world. To ensure that measures cater to actual needs, especially policy makers should consult Deaf associations and Deaf researchers/experts.

## **Recommendation 3: Reduce assimilatory pressure**

The hearing world should respect the existence of sign language users, value their diversity and reduce the imposed force to assimilate that is in progress. Deaf sign language users should be granted full citizens' and linguistic human rights without forcing hearing standards onto them. Governments should raise public awareness with regard to the signing minority/minorities in their countries and spread a positive and respectful understanding of sign language users.

## **Recommendation 4: Take basic linguistic needs into account**

In order to protect and the promote the rights of sign language users the aspect of disability as well as the aspect of linguistic rights should be taken into account. When planning and taking measures, it

should be considered that most of the basic needs and concerns of the European sign language communities are linguistic.

### **Recommendation 5: Integrate sign language users' needs**

The needs of sign language communities in Europe should be viewed in the light of difference and not deficit. Their linguistic and cultural needs and characteristics should be respected. Sign language users issues should be related to relevant organizations and bodies, such as human rights and language committees, minority language organizations and departments, linguistic rights' advisory boards, support teams, and research institutions.

### **Recommendation 6: Enable natural language acquisition processes**

Adequate provision should be made to ensure that every person has sufficient access to a language in order for him/her to acquire it in early childhood between birth and the beginning of schooling. This should be facilitated and secured especially for Deaf babies, toddlers and children. Language acquisition should be achieved independently of the fact that a child may be a candidate for Cochlear Implant surgery (see the Council of Europe report by Preisler 2002). That means that visually significant linguistic input (i.e. a natural sign language - and not

gestures, mime or a synthetic gestural system) should be offered to every Deaf/hard of hearing infant and child, no matter which technical aids are considered for him/her.

### **Recommendation 7: Parent counselling**

Parent counselling should include and explain all views and possibilities of Deafness so that maximally informed parents can make their choices and decisions regarding their child based on all factors and not solely on a medical view.

### **Recommendation 8: Easy access to sign languages for families**

Access to a sign language should be made as simple and direct as possible for children born Deaf or hard of hearing. The same should account for their families. Every Deaf/hard of hearing baby (and his or her hearing family) should find an easy, state-supported and supervised path to enable age-adequate sign language acquisition. The costs for and organization of adequate sign language acquisition should be borne by the state, not by the parents or family.

### **Recommendation 9: Customize Deaf education**

Deaf education should be customised for the target group and focused on its strengths (visual attention and communication) and not on its 'deficit', the

hearing loss. This customisation should take into account the linguistic facts of language acquisition and second language learning. Highest possible quality of sign language use by teachers must be aimed at.

### **Recommendation 10: Make bilingualism the goal**

Bilingual language competence should be the goal of compulsory schooling for sign language users. Both the national sign language and the national spoken language (reading and writing) need to be taught.

### **Recommendation 11: Teacher requirements**

All people who work with Deaf children, pupils and teenagers should be competent in their respective national sign language and Deaf culture. The level of competence should be specified and examined - a minimum of B2 (CEFR) is suggested. People who are or want to become teachers of the Deaf should develop this language skill (ideally level C1 with the goal of reaching C2 within a certain specified amount of time) as part of their training or advanced education. Furthermore, they should learn about Deaf identity, culture and history, preferably taught by Deaf adults, in order to develop positive, non-deficit-oriented images of Deafness.

### **Recommendation 12: Special teacher training**

Deaf education is not simply special needs education. Deaf education requires specific knowledge and competence, and, therefore training of teachers should be offered as an independent programme, a special degree course or career.

### **Recommendation 13: Equal curricula**

The content of curricula and the aspirated goals/knowledge in Deaf education should in principle equal the one for hearing pupils. That means that also secondary and further education should be offered in a sign language to sign language users. For Deaf pupils with disabilities appropriate curriculum adjustments should be made.

### **Recommendation 14: Sign language as a language of education**

Any school for the Deaf should offer a bilingual programme. The national sign language should be used as the means of instruction for all subjects and should be taught as a language in a subject allocated just to it.

### **Recommendation 15: Sign language as a subject in school**

In schools for the Deaf the grammar and structure of the national sign language should be part of the curriculum and be taught as a separate subject.

### **Recommendation 16: Sign language as a foreign language**

In “regular”/mainstream schools the national sign language/s should be offered as a foreign language. In the long run sign language competency among hearing people will contribute to an inclusive society.

### **Recommendation 17: Avoid isolation**

Deaf children should not be mainstreamed on their own. In cases where circumstances or parents do not allow anything else, it should be secured that the child has access to and regular contact with the local sign language community. It should be secured that s/he has access to children and adults that will enable him/her to develop sign language competence, a positive identity, high self-esteem and group belonging.

### **Recommendation 18: Accessible higher education**

In many countries access to higher education is not available to sign language users. This should be changed under the principle of affirmative action. Sign language users should be encouraged to enter universities and sign language interpreting, note-taking assistants, free choice of language during exams, counselling and support should be made available. At the same time awareness-raising and information campaigns should be raised among administration, teaching staff and fellow students.

### **Recommendation 19: Democratic rights**

Sign language using citizens should have the opportunity to take part in any democratic process to the same degree as hearing citizens. This should be secured by use of sign language interpreters and closed captioning. Furthermore, the interests of sign language communities should be represented by Deaf sign language users in state departments and committees.

### **Recommendation 20: Barrier-free information and news**

Information on daily politics, state developments and news should be made available to sign language users. This should be secured by in-vision sign language interpreters and subtitling in

television; and/or by creating broadcasting formats/media (on TV or the Internet) made by sign language users in sign language(s).

### **Recommendation 21: Deaf experts**

Nobody knows more about the needs of Deaf sign language users than Deaf people themselves. Self-determination of Deaf sign language users should be supported: Financial matters, decision-making processes, publications etc. that are of relevance to the sign language community should be carried out in co-operation with or solely by Deaf experts.

### **Recommendation 22: Self determination**

Self-determination and Deaf expertise are inseparable. Only if Deaf sign language users get the chance to become experts they can act as such, counsel and co-determine. Affirmative action to train Deaf professionals is needed in the primary fields such as education, politics, communication and medicine.

### **Recommendation 23: Technology vs. barriers**

Barriers should be removed or technically reduced in order to increase Deaf people's chances on the job market - e.g. by state-funded telephone relay centres. Especially technical innovations and their consequent use should equalize the starting positions for Deaf sign language users.

## **Recommendation 24: Research sign languages**

The many erroneous opinions about sign languages should be corrected. Respect for sign languages as real languages should be increased through information and facts. Many sign languages are still underinvestigated and basic knowledge of their structure is lacking - therefore sign language research should be supported. Universities should receive financial incentives for research on the national sign language(s) and to start programs in Deaf studies (equivalent of Black Studies, Womens Studies, Jewish Studies...)

## **Recommendation 25: Professional sign language interpreting**

For linguistic minorities like the sign language communities interpreters are the key to participation in society. More and better interpreters are needed in nearly every Council of Europe member state. Universities should be strongly encouraged to create sign language interpreter training programmes and the existing interpreter organizations should be encouraged to help organise professional sign language interpreting standards.

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