AIIC Staff Interpreters mark 40th anniversary

Interpreters employed by organisations meet in Paris to celebrate history and plan for future.

The AIIC Staff Interpreters’ Committee (SIC/CdP) met in Paris from 30 October to 1 November 2015 to mark its 40th anniversary and hold its yearly meeting. The historic Château de la Muette (below) and the Ecole Supérieure d’interprètes et de traducteurs (ESIT) served as venues. Discussions included cooperation between staff and freelance interpreters, training & professional development, and entry into the work place.

The history and future of staff interpreters in AIIC

Friday began with a cordial welcome and overview of the interpreting service at the OECD, given by host Claire Donovan (OECD, Head of Service). Keynote speeches by Claude Durand and Linda Fitchett reviewed the history of the Staff Interpreters’ Committee and its key contributions, including major survey projects on “The Next Generation” of interpreters (La Relève) (2005) and the reasons why staff interpreters join or do not join AIIC (2007). These projects were led by the keynote presenters, respectively, during their tenures as committee chairs. There was also institutional and historical input from Christopher Thiéry in a letter annexed to the formal report (attached below).

Claude Durand pointed out that the SIC/CdP has always covered all issues affecting conference interpreters employed by international and national organisations and played 3 main roles by:

- Acting as a unique observatory of the evolving status of staff interpreters in the organisations covered by the CdP.
- Establishing a constant link between staff interpreters and their freelance colleagues.
- Significantly contributing to AIIC projects.
The introduction set the stage for a round table discussion kicked off by a group of panel speakers – the three individuals mentioned above as well as Angela Keil, President of AIIC, and Sirpa Lehtonen, former SIC/CdP Chair. Debate focused on the future of staff interpreters in AIIC, and brought into stark relief the problematic retention of staff interpreter members, although it was noted that membership of staff interpreters in the association has ticked upward to roughly 12.5 percent. Highlights of the discussion are captured in the following paragraphs.

Freelance and staffer: Bound to a common fate

Freelance and staff colleagues are inextricably committed to the same fate, but approach it from different angles. Thanks to conditions originally forged by both, staff colleagues can cite AIIC texts in response to potentially adverse moves by their administration. Indeed, their position is less perilous than freelancers’ when making recommendations to organisations. But staffers should not lull themselves into a false sense of security. They work more days than freelancers, and if working conditions dip, staffers will be the first to bear the brunt. However, in the eyes of organisations, international, public or private, the very existence of a professional association means that there is a profession in the first place. No association, no profession; no profession, no common defence. Mounted by both staffers and freelancers, this common defence is of on-going relevance: staff contracts are increasingly on recurring fixed-term contract cycles, and any deterioration in private market pay and conditions may be seized upon by organisations to justify similar developments in-house.

The advent of remote interpretation and the impact of technology, as well as the need for continuous training and development, are also phenomena affecting both staffers and freelancers. But since staffers are in a relatively sheltered environment, since the concentration of skills within a staff team is an on-hand training resource, their learning can then be made available to freelance colleagues. Staffers and freelancers have a duty to develop professionally. But they have the equally valuable duty to develop the profession. In this respect, the decision of the committee’s to hold one of it's annual meeting in the wings of the AIIC Assembly is a salutary move.

AIIC’s perceived role: Union of quality or union of lobbyists?

This begs the question about how AIIC perceives itself and its role both towards members and the outside world. Is it a trade union? If so, a motivated membership achieving critical mass perhaps matters more than individual interpreter quality. Are good interpreters necessarily good trade unionists? What therefore should AIIC be promoting and defending? Is AIIC primarily a hallmark of quality or solidarity? Is there an antagonistic relationship between the two? What should be made of the slightly higher, albeit still very low, membership rate among staffers – 12.5% – and the forty or so members of AIIC among European Commission/SCIC's 500-strong pool of interpreters? In previous AIIC assemblies alternative membership procedures have been mooted for staff interpreters on the basis that their quality had already been tested through their organisations’ competitive examinations. But should AIIC outsource its quality prerogative in this way? Becoming a member includes an ethical dimension: just as the General Counsel of a corporation owes loyalty to his employer, he also owes loyalty to his profession and the ethical standards that that implies.

The Next Generation
The 2002-2005 study “The Next Generation” (La Relève) was designed to address an expected rise in institutional demand for staff interpreters foreshadowed by interpreter retirement and EU enlargement. Findings of this highly influential study included the need for closer ties between organisations and interpretation schools. Arguably, this project was too effective: schools, old and new, have constituted a supply of interpreters which in some fields has now outstripped demand. EU enlargement also brought with it a changed institutional stance, notably with the introduction of the “on request” system: member states can elect _ad hoc_ to buy interpretation services. This has reduced visibility in anticipating demand, and the first to suffer have been young interpreters, trained in some instances in language combinations for which work has since evaporated.

**Institutional training and collaboration with schools**

On 31 October the committee met at ESIT to address training, both at diploma and professional levels. Valuable contributions were made by ESIT Director Fayza El Qasem; Tasmine Fernando-Schost, Director of ESIT’s Conference Interpretation Section; Sarah Bordes, ISIT Director of Interpreting, and Andrew Gillies, head of AIIC Training and Professional Development. Individual staff colleagues spoke of training and professional development in their home institutions.

