



Our Culture, Our Value – The Social and Economic Benefits of Auslan

Summary of research

Per Capita
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We acknowledge the traditional owners of country and pay respect to past, present and emerging Elders.

We also acknowledge and respect the members of the Deaf community in Australia, who preserve their rich heritage, culture, and our language; Auslan (Australian Sign Language).

We also acknowledge our custodians of Auslan, promoting awareness, equality, and access through our sign language. Through Auslan, we inspire future leaders in our Deaf community to continue our legacy and heritage.

View the full
report and Auslan
translations here



The essential value of language is not something that we give much thought to. Yet, without language, the most fundamental interactions of life would be impossible. Whether it be buying groceries, talking to our neighbours, or accessing government services, language is critical. It is also essential to engaging with, and participating in, cultural practices. Indeed, language underpins so much of our existence that it is often largely invisible, and its value is under-recognised by policymakers and the public at large.

In Australia an estimated 30,000 people use Auslan, and it is the primary language of many within the Deaf community. Auslan is broadly related to sign languages used in Britain yet is distinct from other sign languages and English with respect to grammar and sentence composition.

Despite the critical importance of Auslan for the economic, social and cultural wellbeing of its users, Auslan is not recognised as an official language of Australia. Many countries have made legislative changes to recognise their domestic sign languages as official languages, with 72 jurisdictions currently mandating official recognition. As a result, Auslan does not receive the kind of support and investment from Australian policy makers as do sign languages that are officially recognised in comparable countries.

There is also a relative lack of research into Auslan when compared to the value and benefit of sign language in other developed nations. In order to quantify some of this missing data, Deaf Connect and Deaf Australia commissioned Per Capita to determine the economic benefits of Auslan.

This research considered the economic effects of Auslan on those individuals who use it, and on the economy at large.

We find that Auslan creates a mass of interconnected benefits and outcomes at both the individual and societal level, including greater educational attainment, better employment outcomes, improved engagement with health systems, and more holistic improvements to self-efficacy, advocacy, and most critically, to the expansion of individual capabilities.

The evidence suggests that:

- Deaf children benefit from early exposure to sign language. However, parents should not feel the burden of being their child's only good sign language role models: equally critical is early exposure to other sign language users, and the signing community.
- Sign language capability is positively correlated with academic performance across a number of academic disciplines. Auslan-based instruction has been found to be associated with better learning outcomes amongst Deaf learners, with better testing retention than some technology-based alternatives.
- There is a significant shortage of Auslan interpreters in every Australian state and territory, meaning that many people are unable to access services during critical interactions with civic systems and processes. Auslan interpreting is critical to the provision of culturally affirming service delivery.

When members of the Deaf community access health services without interpreting support, they may be deprived of the critical benefits accruing from the patient/provider relationship. This affects the delivery of diagnosis and associated remedies, as well as depriving the community of the health literacy benefits associated with such interactions. Auslan interpreting ensures that government service provision is not merely accessible, but also culturally affirming.

The benefits of Auslan for the individual, the user-community and the country are wide ranging and complex. However, some of these gains can be estimated in terms of economic benefits. Our research concludes that:

Individual Auslan users are \$12,248 better off per year, indicating a lifetime effect of over \$750,000.

The annual value of Auslan to the broader Australian economy is \$367.4 million.



The demonstrated economic benefits of Auslan highlight the need for a more strategic approach to sign language investment in Australia. Auslan represents a viable language that offers significant protective benefits against both language and cultural dysfluency, the risks of which are significant.

The benefits of Auslan are not limited to early intervention; rather, access and exposure to sign language has positive benefits well into adulthood. Without adequate investment in sign language education and support, Deaf and hard of hearing individuals experiencing language deprivation, may be prevented from reaching their full potential, and the evidence suggests that this may result in substantially higher costs to society.

Increased investment in Auslan education and support services will yield significant social and economic returns through better employment outcomes, improved educational attainment, better engagement with health systems and significant capability enablement.

Further research

This research note is based on Per Capita's report on the benefits of Auslan titled, *"Our Culture, Our Value: The Social and Economic Benefits of Auslan"*.

A companion report exploring the protective quality of Auslan and its role in assisting children in establishing a viable language foundation is also available: *"Exploring the Benefits of Auslan in Early Intervention Approaches for Deaf Children"*.