Is It Time to Accredit Interpreting Agencies?: Perspectives of BSL-English Interpreters

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ABSTRACT

Interpreting agencies have been identified as playing a crucial role in the professionalization process of community interpreting (Ozolins, 2007; Dong & Turner, 2016; Dong & Napier, 2016), but little research on agency influence has been undertaken. Ozolins (2007) claims that actual agency practices may be difficult to research due to agencies guarding proprietary information or avoiding judgment. Hence this study sought insight into the perceptions of British Sign Language (BSL)-English interpreters on the role of agencies in influencing market and professional standards and market disorder (Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2004) in the U.K. interpreting industry. The study also explored opinions on the need for a Code of Industry Practice for agencies and agency accreditation (Ozolins, 2007; Feyne, 2012). Although U.K. centric, the findings may apply to other national contexts. Results indicate a mistrust of interpreting agencies, and survey respondents were strongly in favor of a Code of Industry Practice and agency accreditation. Results also indicated a perception amongst survey participants that agencies play a pivotal role in influencing market and professional standards including quality of services, job allocation, interpreter pay and working terms and conditions. Recommendations are offered for implementing a Code of Industry Practice and an instrument for agency accreditation.

INTRODUCTION

The role of interpreting agencies in influencing market and professional standards is not a new area of discussion (see Harrington, 1997; Brien, Brown & Collins, 2002; Ozolins, 2007; Feyne, 2012), but it is an area in which little research has been conducted. In fact, interpreting agencies have been identified as "the aspect of interpreter work least covered in available literature and professional guidance material" despite having centrality in many interpreters' and clients' experiences and a considerable impact on provision of services (Ozolins, 2001, p. 124). Dong and Napier (2016, p. 26) call the lack of reference to interpreting agencies "problematic." A decade ago, Ozolins (2007, p. 126) predicted "greater agency involvement in interpreting" potentially leading to "significant industrial issues." Ozolins' (2007) forecast may be upon us in the United Kingdom (U.K.) as, "The changing British economic climate and contractualism across public services have brought the role of interpreting agencies to the fore" (Dong & Turner, 2016, p.1).

There has been limited direct academic inquiry into actual agency practices (see Brien, Brown, and Collins, 2002; Dong & Napier, 2016; Dong & Turner, 2016), perhaps due to Ozolins' (2007) claim that such direct research is difficult since agencies often guard proprietary information or elect to eschew judgment. Hence the angle for this study was to seek insight into British Sign Language (BSL)/English interpreter perceptions of interpreting agency influence on market and professional standards and the need for agency regulation.

The factors of influence explored in this study are based on the concept of market disorder in the interpreting industry defined by Witter-Merithew & Johnson (2004). This study makes a contribution to the limited literature available on interpreting agencies, and although

the focus in on the U.K. market, findings may be relevant to other geographic contexts as discussions on agency practices continue in other countries (Norström, Fioretos, Gustafsson, 2012; Feyne, 2012).

INTERPRETING AGENCIES

Interpreting agencies are referral agencies, entities which profit by referring clients to an individual who can meet their needs. Interpreting agencies range in characteristics such as number of staff, geographic coverage, provision to specialist settings, client groups, languages offered, and services provided. Besides sign language interpreting, other services provided by interpreting agencies in the U.K. may include provision of lip-speakers (known as oral interpreters in the U.S.), notetakers, and palantypists; whilst many agencies may provide such additional offerings, these communication services typically constitute a small percentage of agency work (Brien, Brown, and Collins, 2002). Some agencies may employ staff to fill bookings in addition to working with freelance interpreters, although the majority of interpreting agencies utilize freelance practitioners to fill most assignments (Harrington, 1997; Brien, Brown, and Collins, 2002; Norström, Fioretos, Gustafsson, 2012; Dong & Turner, 2016).

Whilst the central role of interpreting agencies is to facilitate bookings, research also shows that interpreters expect more from agencies, such as screening and supporting interpreters (including emotional and psychological support if needed) as well as monitoring and supervising front-line services (Dong & Napier, 2016). Practitioners may also expect Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities (Dong & Napier, 2016), although researchers have also found that many agencies only invest limited resources in interpreters because competition has forced them to lower prices and thus CPD offerings (Norström, Fioretos, Gustafsson, 2012).

The role of agencies in facilitating referrals is central to the services that consumers ultimately receive. This is because interpreting provision is a dynamic system which "often pivots on the competence of agencies" in job allocation, selecting appropriate interpreters and communicating with clients (Dong & Turner, 2016, p. 2). There are several advantages for a client using an interpreting agency. It saves time and effort as the onus is put on the agency to contact a large pool of practitioners to fill a booking; they may be able to source an interpreter at short notice; an agency may have a greater depth of knowledge and experience with which to source appropriate individuals – and the appropriate number of individuals – for the job. Interpreters working via an agency enjoy advantages such as greater access to a range of clients and work opportunities, facilitation of assignment bookings, and remuneration security if a client fails to pay.

Several of the advantages that agencies confer to all parties, however, are to some degree dependent on a knowledge and understanding of the work being done. In a study of U.K. interpreting agencies by Brien, Brown, and Collins (2002), individuals who were both interpreters and agency administrators expressed the view that allocation of assignments and negotiation of contracts should be "undertaken by a person with an in-depth knowledge of the field" (p. 54). This is a pertinent point as agency workers – both decision-makers bidding for large contracts and those performing the daily administrative work of coordinating assignment details and allocating interpreters – may have little to no knowledge about interpreting (Ozolins, 2007; Norström, Fioretos, Gustafsson, 2012; Feyne, 2012), a situation which may be especially true of larger agencies (Feyne, 2012; Collins, 2016; Dong & Turner, 2016). This reality appears to be the basis of a finding in a recent study which reported that interpreters held a sense of distrust toward agencies, apparently borne out of the perception that agencies hold a large pool of jobs but do not necessarily allocate them in a manner befitting best professional practices

(Dong & Turner, 2016). (This issue is expounded upon in the section Interpreting Agencies and Professionalization below.)

COMPETITION AND FEES

In a case study of one U.K. interpreting services agency, Dong and Turner (2016) explained factors impacting interpreter allocation to assignments. These considerations included the reality that clients will not wait to have their request filled, and there are plenty of other agencies who will fill the job quickly, necessitating speedy job allocation. This alludes to business practices motivated by market competition.

Competition, of course, is to be expected in any market. Competition amongst interpreting agencies in the U.K. has increased in recent years along with the number of companies offering these services. In a 2002 publication of a study undertaken on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions regarding the organization and provision of BSL/English interpreters, the authors reported on 55 agencies providing BSL/English interpretation over the course of their study (Brien, Brown, and Collins, 2002). More recently, in January 2016, Roger Beeson amassed a list of 90 agencies across the U.K. providing BSL/English interpretation (Beeson, 2016). It would seem that the number of interpreting agencies operating in the U.K. has significantly increased in the past decade and a half.

Some authors assert that the increase in the number of agencies offering signed language/English services may just be due to the growing number of spoken language interpreting agencies that have added sign language to their pool of languages offered, oftentimes ostensibly without a thorough understanding of what the provision of sign language interpreting entails (Feyne, 2012; Collins, 2016). It has been argued that motives for profit have replaced those for service and that these larger agencies have a "knowledge base in bidding for and maintaining contracts," rather than in evaluating the skills of sign language interpreters or the needs of Deaf consumers (Feyne, 2012, para. 6). These considerations are important because researchers have found that competition between interpreting agencies in a deregulated market forces down prices and leads to compromised service quality for clients (Norström, Fioretos, Gustafsson, 2012), which may be especially true if increased competition is created by entities entering the market without a thorough understanding of service provision expectations. Competition also leads agencies to decrease investment in interpreter development and wellbeing (Norström, Fioretos, Gustafsson, 2012).

Ultimately, agencies are businesses and therefore must earn a profit for the services they provide. Little current research has been done on agency fees. This may be difficult considering Ozolins' (2007) claim that eliciting information from agencies regarding business practices can prove challenging. One "mystery shopper" query posted on an interpreting blog sought a quote from 57 different U.K. agencies for a hypothetical interpreting assignment and asked about the qualifications required of an interpreter for such an assignment (Anonymous, 2012). The responses regarding both fees and necessary interpreter qualifications varied, sometimes considerably. The author of the query concludes this comparison with the opinion that, "Interpreter led agencies come out on top" (Anonymous, 2012), a claim that seems to echo the finding of Brien, Brown, and Collins (2002) from those who were both interpreters and agency administrators that such a business should be run by someone intimately familiar with the field.

Whilst scant research has been done on interpreting agency fees, there are published accounts of perceptions about agency rates. These accounts convey what are deemed to be unreasonably high agency mark-ups and examples of agency business practices which prioritize profit over service (such as sending unqualified people who charge a cheaper rate to fill assignments, enabling larger profits for the agency). These agencies are described as treating interpreters as "cash cows" with anecdotal reports of agencies charging almost 200% mark-ups

of the interpreter's fee (Dodds, 2014). This business practice is seen as detrimental to the quality of services (Ali, 2012; Dodds, 2014); further research into agency operations could inform or refute the credence of these perceptions.

AGENCY STANDARDS

The Association of Sign Language Interpreters (ASLI) in the U.K. has published a document entitled Standards for Interpreting Service Providers (Reed & McCarthy, 2017) which outlines the consensus of the ASLI membership on practices that any organization coordinating sign language interpretation services should follow. The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) in the U.S. has published a similar document (RID, 2014). These are, however, suggestions for best practice and industry standards, and there are no mandates to follow these standards and no repercussions for entities providing interpretation services which fail to adhere to these standards.

The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) Guidelines for Community Interpreting are directly applicable to the interpreting situation in the U.K. This international standard, ISO 13611:2014, sets out the work and competencies of community interpreters, and section 6 specifies the roles and responsibilities of Interpreting Services Providers (ISPs). It is useful to understand the guidelines set forth for interpreting service providers to gauge alignment of these standards with agency practices in the literature. Some of the responsibilities toward clients listed in the ISO guidelines in regard to interpreting service providers include: informing the client promptly if an interpreter is not available in the requested language combination; ensuring that all interpreters are not only qualified but also capable of performing the specified task; disclosing the interpreter's qualifications to the client, and especially when the only interpreter available does not meet the requirements for the setting; informing the client of any potential conflicts of interest; briefing the client on how to work with interpreters; providing the client with an agreement listing price, terms, policies, and procedures (ISO, 2014).

Responsibilities of interpreting service providers toward interpreters that are listed in the ISO guidelines include: providing the interpreter with information about the assignment including setting and client information inclusive of address and contact information; obtaining and providing preparatory materials; ensuring appropriate working conditions for the interpreter; providing the appropriate number of interpreters; providing interpreters with a contractual agreement stipulating terms, conditions, payment procedures, and giving interpreters the right to leave dangerous situations (ISO, 2014).

Whilst the ISO 13611 guidelines have been available for a few years, little inquiry or discussion seems to have taken place regarding how or if they are being applied; although, an interesting application of these ISO guidelines in interpreter training has been conducted (see Hlavac, 2015). It is important to note that the ISO guidelines consider an ISP to be either an entity or a freelance individual and, for the purposes of this research, an agency is understood to mean an organization facilitating the provision of interpreting services rather than a sole practitioner providing services independently of a booking organization. Requiring agency adherence to the ISO standards would focus specifically on those aspects of interpreting service provision applicable to organizations arranging services.

INTERPRETING AGENCIES AND PROFESSIONALIZATION

Ozolins (2007) states that, "Interpreting agencies can play a crucial role in professionalization or retarding professionalization of the field" (p. 130). In order to understand the implications of this statement, it is important to first understand that the sociological theory of professionalization refers to the evolutionary process of an occupation. Professionalization is a dynamic

social process typified by the establishment of professional associations, codes of ethics, formal training programs, regulation, and community recognition (Winter, 1983). Practitioners benefit from professionalization as they enjoy enhanced status, higher remuneration, and more sway over the development of the profession; however, the primary benefits of professionalization are the establishment of minimum standards leading to a higher quality of service for clients and public trust in receiving that standard of service from practitioners (Mikkelson, 1996; Evetts, 2013).

Professionalization may be conceptualized via trait theory whereby the degree of professionalization is judged depending on how many traits the occupation has achieved—such as professional associations, codes of ethics, etc. Professionalization may also be examined by control theory which judges an occupation's level of professionalization by examining how much control the profession is "able to exert over the substance of their work and the market in which they operate" (Mikkelson, 1996, p. 3). Both the trait theory and the control theory have been applied to analyze the professionalization process of sign language interpreting (see Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2004; Pollit, 1997; Best, 2014; Best, 2015). Applying a control theory of professionalization, Best (2014) concluded that in some sectors, "Despite specialist knowledge about best practices for both personal health and optimum interpreting, interpreters do not set the interpreting agenda"; rather, determinations about interpreting service provision are increasingly made by "large corporations and government" (p. 13).

To a great extent, the establishment of agencies is based on cornerstones of professionalization such as the recognition of BSL as a distinct language and the emergence of interpreting as a separate profession (Brien, Brown, and Collins, 2002). The evolution of the profession has also seen a shift from the Deaf community selecting individual interpreters via community connections to interpreter schedulers sending out email calls for interpreter availability (Cokely, 2005; Collins, 2016), all results of professionalization processes. Owing to professionalization processes which led to and enabled agency establishment, interpreting services provision entities may increasingly inform the future development of the profession. In fact, Dong and Napier (2016) assert, "Interpreting agencies in the U.K. have gone beyond the traditional role of information broker to a crucial institutional gatekeeper and potentially the centre of the interpreting occupational community" (p. 39).

The entire professionalization framework for public service interpreting has recently been augmented to take into account "business organizations and the changing institutional climate" and the evolution of agencies to exert increased influence on the professionalization process, thereby necessitating a shift to an organizational professionalism paradigm (Dong & Napier, 2016, p. 24). The following exploration of the literature on signed language interpreting professionalization seen through the lens of agency influence supports this premise.

MARKET DISORDER

In critique of the professionalization of sign language interpreting, Witter-Merithew and Johnson (2004) have identified market disorder as detrimentally impacting the professionalization process, namely by creating difficulties in controlling variables that impact operations and service delivery. Witter-Merithew & Johnson (2004) identified a disconnect between the standards set by the interpreting profession and those set by the market, a divergence of standards resulting in a particular type of market disorder that threatens the professionalization of interpreting. Witter-Merithew and Johnson (2004) further define market disorder in the field of sign language interpreting:

> the current state of the interpreting market that reflects significant instability related to minimum standards of entry into the field and a lack of consistent and reliable profes-

sional control over the variables impacting the effective delivery of interpreting services (e.g., induction into the field, working conditions, job descriptions, roles and responsibility, wages). p. 2

Other authors have also identified a lack of consensus between professional and industrial or marketplace practices—possibly driven by market demand for interpreting services (Dong and Napier, 2016)—that align with this definition of market disorder, including disagreement on the qualifications deemed necessary to work as an interpreter and paying interpreters substandard rates for assignments. Agencies have been identified as responsible parties in propagating this type of market disorder (Feyne, 2012; Best, 2014; Best, 2015; Dong and Napier, 2016).

In lieu of a regulated minimum threshold for practitioners, some agencies have attempted to institute a level of regulation by developing their own standards for interpreting caliber (Dong and Napier, 2016). However, considering that some agency owners and administrators are not familiar with the demands of interpreting (Ozolins, 2007; Norström, Fioretos, Gustafsson, 2012; Feyne, 2012; Collins, 2016; Dong and Turner, 2016), reliance on this type of self-regulation may not always result in the delivery of quality services. In response to the misalignment between professional standards and industrial practices, Feyne (2012) calls for agency oversight and accountability via accreditation, whilst Best (2015) argues for ethical agency management and states that, "identifying not only interpreters but also agencies as safe to practice would mean significant further professionalization" (p. 14).

In a profession exit survey of British Sign Language/English interpreters, one of the most common themes from practitioners leaving or considering leaving the profession was poor practices of agencies (Hale, 2016). Research has also found that agencies fail to provide information which the interpreters feel they need in order to adequately prepare for an assignment, even when that information has been requested (Norström, Fioretos, Gustafsson, 2012). There is also no guarantee that an agency will send a qualified interpreter to fill an assignment (Norström, Fioretos, Gustafsson, 2012), a standard expected by the profession at large and stipulated in the ISO Guidelines for Community Interpreting (ISO, 2014). In a recent case study of one interpreting agency, Dong and Turner (2016) found that interpreters drew attention to challenges of working with agencies such as inadequate information about assignments, lack of training and support, and safety hazards in the workplace, all of which impact professionalization. These challenges mentioned by interpreters are also in contradiction to the responsibilities toward interpreters set forth for interpreting service providers in the ISO Guidelines for Community Interpreting (ISO, 2014). Further findings revealed that agencies generally fail to consider the human needs of interpreters due to either a lack of motivation or expertise or prioritizing other issues; that the procedural knowledge gleaned by interpreters during assignments cannot be properly circulated to others; and that agencies favor minimizing costs over compatibility between interpreter and assignment (Dong & Turner, 2016).

Many agencies strive to offer quality services at fair market rates but find practicalities challenging. Regarding job allocation, it is important to note that even for Deaf and interpreter owned and led sign language interpreting agencies with administrators who are knowledgeable about interpreting and expected professional standards and committed to an ethical business model and best practices, optimum allocation of interpreters to assignments is difficult to achieve while simultaneously meeting demand. This is because matching practitioners to assignments involves considerations beyond interpreter capability and availability. In the study by Brien, Brown, and Collins (2002), "Agencies stated that they were rarely able to offer clients a choice of interpreter for most types of assignments" (p. 56), due to a shortage of interpreters

(in 1999-2001 when this research was conducted) and interpreter availability, although agencies said that they tried to meet specific requests when possible. Clients often will not wait for interpreter allocation and there are plenty of other agencies who will fill the job quickly; furthermore, the financial costs of hiring one practitioner over another were taken into consideration (including fees, travel, etc.) as well as how soon an interpreter was needed, as there might be insufficient time to source the ideal practitioner. These facets of consideration were often found to drown out more human factors such as interpreter expertise and experience, even when the agency had this information available (Dong & Turner, 2016).

Whilst allocating fully qualified interpreters to assignments does impact service quality, there is also interesting research into the effects of interpreter continuity. Hsieh et al. (2010) found higher quality interpreting through interpreter continuity due to enhanced provider-interpreter trust and established communication patterns. Schofield and Mapson (2014) found increased trust as well as a greater knowledge of terminology and a reduction in interpreter intrusiveness. Mapson (2016) also reports that interpreter continuity with BSL/English interpreters impacts the Deaf client's trust, use of natural language, and ability to feel more relaxed, while enabling the interpreter to better reflect the individual style of the client, have a reduced cognitive load, and exhibit more appropriate lexical choice and greater accuracy.

It is also worth noting that information about individual practitioner skillsets and expertise is not always sought or collected by agencies. Interpreters in a study conducted by Norström, Fioretos, Gustafsson (2012) found that there was a perceived lack of appreciation by booking entities for natural limitations of interpreters or the need for an interpreter to have knowledge in the area that they were called on to interpret. Subsequently, interpreters in this study felt pressured by agencies to accept assignments with which they were not entirely comfortable (Norström, Fioretos, Gustafsson, 2012), a phenomenon that others have reported as well (Collins, 2016). This issue is also a mentioned factor in Harrington's (1997) and Ozolins' (2007) suggestion for a grievance process for interpreters to report inappropriate agency assignments.

A grievance process to report agencies for inappropriate assignments or other issues as suggested by Harrington (1997) and Ozolins (2007) may be a useful instrument, but some recent happenings suggest it may also encounter obstacles in achieving its intended effect. For example, a recent email from the National Union of British Sign Language Interpreters (NUBSLI) to union members states that "issues have occurred with most of the agencies who have won call offs" under national framework agreements but that members are not submitting case studies or sharing information with the union due to a "reluctance to share info (for fear of blacklisting)," making the substantiation of any claims difficult and stymying efforts to challenge agency practices (NUBSLI, members' communication, August 12, 2016). Hence the establishment of an avenue to report inappropriate agency assignments or other issues regarding agency practices would need to take into account the fear of retaliation for those submitting reports.

In sum, when considering why "high-level professionalization efforts have so far generated little traction," Dong and Turner (2016, p. 23) state that "agencies are particularly pivotal in formulating the workplace order" and make an appeal for further research into interpreting services planning and provision. Similarly, Ozolins (2007) sums up the influential power of interpreting agencies by stating, "Crucial aspects of interpreting practice can be influenced by agency action (or inaction)" (p. 122), indicating the need for greater insight into how agency practices are impacting the development of the profession.

PROCUREMENT PRACTICES AND AGENCIES IN PROFESSIONALIZATION

The sustainability of the sign language interpreting profession in the U.K. is currently perceived by some practitioners to be uncertain (Hale, 2016). This uncertainty may be due in large part to changes in procurement arrangements for sign language interpreting services (Hale, 2016). Dong and Turner (2016) refer to these procurement changes as top-down contractualism and contend that this shift has altered the British economic climate and brought the role of interpreting agencies under more scrutiny. Hale (2016) reports that these changes place increasing pressure on agencies to reduce costs, leading to inevitable downward pressure on rates to the point that "they have fallen significantly below the market rates for skilled and experienced [interpreters]" (p. 3). Likewise, Norström, Fioretos, Gustafsson (2012) found that in this type of economic climate, agencies often lower their prices (what they pay interpreters) in competition for contracts. This has been borne out in the launch of framework agreements, such as that of the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), which researchers argue have de-professionalized interpreting (Buckingham, 2015), resulting in severe drops in the quality of services rendered and leading fully qualified interpreters to leave the profession as it becomes financially non-viable as a livelihood (Sharples, 2013).

The role of agencies in this downward economic push needs further exploration. Dong and Turner (2016) found that whilst many interpreters attributed deteriorating work terms and conditions to unethical conduct by agencies, the results of their study revealed that even agencies striving to maintain an ethical business model are "struggling to offer clients better treatment in practice" (p. 21). This seems to suggest the possibility that agencies may simply be a cog in a much larger mechanization of change rather than an instigating factor. However, agencies have been identified as integral in setting expectations for those who purchase language services (Ozolins, 2007).

The practices of some agencies drive forward this economic transformation as "there remains a tacit rule in the market that quantity supersedes quality" and "some agencies thrive on tendering for and securing procurement contracts" (Dong & Turner, 2016, p. 12), often prioritizing "cost-saving before quality" in order to win contracts (Norström, Fioretos, Gustafsson, 2012, p. 250). These types of practices have clear professionalization implications as quality and standards may be compromised to win and deliver contracts. More formal examination is necessary to determine to what extent agencies influence these procurement developments.

There are also professionalization implications as large-scale privatization puts smaller agencies – which can typically confer an advantage to clients by possessing good local knowledge and relationships – at risk as larger agencies are awarded contracts (NUBSLI, 2016). This is problematic because these larger, dominant agencies often operate under non-expert management and hence lack understanding of interpreting work and what is required to provide optimum interpretation services (Feyne, 2012; Dong & Turner, 2016). Similarly, Brien, Brown, and Collins (2002) found that many users of interpreting services knew from experience which agency or agencies could best meet their needs and would therefore source interpreters via these proven providers. The possibility for service users to select an agency based on superior service provision is removed when a single large agency, or a limited number of large agencies, is awarded a contract, thereby impacting professionalization by altering the standard of service a consumer may expect to receive.

A concern that has been raised with recent procurement developments is that "organisations advising the government are potential suppliers and have commercial interests" (NUBSLI, 2015). However, it has been argued that suppliers have a social corporate responsibility

to properly educate procurement entities on the social and economic value of quality interpretation services and what appropriate provision of these services entails (Best, 2017).

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has been posited as a useful framework of ethical practices for those procuring and providing interpreting services. This ensures that the profession remains sustainable for practitioners and thus continues to adequately meet the needs of the community. It is argued that a CSR approach encapsulates concerns such as alignment of market standards with practitioners. Using this framework for interpreting provision has also been suggested to encourage agency and procurement entity calibration with CSR principles. Best (2017) suggests procurement stipulations and business practices align with professional standards, sustainability (often framed as environmental sustainability but envisaged here as sustainability of the profession), knowledge of and adherence to relevant laws at national and international levels, and transparency regarding business practices. A consistent history of adhering to CSR principles is also important for building and maintaining public trust in a business, ultimately benefiting individual organizations (Rochte, 2016). CSR is a self-regulatory mechanism incorporated into a business model, and as a voluntary endeavor, public attention and accountability is important for realizing benefits (Best, 2017).

AGENCY ACCREDITATION

Individual interpreters have an accreditation process and must abide by a Code of Conduct; Ozolins (2007) has suggested an analogous framework for interpreting agencies. In the interest of ensuring a requisite standard of language services, he proposes a Code of Industry Practice for agencies and an accreditation system based on criteria that align with public policy objectives. The proposed criteria listed include "using accredited or trained practitioners, explicitly addressing issues of standards, having complaint and feedback mechanisms, and reporting requirements including reporting on professional issues faced by interpreters in their practice" (p. 129). Specific to the U.K. context, Ozolins (2007) mentions discussion at the 2004 Critical Link 4 conference in which Kyra Pollitt commented on a non-binding, voluntary scheme in Scotland which set standards that agencies were encouraged to follow. It was reported as resulting in "significant differentiation among agencies" (p. 129). This scheme has apparently become defunct, and unfortunately, efforts to gain insight into it were unsuccessful.

Interestingly, Ozolins (2007) also predicted that calls to accredit interpreting agencies would be increasingly raised in future, partly as a response to greater privatization and greater dependence on agencies. This forecast is proving accurate as large-scale privatization in the U.K. is currently drawing more attention to the role of interpreting agencies (Dong & Turner, 2016). The call to accredit interpreting agencies has been taken up by advocates elsewhere as a result of market developments. Feyne (2012) maintains that the increasing practice of awarding contracts to language service agencies who have little to no background knowledge of the Deaf world or sign language interpreting – but simply tack on sign language in addition to spoken language interpreting services – fosters the prioritization of profit over service. She outlines the ramifications of a monetary focus to the detriment of what she calls the "human cost," negatively impacting the quality of services clients receive. Criteria for accreditation put forth by Feyne (2012) include abiding by an ethical business model, providing sign language interpreters with relevant information prior to assignments, protecting confidential information in email call outs for interpreters, and providing the most appropriately qualified interpreters for each client. She explicates that this would require agencies to see the Deaf individuals as their clients rather than just the hearing contract holders. Importantly, Feyne (2012) also ad-

dresses the issue of what should be done if an agency fails to adhere to ethical business practices: They should lose the privilege of accreditation and "that information should be made publicly available for any potential clients to view" (para. 14).

Some skepticism has been expressed about the efficacy of accrediting interpreting agencies. In the welcome address at the 2016 Critical Link 8 Conference in Edinburgh, Scotland, Professor Emeritus Ian Mason spoke of the economic pressures on the profession, illustrated by specific examples of contract awards which detrimentally impacted sectors of the interpreting field, such as court interpreting in England. He acknowledged Ozolins' (2007) argument for accreditation of interpreting agencies but stated that large agencies are too big to accredit. Considering that mandatory agency accreditation in this industry has never been done, however, the efficacy of accreditation remains theoretical; ergo it should not be so readily discounted. This is particularly true considering that voluntary agency standards seemed to previously have some positive influence (Pollitt as cited in Ozolins, 2007).

It is important to note that many of the criteria for agency accreditation proposed by Ozolins (2007) and Feyne (2012) align with the ISO Guidelines for Community Interpreting (ISO, 2014). Moreover, the public policy objectives mentioned by Ozolins (2007) and the criteria proposed by Feyne (2012) align with common corporate social responsibility endeavors outlined in Best's (2017) argument that interpreting services provision entities have a social obligation to strive for these standards. A key difference in these arguments, however, is that CSR is corporate self-regulation whereas accreditation would likely entail regulation by an external body. In light of this, it is also interesting to consider whether corporations may struggle to take a long-term view of benefits and instead focus more on instant short-term gains. The immediate pressures on agencies to make a profit and fill contracts in a competitive market may supersede voluntary, longer-term CSR considerations. This theoretically strengthens the argument in favor of agency accreditation. It is also important to note that the discussion on ethical agency practices has been ongoing (Harrington, 1997; Brien, Brown & Collins, 2002; Ozolins, 2007), and it may therefore be argued that voluntary corporate regulation inherent in CSR has thus far failed to satisfactorily manifest on a sufficient scale throughout the industry, making other measures such as external accreditation more pertinent.

Other industries have found agency accreditation beneficial. Granted, the extant research is not inclusive of interpreting services referral agencies, but it is nonetheless interesting. The accreditation of agencies – often done via independent accreditation bodies that develop regulatory standards and perform evaluations and monitoring – is an increasingly applied services management system, purported to be particularly helpful in tracking government spending (Hunter, 2015). Accreditation has been found to aid professionalization by requiring agencies to formally adopt policies and practices that are sanctioned by an external organization, thereby facilitating a diffusion of best practices (Teodoro & Hughes, 2012). Accreditation in certain sectors now plays a defining role in determining the eligibility of agencies to apply for government contracts (Hunter, 2015) and has also been found to strongly correlate with workers' positive perceptions of agency priorities (Teodoro & Hughes, 2012).

In conclusion, agency practices impact the immediate services received by clients and, on a larger scale, the professionalization of the interpreting field. This study surveyed British Sign Language (BSL)/English interpreter perceptions of interpreting agency influence on market and professional standards in the U.K. and sought to determine if UK-based practitioners perceived a need for agency regulation.

METHODOLOGY

SURVEY STRUCTURE

An online questionnaire was created using the survey software Qualtrics and included 14 questions to collect basic demographic data, qualification information of those who identified as interpreters, and ratings of perceptions of agency influence on market disorder in the interpreting industry as defined by Witter-Merithew & Johnson (2004). Perceptions on the need for agency regulation were also collected. Participants were asked to rate how important they felt agencies were in influencing a range of market and professional factors identified by Witter-Merithew & Johnson (2004), ranging from extremely important to not at all important. One question asked participants, based on their experiences, to rank given entities as to perceived level of influence on the provision of interpreting services. This question also allowed respondents to add any perceived influential entities not listed. Three questions asked for opinions with answers of yes, not sure, and no. The survey concluded with the opportunity for participants to write in additional perceptions on the issue of interpreting agency influence.

CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS

The survey was distributed on E-NEWSLI, a UK-based Deaf and interpreter-themed email listserv with approximately 720 recipients (not all of whom are interpreters, but also includes clients and providers of interpreting services, interpreting students and other interested parties) and shared via two BSL/English interpreter groups on social media. The survey was open for 16 days. Respondents were not offered an incentive for their participation.

The survey was opened 59 times; 47 completed surveys were submitted. Only data from completed surveys were included in data analysis. 22 participants left comments in the open text question at the end inviting respondents to share additional perceptions on the issue.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

The survey asked participants to identify whether they were an interpreter (fully qualified, trainee, or neither), Deaf user of interpreting services, hearing user of interpreting services, or agency staff. These categories were not mutually exclusive. For example, four of the interpreters also identified as agency staff, and one respondent identified as an interpreter and a Deaf user of interpreting services. Due to the distribution channels of the survey, most respondents were interpreters. 9% of respondents did not identify as an interpreter, and due to the low numbers of other groups responding, only the responses from those identifying as interpreters were considered in the data. 93% identified as fully qualified interpreters with the remaining 7% identifying as trainee interpreters.

TRUST

Participants were asked to rate their agreement with the following statement: 'I trust interpreting agencies to operate by an ethical and sustainable business model.' The majority of respondents disagreed with this statement to some extent. 36% expressed strong disagreement with this statement whilst 28% said they somewhat disagreed with this statement. In contrast, 6% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement and 15% somewhat agreed whilst 15% neither agreed nor disagreed. Two of the agency staff interpreters strongly agreed with the statement whilst the other 2 neither agreed nor disagreed.

This question was based on the premise that professionalization leads to trust that certain standards will be met (Mikkelson, 1996) in conjunction with Dong and Napier's (2016) conceptualization of organizational professionalization. The question sought to gauge the level of trust that the survey participants had in interpreting agencies to abide by an ethical and sus-

tainable business model. It could also be extrapolated to considerations of Best's (2017) argument of CSR for interpreting services provision as Rochte (2016) states that a consistent history of adhering to CSR principles fosters trust in a business.

The majority of interpreters taking part in this survey do not trust interpreting agencies in general to operate by an ethical and sustainable business model. This aligns with the findings of Dong and Turner (2016) which found that interpreters hold a sense of distrust toward agencies.

At the end of the survey three participants left comments directly related to trust. Two statements referenced trust granted to agencies by the public: "Agencies are held in a position of trust by Courts, the Medical profession, the Government and too many other people/organisations to mention and yet they've done nothing to prove or earn this trust." Another comment said: "Hearing clients who don't know about this sector rely on agencies to advise them, some are unscrupulous and don't do this," insinuating that some agencies cannot be trusted by those seeking their services. The final comment related to the lack of trust felt by practitioners: "The lack of transparency and poor service that interpreters have received from agencies has led to a state of immense mistrust."

Q1- Please rate your agreement with the following statement: I trust interpreting agencies to operate by an ethical and sustainable business model.
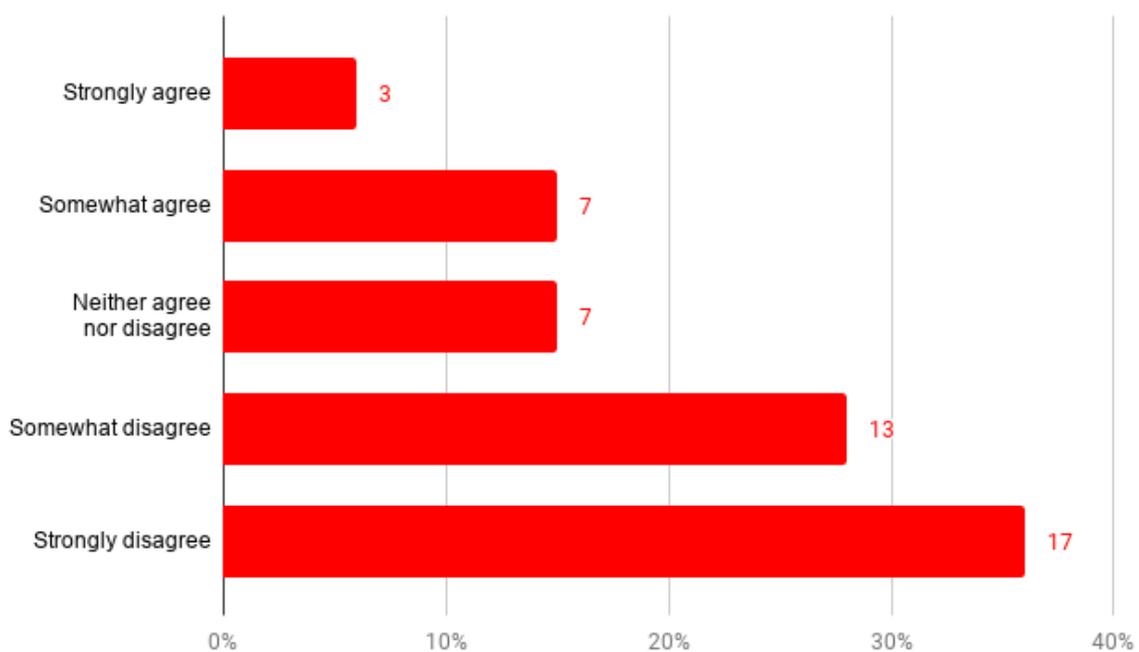
Figure 1. Trust in agencies.

PERCEPTIONS OF AGENCY INFLUENCE

Survey participants were asked, based on their experiences, to rank the following entities as to perceived level of influence on the provision of interpreting services: Deaf clients of interpreting services, hearing clients of interpreting services, individual interpreters, interpreting agencies, interpreter groups (NUBSLI, signed language interpreters' professional associations, etc.), and procuring entities (those purchasing services and contracts). Procuring entities were ranked as having the most influence on the provision of interpreting services with 54.2% of survey takers placing this choice in the number 1 position. Interpreting agencies were ranked

as second in influence with 35.4% of respondents placing this choice in the number 2 position. Interpreter groups ranked as third most influential by the majority of respondents and individual interpreters as fourth most influential (both at 37.5%, the largest percentage for these respective rankings). Importantly, those actually using the services were ranked as the least influential with Deaf clients of interpreting services ranked as fifth by 35.4% of respondents, and hearing clients of interpreting services coming in last with 37.5% of participants ranking them in sixth place.

QUALITY OF SERVICES

Several survey questions sought insight into perceptions of agency influence on various factors of professionalization and market disorder as defined by Witter-Merithew & Johnson (2004). Considering that one of the greatest benefits of professionalization is enhanced quality of services to consumers (Mikkelson, 1996; Evetts, 2013), perceptions regarding agency influence on service quality were explored. 55.3% of respondents felt that agencies were 'extremely important' in influencing the quality of interpretation services that consumers receive while 40.4% felt they were 'very important.' On the other end of the continuum, only 4.3% of respondents felt that agencies were 'not at all important' in determining service quality. The great majority of responses therefore indicated a perception that interpreting agencies play an important role in the delivery of quality interpretation services.

This line of inquiry relates to the importance of agencies in influencing the quality of interpretation services delivered, but it does not examine how agencies may influence the provision of such services. This is explored to some degree in specific follow-up questions. However, further insight was gleaned from several comments that were offered at the end of the survey which were explicitly linked to quality of services. One participant observed: "Far too often agencies put profit margins over quality and what's best for the end user." This sentiment about prioritizing profit over service quality was echoed by three other contributors. One remarked: "I don't work for considerably more agencies that have not understood the market or actively chosen to put in bids for unsustainable pay... Many do not appear to understand the impact of these decisions on the people that need the services." These findings align with assertions by Feyne (2012) and findings by Norström, Fioretos, Gustafsson (2012) that for some agencies, considerations of profit trump those of service quality.

Some follow-up specifics were explicitly sought for further insight into perceptions of agency practices regarding job allocation, which the literature identifies as either facilitating or impeding quality interpretation services (Feyne, 2012; Norström, Fioretos, Gustafsson, 2012; Hsieh et al., 2010; Sharples, 2013; Schofield & Mapson, 2015; Mapson, 2016.)

JOB ALLOCATION

On the issue of control of entry into the field and ability to practice (Witter-Merithew & Johnson 2004), 70.2% of respondents said that agencies were 'extremely important' in the hiring of appropriately qualified interpreters for assignments, 27.7% said agencies were 'very important' in this regard, and 2.1% said that agencies were only 'moderately important' with no responses left for 'slightly important' or 'not at all important.' This indicates a strong perception that interpreting agencies hold a significant responsibility for ensuring that appropriately qualified individuals are hired to fulfill interpreting assignments, which is considered correlative with service quality (Sharples, 2013). This is important because Norström, Fioretos, Gustafsson (2012) found that agencies in their study did not always send a qualified or vetted interpreter to fulfill assignments, a practice which is clearly in contradiction to the ISO Guidelines for Community Interpreting (ISO 2014).

Consistency in placing the same interpreters for ongoing assignments, when possible, supports service quality as the interpreters gain familiarity with clients, setting, and content

(Hsieh et al. (2010); Schofield & Mapson, 2015; Mapson, 2016). 59.6% of survey respondents said that interpreting agencies were 'extremely important' in influencing the consistency of interpreters for ongoing assignments, 29.8% said that agencies were 'very important' in influencing interpreter consistency, and 10.6% graded agencies as 'moderately important.' Again, it is notable that no respondents gauged agencies as either 'slightly important' or 'not at all important' in this regard and most of the respondents credited agencies with a large degree of power in this type of job allocation.

Some of the comments offered at the end of the survey pertained to job allocation. One participant stated: "We have all witnessed or been made aware of incidences where interpreting agencies have not respected Deaf client choice (i.e. preferred interpreter) and so on all for the sake of saving a few pennies." Another remarked: "Agencies have been contacted before requesting specific interpreters but have been told that they were unavailable. This was untrue, as the agency wanted to use their in-house interpreters. Extremely unprofessional and does not put the Deaf client at the forefront of the service." Whilst several factors must be considered by an agency in allocating interpreters to assignments (Brien, Brown, and Collins, 2002; Dong & Turner, 2016), these types of comments regarding job allocation appear to be rooted in a perception of agency prioritization of profits over service as mentioned in the section above.

INTERPRETER PAY AND WORKING CONDITIONS

Remuneration of practitioners in line with expectations of the profession is important to market stability (Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2004). Agencies were perceived as highly influential in interpreter pay rates with 51.1% of respondents saying that agencies were 'extremely important' in this regard and 36.2% stating that they were 'very important.' 8.5% of respondents rated them 'moderately important' while only one participant each rated them as 'slightly important' and 'not at all important.'

Interpreter working conditions were perceived to be heavily influenced by agencies. 46.8% of participants deemed agencies 'extremely important' in influencing interpreter working conditions, 40.4% 'very important,' and 8.5% 'moderately important,' while only one participant each rated agencies as 'slightly important' and 'not at all important' in this regard. These findings are supported in the literature which shows that agency practices impact interpreter working conditions (Harrington, 1997; Hale, 2016; Dong & Turner, 2016). These findings also align with other research reporting that interpreters perceive deteriorating working terms and conditions to be due to agency practices (Dong & Turner, 2016). Both pay and working conditions were mentioned by several participants in the comments section at the end of the survey. For example, one participant stated that agencies' "drive seems to be profit margins for themselves, rather than quality access for Deaf people or maintaining decent wages and working conditions for interpreters."

These sentiments are supported in the literature which found that agencies compete by cutting interpreter wages and working terms (Norström, Fioretos, Gustafsson, 2012) and in the published perceptions regarding high agency fees (Ali, 2012; Dodds, 2014). Diminishing pay and working terms may, however, be due to economic changes whereby there is downward pressure impacting the procurement of services. Further research could explore the extent to which agency practices influence these elements of market disorder.

PERCEPTIONS ON THE NEED FOR AGENCY REGULATION

The majority of survey respondents – 95.7% – indicated that they felt interpreting agencies differed in work practices and standards. Comments left at the end of the survey affirm variance in standards as some participants gave examples of "unethical agencies" and others commended those they perceived to adhere to good practices.

Participants were asked for their opinions on the need for Ozolins' (2007) suggestion for a Code of Industry Practice for agencies akin to the Code of Conduct for individual interpreters. Survey respondents were overwhelmingly in favor of such a measure with 95.7% in favor and only 4.3% unsure with no respondents against.

Q10 - Interpreters are expected to abide by a Code of Conduct. Do you think that there needs to be a Code of Industry Practice for agencies?
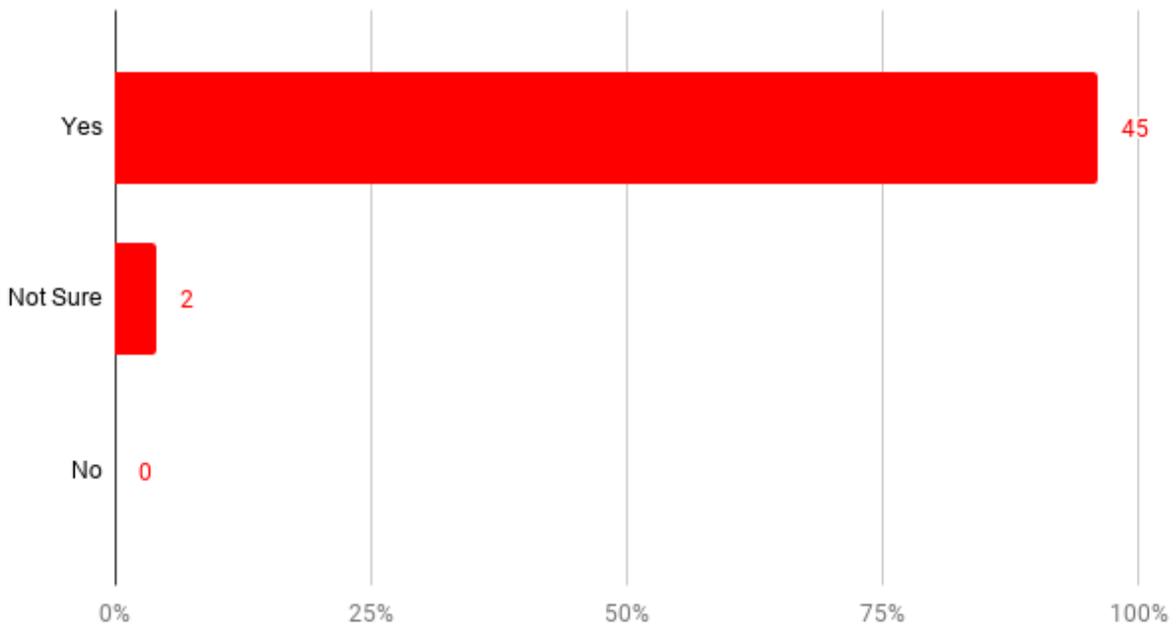

Figure 2. Perceptions on the need for a Code of Industry Practice for agencies.

Agency accreditation has been suggested by Ozolins (2007) and Feyne (2012). When asked if they would be in favor of such an instrument, 89.4% of respondents said yes, whilst 10.6% said maybe. Notably, there were no participants in this survey who indicated that they would not be in favor of agency accreditation.

This subject also garnered a great deal of voluntary commentary. One participant re-marked: "It would be good to have a rated and accredited system, however, one that doesn't lower the standards as it is and then it becomes acceptable." Another participant expressed concerns that certain large agencies would be granted accreditation despite being perceived as unworthy.

Comments also offered insight into why respondents indicated they were in favor of accreditation. Three participants left questions pertaining to accreditation such as, which body would be responsible for it and on what basis? It is also important to note that five participant comments mentioned that agency accreditation would serve to acknowledge and reward those agencies who do abide by ethical business practices.

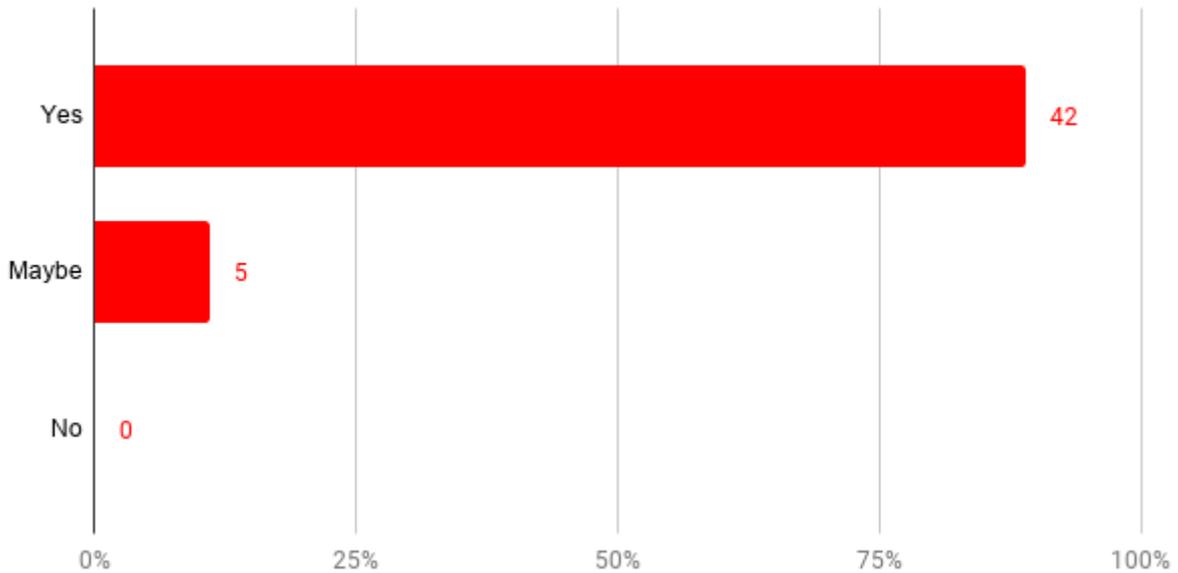## Q17 - Would you be in favor of an interpreting agency accreditation system?

Figure 3. Perceptions on the need for an agency accreditation system.

PERCEPTIONS ON TYPES OF AGENCIES

A theme emerged in several of the comments left at the end of the survey about agencies. Many of the commentators left qualifiers in their remarks in regard to the size of the agency. "Big agencies" and "non-Deaf led, global languages agencies" were perceived differently than "specialist" and "smaller agencies," the latter being defined by one participant as "the ones who can offer a genuine quality service." This delineation is also expressed in the literature with some authors reporting that agencies which are smaller and/or which specialize in sign language interpretation (which are often smaller agencies due to their focus) may be more familiar with their customer base and interpreting work, and therefore provide better quality service (Brien, Brown, and Collins, 2002; Feyne, 2012; Collins, 2016; Dong & Turner, 2016).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There are some important limitations to consider in this research study. This qualitative research was based only on the perspectives of a relatively small number of BSL/English interpreters. The survey instrument used was created by the researcher, and it was not based on any existing, externally validated tool.

Further insight could be garnered by seeking the perceptions of those who use, procure, and provide interpreting services. Although Ozolins (2007) states that actual agency practices are difficult to research, qualitative research in this regard would prove useful. Future research could explore to what extent agencies versus those procuring services and setting contract stipulations influence market disorder. It would also be interesting to extend the research to other countries to gather comparative data.

CONCLUSION

From these survey results and the literature supporting accreditation (Ozolins, 2007; Feyne, 2012; Teodoro & Hughes, 2012; Hunter, 2015), it follows that an Industry Code of Practice and accreditation as suggested by Ozolins (2007) are instruments worthy of implementation. It is telling that 95.7% of respondents said that interpreting agencies differed in work practices

and standards. Teodoro & Hughes (2012) found that agency accreditation facilitates the diffusion of best practices by setting expected standards and holding agencies accountable for achieving these standards. Hence accreditation of interpreting agencies will help to streamline standards, thereby bolstering the professionalization process and increasing the public's trust that they will receive a certain standard.

The results of this study also revealed that interpreters surveyed had a deep mistrust of interpreting agencies. Teodoro & Hughes (2012) found that agency accreditation was positively correlated with workers' perceptions of agency priorities. One study participant echoed this by predicting: "An accreditation system along with a Code of Practice would give interpreters reassurance that agencies have a certain standard of ethics. This reassurance would also extend to the public at large." As mentioned by several survey participants, it would also acknowledge and reward those agencies following ethical business practices.

Agency accreditation based on the ISO 13611 Guidelines on Community Interpreting, section 6, would facilitate the diffusion of best practices and responsible interpreting service provision. Although the ISO guidelines were created a few years ago, it seems that inquiry or discussion about how or if they are being applied has been limited, apart from their apparent influence on interpreter training (Hlavac, 2015). This article may be the first discussion of the ISO 13611 ISP requirements applied to a market. Further application of the guidelines may provide more insight into how ISPs are or are not meeting the recommendations put forth by the ISO, and this UK-based analysis provides a comparative point for a broader application of the ISO 13611 ISP guidelines.

An accreditation instrument based on the ISO 13611 ISP guidelines may be most effective if granted and monitored via an external body. This is necessary seeing as how the issue of agency practices has been broached repeatedly in the past (Harrington, 1997; Brien, Brown & Collins, 2002; Ozolins, 2007), but the discussions are ongoing (Hale, 2016; Dong & Napier, 2016; Dong & Turner, 2016). This fact, in conjunction with these survey results, suggests that little impetus exists for agencies as a whole to reliably regulate themselves in a way deemed to be in line with professional standards and sustainability.

In order for accreditation to be effective, it would be useful to have a grievance procedure to report agencies as suggested by Harrington (1997) and Ozolins (2007), through which those who fail to comply with accreditation standards would have their accreditation revoked and this fact made public as suggested by Feyne (2012). It is not enough to have a stamp that an agency is able to tack onto their website after paying a fee to a registering body – the initiative must have clear repercussions for failure to adhere to standards. This would serve as public accountability for corporate social responsibility which would foster compliance (Best, 2017).

Whilst agency accreditation may prove beneficial to the professionalization of the field and to the quality of services received by the public, identifying a body to perform the regulation remains a challenge. The National Registers of Communication Professionals working with Deaf and Deafblind People (NRCPD) in the U.K. registers signed language interpreters and would be the most readily suited candidate for agency registration as well. This organization, however, has indicated that they are currently not interested in becoming involved with standards for agencies.

Given that procurement entities were ranked in this survey as exerting the most influence on the provision of interpreting services, the best course of action may be to incorporate measures mentioned by Hunter (2015) whereby only those agencies which have accreditation are eligible to bid on government contracts. In the absence of an accreditation mechanism, ISO 13611 certification should become a procurement stipulation. Establishing this requirement

will likely necessitate more education/consultation for those procuring interpreting services. Agencies may be in a unique position to take on such a role as they are integral in shaping the expectations of those purchasing language services (Ozolins, 2007). Ultimately, requiring standards such as ISO 13611 certification in procurement contracts may be the most effective way to ensure both adherence to and maintenance of professional standards.

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