Conference interpreter training in Sweden

Courses to prepare conference interpreters got a big push when Sweden voted to join the EU.

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Before Sweden joined the European Union in 1995, Swedish was one of the more exotic languages in the conference world. Its use was basically limited to the international trade union organisations and to meetings held in Sweden. There were no more than twenty-five interpreters in the whole world with a Swedish "A". Most got their training at ETI in Geneva. Other options included ESIT in Paris and Heidelberg and Germersheim in Germany.

In the field of training, Sweden has had well-established courses for community interpreters since the 1960s, initially in languages such as Finnish, Serbo-Croatian and Spanish with Arabic, Somali and Albanian being added later. These training courses are organised as "study circles" or at the Swedish institutes for adult education known as folk high schools. There were also occasional three-semester university certificate courses. There has been a national authorization scheme for community interpreters since 1976. The only conference interpreter training was offered at the regional level to satisfy the needs of the Nordic Council for interpretation between Finnish and the Scandinavian languages.

On 13 November 1994, the Swedish people were asked to say "yea" or "nay" to the European Union in a national referendum. During the 1993/94 academic year, Stockholm University's Institute of Translation and Interpreting offered a six-month postgraduate course in conference interpretation to better prepare the country should it enter the EU and to revitalize the stock of interpreters with Swedish in their language combination. This course was taught by conference interpreters, most of them members of AIIC. They were given a free hand to design and run the course in accordance with AIIC guidelines for interpretation schools. The first class graduated in May 1994.

The day after Sweden voted to join the EU, planning began for a second course and conference interpretation began to pick up speed. Five courses have now been completed, with the most recent class graduating in June 2000. A total of some 45 students have passed the final examinations. The Stockholm Institute (TÖI) has now joined the "European Masters in Conference Interpretation" program and our training program, now extended to eight months, has merited AIIC's highest rating of three stars.

What does the future hold? The stage of an urgent need for Swedish interpreters has passed and we can consider the period of "rescue service" over. The current phase may be described as one of consolidation of the knowledge and practical experience of recent graduates. The needs of the EU after the Swedish presidency and as the enlargement process continues are uncertain. With this in mind, the program is not being offered for the 2000-2001 academic year and will resume at the earliest in autumn 2002. TÖI is considering changing to a two-year course of studies, but Swedish students may be reluctant to devote such a period to full-time postgraduate studies in interpretation.
A one-year course with a preparatory semester has also been proposed. Consideration is also being
given to including the language of an EU candidate country, such as Polish or Estonian, in addition
to the traditional "major" languages.

At present there are also a few students with Swedish in their language combinations in programs in

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