

To the governmental committee on Norwegian Sign Language (tegnspråkutvalget),

The section for Signed Language and Interpreting at NTNU has worked for many years across a range of interdisciplinary topics related to signed languages and deaf communities, and specifically on Norwegian Sign Language and the Norwegian deaf community. We teach Bachelor level students who are learning Norwegian Sign Language, who are training to become Norwegian-Norwegian Sign Language interpreters, and/or who are training to become teachers in schools across Norway. We also conduct research on a variety of topics, such as (signed language) linguistics and interpreting. Importantly, we—as a group of deaf and hearing colleagues—are invested in the deaf community and are actively working to support this community and its language, Norwegian Sign Language. Our many years of experience in the community provides us perspective on how we might be able to preserve and promote Norwegian Sign Language and create a more equitable society for members of the deaf community. Below you will find some of the most important issues to us—including challenges and potential solutions.

Documentation and research on Norwegian Sign Language

Currently, documentation work of Norwegian Sign Language at the Section is focused on the creation of a Corpus (a large representative sample of the language) and a lexical database (an inventory of the language's signs). These two resources are essential to the documentation and description of Norwegian Sign Language and can support research on a wide variety of research questions well into the future. This work aligns well with the Norwegian government's goal of preserving and promoting Norwegian Sign Language. Indeed, these resources have already led to a number of academic publications about the linguistics of Norwegian Sign Language. However, a main challenge to this work has been, and continues to be, capacity and competence.

Currently, there is no formal program of study where Norwegian, (deaf) people can gain expertise in (Norwegian) signed language linguistics—important skills for language documentation work. All university-level work on “signed language” is primarily conducted within interpreter training programs (where there is a focus on hearing students). Within these programs there may be some coursework on basic-level (signed language) linguistics, but we lack a dedicated place where (deaf) students can learn about linguistics and/or develop the academic skills needed to become competent researchers/linguists of Norwegian Sign Language. This has partly led to the situation we are in now: There are few linguists working on Norwegian Sign Language. None of these linguists are deaf, and most are foreigners. Norway needs deaf, native signing Norwegian linguists with the appropriate education and qualifications. Their insights and knowledge of Norwegian Sign Language cannot be understated.

Another important aspect to these challenges relates to financing. Documenting a language and archiving these resources takes many years and requires funding. While the initial archival of the Norwegian Sign Language Corpus has been covered by funding from several research projects, the Norwegian Sign Language lexical database is in a more precarious situation. Currently, this database is hosted in the Netherlands as part of a Global Signbank (<https://signbank.cls.ru.nl/>). However, the longevity of this resource is uncertain, and it may happen that we need to migrate the Norwegian database to Norway. In such a case, we would need to build the database with our own resources and infrastructure—which will no doubt require financing and technical expertise.

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In order to support documentation work on Norwegian Sign Language, we need secure, long-term investment/financing: 1) providing education and training so that Norway has competent Norwegian deaf linguists, e.g., through a dedicated study program, or by adding signed language linguistics to an existing linguistics program, 2) stable financing for corpus/lexical database work, 3) financing for research that uses the corpus and other methods in order to more fully document the grammar and lexicon of Norwegian Sign Language. This foundational work would support other research trajectories such as how different groups learn Norwegian Sign Language (e.g., deaf and hearing children, deaf and hearing adults) and how pedagogy can support the acquisition process. Such work could be carried out as part of a Sign Language Research Center of some kind, housed within a university. Dedicated, (full-time) positions could be financed to carry out the long-term work that is needed. For example, at Stockholm University they have at least one full-time position dedicated to developing their Swedish Sign Language lexical database. In Finland, the government has given long-term financing as well as a mandate to conduct research on Finnish Sign Language: <https://www.jyu.fi/hytk/fi/laitokset/kivi/opiskelu/tutkinto-ohjelmat-ja-oppiaineet/viittomakieli/english>.

Norwegian Sign Language interpreting

One of the main activities of the Section is training future Norwegian Sign Language-Norwegian interpreters. The Bachelor program is only three years but aims to 1) teach students adequate Norwegian Sign Language, 2) basic skills in Norwegian Sign Language-Norwegian simultaneous interpreting, 3) basic skills in interpreting and guiding deaf-blind persons, and 4) basic skills in voice-to-text captioning. Students who graduate from the program are certified to work as interpreters—even though they have acquired only basic level skills. Once these interpreters go out into the workforce, there are no programs in place to support them (e.g., mentor programs). Additionally, there is no requirement for continued and/or regular professional development. Norway also lacks systems for recognizing particular skills sets (e.g., in particular domains, such as health or legal) and overall competence. We believe this lack of this infrastructure, which is common in many countries, has serious consequences on the quality of Norwegian Sign Language interpreting provided in Norway, which negatively affects the choices deaf people have and how they are able to participate in social, political, and economic spheres in Norway.

We think one way to address these issues is to provide four years of training at the BA level. This could be achieved by either 1) lengthening the BA program from three to four years, or 2) by requiring basic level signed language skills before entering a three-year BA program (which is now being implemented at OsloMet, but could be expanded to NTNU and HVL). We also believe that signed language interpreters should be required to participate in regular and continuous professional development in order to maintain their status as working interpreters, again which is common in a number of countries. This professional development could take many forms: short-courses, university-led courses, workshops, conferences, etc. Such a systematic requirement also aligns with potential changes in how interpreters are qualified and paid—another way to lift the quality of signed language interpreting in Norway. Having different levels of qualification—from novice to expert—which are rewarded with different pay scales can have an important impact on how interpreters see their work and may motivate interpreters to seek out opportunities to become better signers and better qualified. Through these mechanisms, we may train more qualified interpreters to work in specialized settings and to work between Norwegian Sign Language and other spoken languages (such as

English, which has become an important language in many domains, such as higher education and various work sectors).

Norwegian Sign Language in (deaf) education

Primary and secondary education

There is a critical need for strong Norwegian Sign Language environments within schools and universities, and other educational institutions. If we are to provide good learning environments to deaf (and hearing students) in and about Norwegian Sign Language (oppl ring i og p  norsk tegnspr k, §5.1 og §2.6), then we need a critical mass of fluent signers. This can include deaf and hearing students, teachers, interpreters, and other staff. By fostering a critical mass of signers, deaf students will be able to directly interact with their peers and teachers, and, importantly, learn, without the need for an interpreter. Such a change in education has significant positive implications for deaf students. To further support Norwegian Sign Language in schools, more materials available in this language are needed. And we also propose that other professionals working in school environments, e.g., advisors (r dgivere), be required to know (about) Norwegian Sign Language and the deaf community so that advice to deaf students and their parents can be balanced (with regards to, what we believe is a current over-focus on assistive technologies).

Higher education

As a group of professionals who work in higher education, we also see a need to make university and university college education more accessible to deaf students. Currently, the higher education sector is not suited for deaf students. There is a lack of qualified and reliable interpreting, teaching in Norwegian Sign Language, as well as courses and programs relevant to the deaf community. This has partly led to the capacity issues we face currently, as there is no way for candidates to become qualified in the areas we need people to be qualified in (e.g., signed language linguistics).

However, it also means that deaf people struggle to access education in other fields as well, and this limits their ability to enter to labor market more generally. We propose to create more pathways through higher education that can be accessed through Norwegian Sign Language. For example, certain study programs could offer a cohort of students courses taught in Norwegian Sign Language (or especially suited to interpreting and visual learning) (one example is the Bachelor in vernepleie at the University of South-Eastern Norway that now has a cohort of deaf, native signers) and provide appropriate scaffolding for both academic skills and skills in English and Norwegian, if necessary. In this way, we could promote the use of Norwegian Sign Language in domains traditionally held by Norwegian (or other spoken languages), which would then eventually extend the use of Norwegian Sign Language into work life. Such a solution would also help various deaf people prepare to enter the labor market and participate in Norway's socio-political life.

Norwegian Sign Language in public and work life

While our expertise perhaps lies in issues related to (higher) education, we also have for many years been involved in public and work life in Norway and we also see that by fostering the use of Norwegian Sign Language in these spheres, we can create a more inclusive and equitable society. We all agree that more people, deaf and hearing, should have the opportunity to learn and use Norwegian Sign Language and learn about the deaf community (as we also stated above). This will create opportunities to use this language across various domains: in work life, in social settings, as well as in

encounters with health and legal services. Families with deaf children need particular support to learn this language, but also the professionals who work with deaf people: child-care workers, teachers, advisors, doctors, nurses, lawyers, to name just a few. We know it is perhaps too hopeful to expect Norwegian signers in all domains of life, but we believe that by providing learning opportunities (formal and informal) we can grow the community of signers over time, and this is good for both the vitality of Norwegian Sign Language and the people who use this language. Signed language courses could be developed and provided by deaf associations, institutions of higher education (both as part of programs of study but also as continuing education, etter og videre-utdanning), but also by schools or other resource centers (e.g., Statped).

One way we have thought about this is to create and foster robust, long-term signed language environments: signed language hubs if you will. These can be particular towns and cities that have strong signing communities and learning opportunities or specific workplaces, e.g., a Sign Language Research Center that was mentioned above. Having dedicated places where Norwegian Sign Language is the main language of communication can help to provide the critical mass of signers that is needed for this language's vitality. It would also support deaf signers entering the work force, as well as support the learning of this language by, e.g., parents of deaf children as well as deaf immigrants.

As part of this, we will need to acknowledge and value the language competencies and lived experiences that deaf people bring to the table. For example, it should be a given that deaf people can access health-, senior-, and hospice care in signed language. We believe that in many sectors it is easier to provide those with Norwegian Sign Language as a first language formal training in e.g., becoming a nurse or hospice care worker, than it is to for a non-signer to learn fluently Norwegian Sign Language. This is an important consideration. Once again, by creating strong deaf-centered environments, Norwegian Sign Language will be supported and respected.

Across Norwegian public life, it is also important to consider how Norwegian Sign Language is used to provide life-saving, or otherwise important, information. The most recent example was the COVID-pandemic, where many deaf people were unable to access the regular press briefings due to a lack of qualified interpreting. Instead of providing interpreters, we suggest it is better to provide direct information in Norwegian Sign Language targeted towards different groups in the deaf community. Related, we still lack an ability to use Norwegian Sign Language to call for emergency services or receive information about e.g., natural disasters or other climate events. Many countries have such infrastructure in place, and we suggest it is time for Norway to also provide such essential information and services to the deaf community in Norwegian Sign Language.

We thank you for this opportunity to provide comments and input to the governmental committee on Norwegian Sign Language (tegnspråkutvalget). We look forward to continuing the discussion about how to promote and preserve Norwegian Sign Language for future generations and for the benefit of the deaf community.

Sincerely,

The Section for Signed Language and Interpreting, NTNU