



Legal Seat – Helsinki, Finland

**WORLD FEDERATION OF THE DEAF
WORLD FEDERATION OF THE DEAF YOUTH SECTION**

An International Non-Governmental Organisation in official liaison with ECOSOC, UNESCO, ILO, WHO and the Council of Europe. WFD was established in Rome in 1951.

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Statement and Guidelines on Best Practice for Access to Higher Education for Deaf Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented global health crisis affecting billions of people around the world. The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) and the World Federation of the Deaf Youth Section (WFDYS) are working to ensure the more than 70 million deaf people around the world are able to continue to participate in society on an equal basis.

Many national governments have adopted the World Health Organisation's (WHO) recommended public health measures to prevent the virus spreading and ensure the safety of their citizens. Many universities, colleges and other institutions of higher education have closed and shifted to online teaching in order to ensure continuity of education. National governments and educational institutions are using digitalisation and technologies to deliver the best possible education to their students at this time.

The WFD and WFDYS applaud these crucial and necessary measures, stressing the need to provide continuity of education for deaf students. The WFD and WFDYS stress deaf students must be kept in mind in this shift to other instructional alternatives during the pandemic.

Key points:

- **Deaf students must be considered in all planning and implementation efforts during the shift to remote and online education during the COVID-19 pandemic.**
- **Educational institutions should foresee the provision of national sign language interpretation for online and remote classes.**
- **All course materials must be accessible to all students at the time of release.**

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2006 and ratified by 113 countries, is an international legal instrument recognising persons with disabilities, including deaf and deaf youth, as rights holders. The CRPD recognises the right of deaf and deaf youth to have professional sign language interpreters to participate fully in all aspects of life and equal access to information. Moreover, deaf and deaf youth people have the right to exercise their freedom of expression and opinion, including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas in their national sign language(s). When it comes to tertiary education, the CRPD recognises the right of deaf students to receive reasonable accommodation when requested.

Education is crucial for full participation in society. In this current global health crisis, national governments and educational institutions must pay attention to the principle of the 2030 Agenda to leave no one behind and to reach the furthest behind first; including deaf youth.

To ensure the consistent provision of a quality and accessible online education to all deaf learners responding to their individual specific requirements, the WFD and WFDYS strongly advise national governments and educational institutions to immediately implement the following:

Guidelines on Best Practice

- Consult the deaf student on their preferred reasonable accommodation requirements. Those requirements include *inter alia* access to online lectures with certified professional national sign language interpreters and notetakers.
- Synchronous and asynchronous class lectures and discussions should be interpreted into the national sign language by qualified and certified sign language interpreters.
- Auditory and filmed course materials should be professionally subtitled for all learners, with alternatives made for interpretation in the national sign language if no subtitles are available. This alternative should be made available at the same time as the course materials are made available to all students.
- When using a national sign language interpreter to ensure the accessibility of their courses, educational institutions must ensure that their interpreters are qualified and accredited by their national interpreting organisation. In order to provide quality

interpreting, interpreters should be familiar with the subject of the class. Certified deaf interpreters can also be used.

- Students should have input in which national sign language interpreters are hired for the class and be able to request alternative interpreters if the ones chosen are not suitable.
- Quality national sign language interpretation must be provided without requesting additional fees from deaf students.
- Educational institutions, not the deaf students, are responsible for coordinating reasonable accommodation provisions.
- National sign language interpreters should have access to the teaching materials and other preparatory materials from the teacher prior to the class to provide quality and smooth interpretation to deaf students.
- The size of the interpreter screen must present at least 25% of the screen with slides and other materials used by the course instructors being clearly visible for both the deaf students and national sign language interpreters.
- In this current pandemic, national sign language interpreters may be reallocated to public health and safety work. If interpreters are not available, the class should be postponed until such a time as the university is able to provide full and equal access to all enrolled students. Alternately, the institution should find other solutions for full access, including recording classes for translation as immediately as possible, and without penalty to the deaf student.
- Postsecondary education institutions should contact their National Association of the Deaf for further support and guidance.