**Staff interpreter training provided by home institutions**

Colleagues expressed a need for institutions to offer funded training in several areas, such as adding languages, stress management and training refreshers in team work and booth manners. Larger organisations could offer language learning and voice coaching, and in some cases training in how acting skills can be incorporated into an interpreter’s rendition. Some institutions bring in non-interpreter experts to provide briefings or workshops on new concepts or buzz words in their field. Such meetings also offer scope in raising awareness among users of interpretation.

Some colleagues highlighted the need for additional training areas, such as refresher courses for the A language. With English dominating statements from the floor, English As doing _retour_ need to maintain their rarely used English. Furthermore, interpreters are encouraged to flesh out their skills in non-interpreter related fields to create scope, if so desired, for branching off into other professional areas. Lastly, colleagues were reminded of the motivational effects of training and the need to organise and lead workshops, using one’s own skills for the benefit of others.

**Bridging the gap between graduate level and both freelancing and staffing at institutions**

Many present expressed frustration at the perceived skill gap between graduate level of competence and that required by their organisations for accreditation as a freelancer or recruitment as staff. Bridging the divide is addressed, in one instance, by a mentoring system, involving a three-day training course with feedback to sensitize would-be candidates to where their current performance stands. In some instances young graduates are offered a total immersion course, allowing potential for later appearing on the freelancer roster. Highly intensive and tailored to the needs of the institution, candidates are selected both by the school and the institution.

More radically, some organisations expressed the need to train their own future in-house interpreters from scratch so as to tailor them specifically to their needs. This is true for languages of lesser diffusion, the training structure and format of such courses echoing that of ESIT’s special regime. But it is also true of the United Nations. UN organisations expressed dismay at the paucity of viable Arabic booth candidates. They claim schools are out of touch with the realities of UN staff interpreter work, whose regular diet is fast pace sight translation and speeches read out at a rate of between 140 and 180 words a minute. Visa restrictions for freelancers seeking to operate on private
markets local to UN locations have compounded the issue, since gaining prior freelance experience with the UN is not easy. In light of this, the UN has built competitively accessed (but remunerated) courses to specifically prepare candidates for the LCE exam. In parallel, they suggest schools offer an optional module for training potential UN language profiles. The low success rate of students taking diploma courses and the low level of graduates successful at EU institutions accreditation tests were also addressed: only 30% of students obtain their final diploma and only 30% of graduates sitting accreditation tests actually pass.

**Institutions cooperating with schools**

The schools underscored their primary purpose of producing quality interpreters. Heavy accents, incoherent statements, excessive delivery speed and *bidule* are realities of the market that a solid technique, acquired under ideal conditions, can tackle with the future benefit of experience. Students are sent for internships to partner organisations, which ordinarily double as a talent scout exercise. Mention was also made of training offered to experienced interpreters, on-site but also distance teaching, e.g. with the trainer in Paris and the beneficiary at a remote location.

**AIIC training**

AIIC’s schools’ survey came under fire. While the school rating system has been phased out, some schools continue to provide what is described as inadequate training, both in quality and course duration. On the one hand, this formed part of the debate about the perceived shortfall between graduate competence and the abilities sought for rostered or staff interpreters. On the other, it raised fears of some schools simply servicing the grey market, schools paradoxically supported (with the best intentions but with mixed feelings) by their Paris counterparts.

Other views were also voiced. While some “good” schools’ performance was demonstrably poor with some language combinations, others are prevented by law from meeting some of the AIIC survey criteria. As a reverse segue into the Friday debate, just as good interpreters don’t necessarily make good lobbyists, good interpreters, it was felt, aren’t necessarily good teachers. Young interpreters were also highly critical of schools training interpreters in combinations which are not marketable and complained of interpreter teachers wholly lacking in both pedagogical skill and a sense of responsibility to their students.

In response, Andrew Gillies pointed out that to avoid a conflict of interest with the [AIIC Interpreting Schools and Programmes Directory](https://www.aiic.net/policy-and-standards/aiic-interpretationschools-and-programmes-directory), AIIC provides no training as part of a formal partnership with schools. He said that what AIIC can offer, however, is continuous training and professional development. Picking up on the previous theme of solidarity and the privileged training position of staff interpreters, he was at pains to make clear that staffers could also be providers of training as well as beneficiaries.

**Towards the end of the afternoon,** updates on two ongoing SIC/CdP projects were presented to this broader audience:

- A survey of test formats for institutional competitive exams.
- The distance interpreting survey, initiated by Andrew Constable as an internal project and since grown to encompass the entire association and broader profession.

The test format survey for rostering and recruiting was circulated and the purpose of the project explained by Chris Guichot de Fortis (NATO). Regarding the distance interpreting survey, approved by the AIIC Technical Committee, a working group has now been established. The next step is to identify a point person responsible for disseminating the survey within member organisations and beyond.

**Passing the baton**
David Sawyer stood down after an extremely successful term as committee chair and selflessly serving as interim chair while a successor could be found. Christina Edwards put her candidacy forward and was elected by acclamation.

The full formal report and record of decisions can be downloaded below.

Recommended citation format: