Letter from the Editor; Keep Language Programs Open

When I read that the Westminster MA Conference Interpreting course had been shut down, I was struck dumb. Should I offer my condolences to all who had worked hard to make it a premier choice among post-grad interpreter training programs? Or should I feel vicariously relieved that a group of hard-working colleagues would no longer have to deal with bureaucrats incapable of grasping the import of what they were doing?

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Recently the media has had much to say about the negative economic effects of poor foreign language skills in the UK (see one example in this BBC article) and on budget reductions resulting in language programs being reduced in scope or eliminated altogether in many countries (read this protest from the MLA on cuts in the USA).

At the same time, international organisations are making very visible efforts to attract interpreters, including those with English as their mother tongue. The pieces don’t fit together. Why do away with the only European Masters in Conference Interpreting course in an English-speaking country?

We all know the answer: money. But I am not alone in rejecting the budgetary arguments. Education cannot be reduced to the bottom line; no one can deny its social benefits. As the University of Westminster Students’ Union said of fee hikes: “We believe this type of approach will further intensify the precarious culture of the University for students and staff who have already, and are currently, being affected by cuts to staffing and courses. This also goes against our belief in education as a social good, we do not believe in the marketisation of higher education.”

We know what happens when profit, under the guise of self-sustainability, is applied to schools at any level: larger classes, fewer teachers, and poor facilities. If we need an economic term to go with education, investment would be a good choice. Not the personal investment a student makes in the form of tuition, but the social investment a society must make in its own future.

Westminster: outcry from interpreters

The decision to close the Westminster course on the eve of its 50th anniversary met with prompt condemnation. The blogging community was quick off the line with a concerted effort. They pointed to the program’s long history of producing quality interpreters for institutions and the private market, “not just in the English booth but also in the French, Spanish, Italian, German, Polish, Hungarian, Czech, Bulgarian, Irish, Maltese, Russian and Chinese booths” (see Bootheando), and UW’s stated “commitment to educating for professional life” (see Cosa de dosPalabras). For more opinions read:

- The Interpreter Diaries - The University of Westminster Closes its Training Program
The core group went a step further by engaging the social networking community with Have your say on the closure of Westminster's interpreting course on Facebook [1].

EU interpreting service’s response

On 11 May this announcement appeared on the European Commission website: “The head of the interpreting service for two of the EU’s main institutions has written to the UK government to raise concerns following the recent announcement by the University of Westminster that its MA in Conference Interpreting is to close.”

In his letter, Marco Benedetti points out that 10% of English staff and 20% of accredited freelancers working for the European institutions on a regular basis are graduates of the Westminster course.

Further on he reminds the UK authorities that: “Interpreters in the EU institutions play a vital role in ensuring the daily operation of the Union, and English mother-tongue interpreters are arguably the most critical link in the chain... without English interpreters, the 90% of UK delegates who depend on interpretation to participate in meetings would be hampered in their task of defending their country’s interests.”

He ends by saying “I hope that by drawing your attention to this matter, I will have succeeded in making you aware of the wider implications of cuts in language training.”

Will anything change?

I wouldn’t hazard a guess, my forecasting ability being no better than that of a coin. But we can hope – and continue to raise our collective voice against budget cuts affecting language and interpreter training courses.

The Westminster course lasted for 50 years because it offered quality training. In fact, good translation and interpreting programs provide students with a sound general education based on familiarity with contemporary issues, an appreciation for cultures and an international mindset, and a set of skills that can be – and often are – applied in other walks of life. Interpreters and translators learn how to learn and a rapidly changing world needs people like that.

This Issue

Interpreter Voices returns with Claudia Sierich’s interview of Ana Teresa Arcaya, one of the pioneering generation of conference interpreters in Venezuela.

The AIIC Research Committee has been exploring “how age-related changes in language abilities and the cognitive abilities underlying them are experienced by professional multilinguals – namely, conference interpreters.” Read more in Interpreting work buffers against aging? Reporting on the AIIC Lifespan Study.

Garry Mullender and Vitorino Guila combine to take a look at the first postgraduate training course for interpreters in Portuguese-speaking Africa and an AIIC-sponsored training seminar in Rome in...
Training Trainers for Africa.

In European – or the language that doesn’t speak to people, Michel Lesseigne, “fazed and fascinated” by the experience, examines David Lescot’s play L’Européenn and interviews the author. In an example of life imitating art, the article has been translated into all the languages used onstage (EN, DE, PO, PT and SK).

Lescot’s piece was performed last April 2nd in an event sponsored by AIIC France. In Se comprendre malgré ou grâce au multilinguisme ?, Bettina Ludewig and Meei-huey Wang pick up where the play left off to inform us of various outreach initiatives undertaken in their region.

Language in the News opens with research on the origins of languages and closes with how the brain works during improvisation. In between – translators and interpreters defend professional right, endangered languages, interpreter blogs, and much more.

Articles reflect the views of the author(s) and should not be taken to represent the official position of AIIC.

Communicate! invites submission of articles from members and non-members. Please contact l.luccarelli@2nvrgc.aiic.net or info@2cszny.aiic.net.

[1] Just as this issue of Communicate! was about to be launched, a petition to be sent to university authorities was posted for signature here.

Recommended citation format: