La Relève – The Next Generation: Results of the AIIC project

International organisations are seeing their staff age while at the same time there is a gap between employer demand and the supply of interpreters graduating from training programmes. How can we prep

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The idea for the “Next Generation” project dates back to June 2002, when the IAMLADP working group on the training of language staff published its report. The sub-group on conference interpretation had organised an initial survey on the training and recruitment needs of international organisations, which 11 institutions and 37 universities which train interpreters had answered. The main finding was that there was a growing – and potentially dangerous - gap between employer demand and the supply of interpreters graduating from training establishments.

Convinced of the seriousness of the phenomenon and its potential impact on the profession, the CdP (AIIC’s Staff Committee) decided at its annual meeting in New York on 7and 8 September 2002, to submit to AIIC Council a new project entitled “La Relève - The Next Generation” that would take stock of the situation and propose ideas for the future. The project was approved by the Porto Assembly in January 2003 and confirmed by Council in Paris on 6 July 2003 after hearing from Claude Durand, President of the CdP and project coordinator. It was also decided that the project would be headed by the CdP and carried out in liaison with the TC (Training Committee) and PriMs (Private Market Sector).

It took over 2 years for the project to be completed (from January 2003 to April 2005) and it was logically divided into 2 main parts: the first addressing international organisations (IOs), the second the interpreter-training establishments.

Of the 24 international organisations contacted (or national organisations, such as the Conference Services of the Government of Canada), 11 provided more or less detailed information about the age pyramid of their staff, language combinations in short supply now and in the medium term, their relations with training programs, and facilities in place, if any, to incorporate young interpreters. A bare dozen may not seem very many, but there is no doubt that these IOs prove representative as they employ 90% of full-time staff interpreters in the world and have a high volume of activity.

Submission of information from training establishments was less satisfactory; only 19 universities - including 3 non-European ones - took the trouble to reply to a short questionnaire appended to the 2004 survey sent out by the AIIC Training Committee to schools. However, when added to the results from the IAMLADP 2002 survey, these replies constitute a precious source of information.

The main conclusions are presented here [1].
In the organisations

The ageing of staff: the IOs studied are all seeing a marked ageing of their staff interpreters, but there are considerable differences among organisations. This can be noted particularly from two parameters:

- the average age of staff interpreters in 2003 ranged from 42.9 and 57 years of age
- the proportion of staff interpreters over 50 ranged from 23% to 100%

This last figure is even more significant than average age when considered in relation to age of retirement, which in some organisations comes as early as 55 and nowhere currently exceeds 65 years of age.

It should be noted that the European Union institutions do not allow their former staff interpreters to work for them as freelancers after retirement, which means that they are all the more eager to promote the training of future generations of both staff and freelancers.

Language combinations in short supply: here a distinction must be made between those IOs which need to replace staff within the context of an unchanging language regime (i.e. for whom ageing is the sole factor), and those which have also seen an explosive increase in the number of official languages (i.e. the European institutions since 1st May 2004). For details please refer to chapter IV of the full project report, since renewal needs vary considerably both within and among organisations.

Incorporating young interpreters: only a small number of IOs has introduced a system to facilitate the entry of young, relatively inexperienced interpreters: the Translation Bureau of the Government of Canada ("internships"), DG SCIC ("insertion scheme" from 1998 to 2003) and the EP (short-term courses).

Relations with interpreter training establishments: the European institutions (DG SCIC and EP) are without doubt those with the most developed contacts with interpreter training programs, to which they provide technical and/or financial assistance. The SCIC-Universities Conference, convened annually by DG SCIC since 1997, brings employers and training establishments together to exchange a wealth of information.

In the training establishments

Most universities which train interpreters already have numerous contacts with those IOs that are potential employers of graduates and particularly appreciate the help given in the form of pedagogical assistance, participation in exam juries, visits by students to the IOs and subsidies.

Whereas most training establishments say they are being informed (often informally) of job openings by the IOs, many would prefer the organisations to take advantage of better planning and officially notify them of present and future recruitment needs.

The great majority of universities maintain they have started to adapt to the new needs of IOs by expanding the range of languages they offer and diversifying the content of courses. However, they underline difficulties linked to rigid academic structures, whilst welcoming the creation of the European Masters in Conference Interpreting. Many belong to one or more academic networks.

As a result of this stocktaking, the CdP and the TC would like to make the following recommendations:
To the IOs

We cannot but urge all IOs to ensure the renewal of permanent staff in order to guarantee continuity in quality, to safeguard the memory of the institution and its own special thesaurus, and to transmit from one generation of interpreters to the next the values of the organisation. At the same time we urge them to concern themselves with the training of all future interpreters who may one day work for them.

In recent years some IOs have made a real effort to communicate with training establishments. We encourage them to continue along this path and invite the others to further develop contacts with universities and schools of interpretation.

Some IOs have not yet realized that their interpreting staff is ageing and will need to be replenished in the medium term. We recommend that they study the situation and consider a longer-term view of recruitment needs.

Even for those IOs who do plan recruitment in the medium term, we suggest that they try to ensure, as far as possible, continuity in the rules of the game (selection criteria, linguistic profiles, insertion systems, etc.), and that they set a timetable for entrance exams (competitive exams for staff and tests for freelancers) and keep potential candidates informed.

To training establishments

We encourage universities to redouble their reform efforts, especially by bringing programs in line with the principles established by the European Masters consortium.

We recommend that training establishments not try to do without criteria and procedures governing admission to studies in conference interpretation.

We remind universities that the training of interpreters by professionals, who both practise their profession and have training in this special branch of teaching, is a guarantee of success.

We are pleased to see that several networks linking universities are now in place. We encourage programs still working in isolation to seek counterparts with whom they can cooperate and exchange ideas.

We recommend that universities try to benefit from the technical and financial aid available from some particularly dynamic IOs.

To AIIC and its members

AIIC Council is requested to ensure dissemination of the results of this study to IOs and universities.

Wherever possible, staff interpreters belonging to AIIC (as well as freelancers) should become involved in the training of the future generations of interpreters in order to transmit the good practices and professional ethics needed to safeguard the future of conference interpreting.

The CdP, the TC and PriMs should be encouraged to continue collaborating on these matters in order to provide the association with regularly updated information on openings, sought-after language combinations, good training programs, etc.

We urge AIIC to take the initiative to revive regular meetings with the Chief Interpreters of IOs in order to keep abreast of the matters dealt with in this study.
We encourage AIIC, and in particular the group working on Definition and Recognition of the Profession, to continue efforts to safeguard and improve the status of conference interpreters, as some universities say low status deters many students otherwise interested.

Finally, AIIC should request observer status with IAMLADP in order to inform and be informed of new developments in the language professions.

[1] The full 45-page report is available on this website. Click for French or English.

Claude Durand is coordinator of "La Relève – The Next Generation."

Recommended citation format: