



A Culturally Affirming Way Forward

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



Deaf Connect and Deaf Australia have identified the need for a sound evidence base explaining the economic value, and optimal timing, of Auslan intervention. These organisations commissioned Per Capita to explore critical issues pertinent to the Deaf community within Australia.

In comparison to many other advanced economies, there remains a genuine shortage of research exploring the social impact of sign language in Australia. Without such an evidence basis, the efficacy of policy formulation and program design will be limited.

Over two reports, entitled *“Our Culture, Our Value: The Social and Economic Benefits of Auslan”*, and *“Exploring the Benefits of Auslan in Early Intervention Approaches for Deaf Children”*, Per Capita has drawn together expert opinion and academic research on the economic and social benefits of Auslan, and the optimal timing of Auslan intervention.

These reports identify poorly understood benefits associated with Auslan as a capability-enhancing primary language, as a source of protection against the uncertainty of outcomes associated with alternative approaches, and in support of other intervention approaches.

The Economic and Social Benefits of Auslan

Auslan yields significant economic and social benefits to members of the Deaf community and the broader Australian economy.

Individual Auslan users are \$12,419 better off per year compared to Deaf non-users of Auslan, equating to as much as \$750,000 in increased income across the lifetime.

The overall economic benefit associated with Auslan in Australia equates to \$368 million annually.

Deaf people are frequently viewed through a medical/health lens, which recognises their deafness as a deficit or disability, while many members of the Deaf community see themselves as part of a particular culture, of which Auslan is the primary language.

Partly as a result of the medical view of deafness, the provisions and services needed and used by Deaf people, including Auslan education and associated supports, are regarded in the policy making process as pure costs. Yet Per Capita’s analysis demonstrates that there are significant economic benefits associated with Auslan, and consequently Auslan generates significant value for both members of the Deaf community and the broader economy.

Employing research conducted with a number of OECD countries with large populations who use sign language, the reports identify both improved educational outcomes and positive employment effects associated with sign language competence. Sign language also supports a better health sector, improved access for Deaf people to financial and legal services and, importantly, greater self-reliance and independence.

The research finds that proficiency in sign language reduces the impact of deafness on the wellbeing of individuals, and ameliorates the social disadvantage associated with deafness. Auslan provides users with enhanced capabilities, the absence

of which would make many basic but important social interactions challenging.

The opportunity cost of not investing in Auslan is therefore significant. Policy makers should judiciously review all programs related to the provision of Auslan education and associated support, to enable greater levels of Auslan utilisation within the Deaf community and provide better service delivery outcomes.

Early Auslan intervention protects against language deprivation

Having established the significant economic benefits of Auslan, it is important to consider the benefits of Auslan as an early intervention strategy.

There is significant evidence demonstrating the benefits of Auslan as part of early intervention strategies for children that are deaf or hard of hearing. This research is outlined in our report titled *“Exploring the Benefits of Auslan in Early Intervention Approaches for Deaf Children”*. The report identifies several developmental and cognitive benefits associated with early exposure to language, and the benefits of sign language in establishing a viable language foundation for deaf children.

Increasingly, parents want to expose their deaf children to sign language for the significant cultural benefits associated with the language. Notably, delayed sign language exposure is associated with atypical language processing, which is suboptimal for the child. Early deficits in language processing typically are not overcome with the benefit of time, leading to a lifetime of disadvantage.

The largest benefit associated with early Auslan intervention is the protection it provides against language deprivation: that is, the risk of not acquiring language properly in early childhood. While oral/aural intervention strategies may provide significant benefits, there is greater uncertainty associated with the outcomes of such strategies when used in isolation.

Too often, intervention strategies are offered to parents as an 'either/or' proposition: that is, parents are guided to invest *only* in oral/aural interventions because of the medical approach to 'curing' deafness. Such an approach deprives deaf children of access to primary language acquisition in the critical early childhood years.

It is critical that policy makers invest in presenting intervention options accurately, fairly and not in opposition to one another. Early access to Auslan education and support ensures that a deaf child has a viable foundational language regardless of the outcomes of alternative interventions. This protective benefit is arguably the greatest advantage of Auslan.

In considering the importance of timing, the research identifies that earlier intervention is of immense benefit for improved economic and social outcomes. We explore two models of benefit, the first based on an 18-year benefits model and the second based on a 13-year benefits model. Each model makes a conservative assumption that the benefits of intervention decline at a constant level over the terms.

Delaying childhood Auslan intervention by two years produces a learning deficit of approximately 20% by the age of ten, compared to their peers. This learning deficit is a significant opportunity cost.

The lifetime opportunity cost of delaying early Auslan intervention by two years from age 5 to age 7 is between \$128,245 and \$171,474, or roughly 2.4 to 3.3 years of median income.

Intervention in year one rather than year five yields a lifetime benefit to the child of between \$273,782 and \$367,445.

Incorporating Auslan as part of an early intervention strategy for deaf children provides significant protective benefits. Auslan as an early intervention strategy also provides children with the opportunity to engage with a cultural community, something that families increasingly value. Providing those children, their families and their broader community with improved Auslan support requires a sizable increase in funding for early intervention.

Investing in Auslan across the life course

Despite the significant evidence to support the cultural and educational benefits of sign language education for deaf children, and the economic value of Auslan education, the current status of Auslan support and support afforded the Deaf community is inadequate to realise these benefits.

While many countries have chosen to formally acknowledge their national sign language, Australia has not.

Concerningly, major peak bodies that have historically been funded to represent the needs of the Deaf community have been defunded over the past decade, diminishing the community's capacity to advocate for its needs. This defunding has undoubtedly had a negative impact on Deaf advocacy and

services and has arguably silenced the community. It is essential that the benefits of Auslan, and Deaf advocacy, are acknowledged through the provision of sufficient support for peak bodies to represent the community.

Equally critical is the acknowledgement that Deaf researchers from Australia are significant contributors to Deaf research internationally. Yet there is little by way of funded longitudinal research into Deafness and sign language occurring in Australia. The paucity of local research programs has led to many critical research questions going unanswered. Local research capability remains strong, but the sector must be given sufficient resources to engage in much-needed work to drive positive and sustainable change in Auslan education, Deaf studies and early-stage intervention.

While the benefits of Auslan to educational attainment and employment among Deaf people are already significant, there remains immense potential for greater economic and social benefit for both the Deaf community and the Australian economy through further investment. To fully realise these benefits, greater engagement is required from government and greater investment is needed for Deaf people entering, or already in, the paid workforce.

Deaf workers would benefit from increased funding of Auslan interpreting services to fully utilise their skills, improving both their individual positions, and overall labour market efficiency. Employment service providers should be required to participate in mandatory cultural awareness training to provide more culturally suitable service outcomes for Deaf job seekers.

Most critically, there must also be a deeper level of engagement between government, unions and employers, to actively promote higher rates of recruitment of Deaf candidates, and to promote better use of enabling technologies and culturally supportive workforce systems.

Older members of the Deaf community continue to be forgotten in policy and program support. The elderly Deaf community constitutes a sizable portion of the broader Deaf community. There is a dearth of technology provision for older Deaf people, given that most are not able to attain any benefit from the Hearing Support Program, the National Disability Insurance Scheme and the My Aged Care system. Funding age-specific assistive technologies would greatly improve the quality of life of older Deaf Australians and would predictably reduce the costs associated with their care.

Deaf Connect and Deaf Australia invite further dialogue around these critical issues and encourage relevant stakeholder groups to explore the research and critical evidence base.