

CASE STUDY

INTERPRET

«COMMUNITY INTERPRETERS»¹

Furio Bednarz, ECAP Foundation

Foreword

The case study deals with a successful experience of *recognition of prior learning outcomes* (RPLO) made during the start-up phase of the new qualification scheme, defined in the early 2000, to improve the quality of *interpreting services* in health and care, educational and social work sectors.

Generally speaking, interpreting services play a very important role in the above mentioned sectors, due to the considerable number of foreign “clients” of those institutions. In the 90’s studies and research highlighted the importance of establishing correct and effective communication between local institutions, foreign patients in health and care or migrant families and children in education, to avoid misunderstandings and, last but not least, to reduce the costs and to improve the efficiency of health, educational and social services.

Interpreting was traditionally assured in these sectors by volunteers, such as mediators and sometimes “community leaders”, motivated by civil commitment, without a specific competence in interpreting. Lacking interpreting resources, communication was often assured activating non professional “self help” means, in extreme situations also asking the children to translate delicate medical diagnoses or feed-backs concerning scholastic behaviour to their parents. At the end of the 90’s, on the basis of information directly collected in hospitals, schools, social institutions, a study stressed the need for defining quality standards in this field, professionalizing interpreting services. The basis for defining a professional profile, and a qualification procedure, has therefore been created, offering at the same time a good professional opportunity to the large number of volunteers and mediators who were already active in this field.

Taking into account the wide range of non formal and informal learning paths followed by the existing interpreters in building up their competences, the qualification procedure foresaw since the beginning the possibility of achieving the certification according two different modalities:

- a formal modular training path;
- a validation path, based on a RPLO procedure, specially thought for interpreters disposing of a longer experience.

In our case study we will briefly analyse the system as a whole, reflecting more in depth on the issues focused by *Observal*:

- actual development of the RPLO procedure,
- experiences and main results,

¹ We will use the term “Community Interpreter”, referring to the Swiss “Interkulturelle UebersetzerInnen” (Intercultural Interpreters) qualification profile. The first term corresponds to the French version of the same profile (Interpret Communautaire), and better defines in English tasks related to interpreting in a “trialog” situation.

- implications and consequences for the candidates who gained a qualification through RPLO,
- role played by the key actors and by the experts and assessors.

The case study has been developed using multiple sources:

- direct experience of the researcher, who participated to the works of the Federal Commission that was in charge of the elaboration of regulations and tools concerning intercultural interpreters' qualification; in addition he was a member in the first phase of the BEKOM, a consultative commission in charge of dealing with appeals;
- available documents and statistics produced by INTERPRET, the Association managing the system;
- interviews with the responsible of the Quality Commission in charge of delivering the certificates, experts and candidates who experienced the procedure.

Part 1. The context

1.1 Positioning of the Certificate

The case study of “*Community interpreters*”, whose origins and regulations have been established a couple of years before the development of the Swiss national VA system actually in the piloting phase (see National Report), represents a good example of how a qualification procedure normally finds, step by step, a place in the formal “certification” landscape of the country.

It follows a bottom-up approach. First of all, actors active on field define an emerging need (as we have already mentioned in the case of interpreting services, as well as in the case of Adult trainers, focused in another case study), designing a draft of what such a qualification should be. Then a bottom-up planning phase is launched, followed by a testing one, in which, for example, the new certificate could take the form of an “attestation” delivered by a private professional associations (in many cases these certifications are much appreciated by the job market, even when not officially recognised by the Federal Authorities at all!). Finally the Association that promoted the certificate could apply for the formal recognition of the title to the Swiss Federal Office for Vocational Training and Technology, the competent institution acknowledging Federal Certificates and Diplomas.

From INTERPRET certification to the delivery of a Federal Certificate

Brevet fédéral d'interprète communautaire délivré par l'OFFT			
Examen :			
- Cas pratique			
- Etique professionnelle			
- Techniques d'interprétariat pour interprètes communautaires			
- Examen en situation		→	Examen professionnel réussi
Conditions d'admission à l'examen professionnel			
Activité pratique dans un des domaines d'emploi (affaires sociales, santé, formation, migration)		→	Attestation pour 750h d'activité pratique
Complément d'activité pratique (expérience) en tant qu'interprète communautaire		→	Attestation pour 100h d'activité pratique en tant qu'i.c. (total 150h)
Complément de supervision		→	Attestation pour 7h de supervision (total 15h)
Niveau d'éducation secondaire II	ou	Voie de formation équivalente Diplôme reconnu sanctionnant des études effectuées à l'étranger	→ Diplôme du niveau secondaire II
Exigences du Certificat INTERPRET			
Activité pratique (expérience) en tant qu'interprète communautaire (i.c)		→	Attestation pour 50h d'activité pratique en tant qu'i.c.
Test linguistique en langue d'interprétariat (Profil/niveau B2)	ou	Attestation de compétences linguistique (Niveau B2)	→ Attestation linguistique pour la langue d'interprétariat
Test linguistique pour la langue officielle (Profil/niveau B2)	ou	Attestation de compétences linguistique (Niveau B2)	→ Attestation linguistique pour la langue officielle
Module 2	ou	Vérification de l'équivalence	→ Attestation de module 2
Supervision		→	Attestation pour 8 heures de supervision
Module 1	ou	Vérification de l'équivalence	→ Attestation de module 1

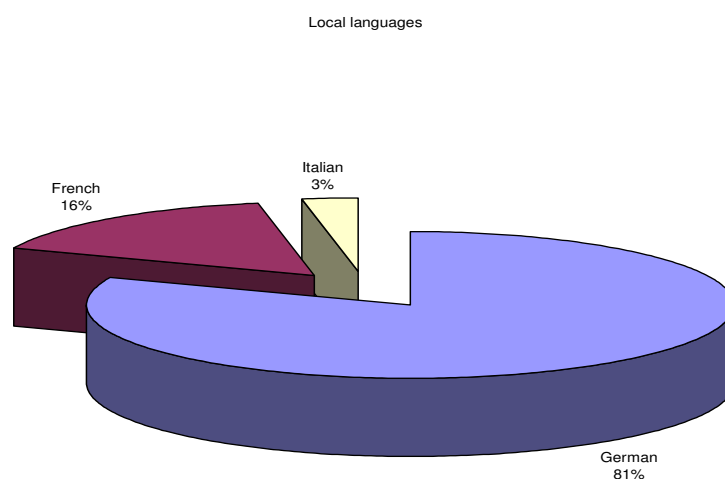
Also in our case the process developed according to this scheme, leading, at the end of 2007, to the integration of the qualification in the framework of Swiss higher vocational qualifications, as a Federal Certificate (Brevet Federal, Eidgenössischer Fachausweis): *Community Interpreter with Advanced Federal Certificate of Higher Vocational Education and Training*. To obtain this official acknowledgement, the qualification procedure has been improved, increasing the duration of the learning process, and adding some requirements to achieve the title.

The path approved by the Federal Office (see previous scheme) now allows intercultural interpreters to obtain a Federal Certificate, giving value to their *INTERPRET certificate* (and thus also giving value to prior learning), but in any case passing a final examination, after having presented a secondary school diploma (or an equivalent document), a certain amount of working experience as well as having participated in external supervision (more detailed information in INTERPRET, *Jahresbericht 2007*; downloadable from www.inter-pret.ch)

Our case study considers the RPLO procedure defined to achieve the *INTERPRET certificate*, actually available to validate basic competences corresponding to this “first level” qualification. This title is delivered by a private umbrella organisation (INTERPRET), established about ten years ago to promote the use of professional interpreters in “*trialog*” situations in health and care, social and educational sectors². The title is actually delivered by a Quality Assurance Commission nominated by the Association, whose members are qualified interpreters and sectoral experts (the same experts in charge of assessing candidates) representing associations, training bodies and institutions asking for interpreting services. The delivery of the title is ruled according to the procedures normally adopted by the Swiss Authority (ModuQua), providing supervision and control in the framework of modular qualification paths. Therefore it includes the presence of a Commission, also nominated by INTERPRET, in charge of examining appeals against decisions taken by the Quality Commission, and the possibility to achieve a global or partial certification through validation of prior learning outcomes (non formal, informal).

1.2 Participants to the qualification procedure

An updated and complete list of certified interpreters is available on www.inter-pret.ch. 565 interpreters, 80% women, are included in the list (October 2008), but we should bear in mind that a part of them (difficult to estimate) are no more active in Community interpreting, having found other more stable working opportunities (obviously an indirect positive result of their qualification efforts). The aim of the Association is to provide professional Community interpreting services to all Cantonal / regional institutions active in social, educational and health and care sectors. Actually it implies that all the languages, both national

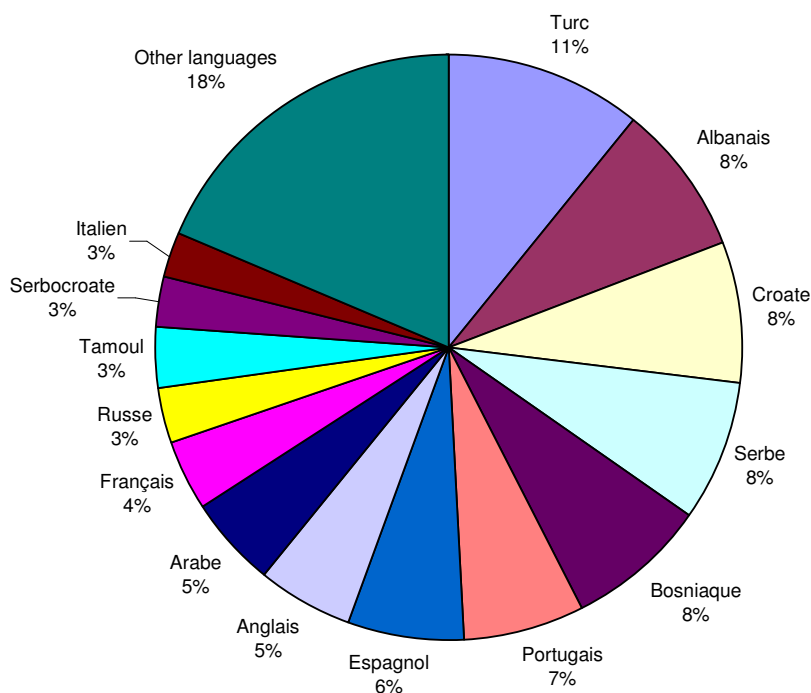


² *Trialog* situations normally occur when an interpreter is acting to facilitate understanding in diagnostic or counselling dialogues taking place between representatives of local institutions (teachers, medicines, social workers...) and immigrants who don't master the local language).

and foreign, including some “rare” ones, are covered by interpreters.

At the moment more than 80% of the interpreters are competent in translating German (see the previous graph), while French (16%) and Italian (3%) are under represented, in relation to the number of native and foreign residents in French and Italian speaking Cantons of Switzerland.

Turkish and the different languages spoken in former Yugoslavia are dominating in the framework of interpreted languages. Nevertheless the system assures that translation services are available also for several minor languages, as clearly highlighted by the graph.

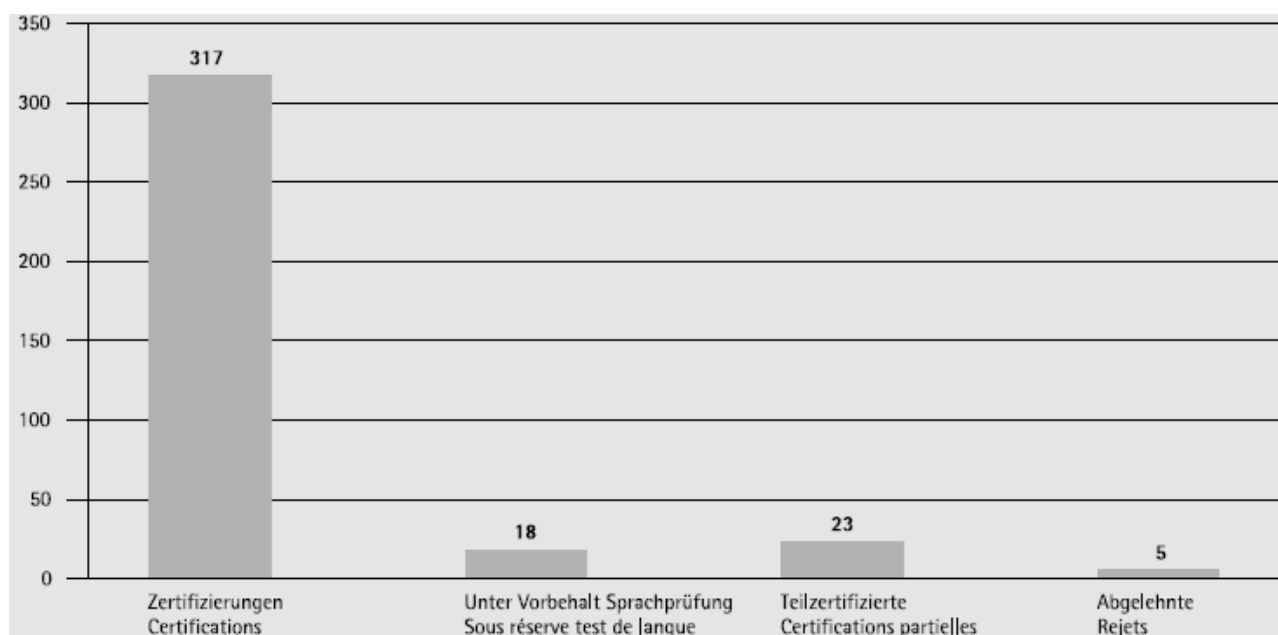


Available data (provided by INTERPRET Association), as well as the statistics elaborated by the Federal Commission for Integration of Foreigners (EKA), responsible for promoting Community interpreting Agencies highlight that local interpreting needs are now well covered in quite all the situations, also in Italian and French speaking Cantons, exception made for some very rare foreign languages, where Placement Agencies and INTERPRET are asking for new professional interpreters.

More than 400 active intercultural interpreters applied in the start-up phase of the qualification system for a validation, thanks to the advertising campaign launched by INTERPRET and to the financial support assured by the Federal Authorities.

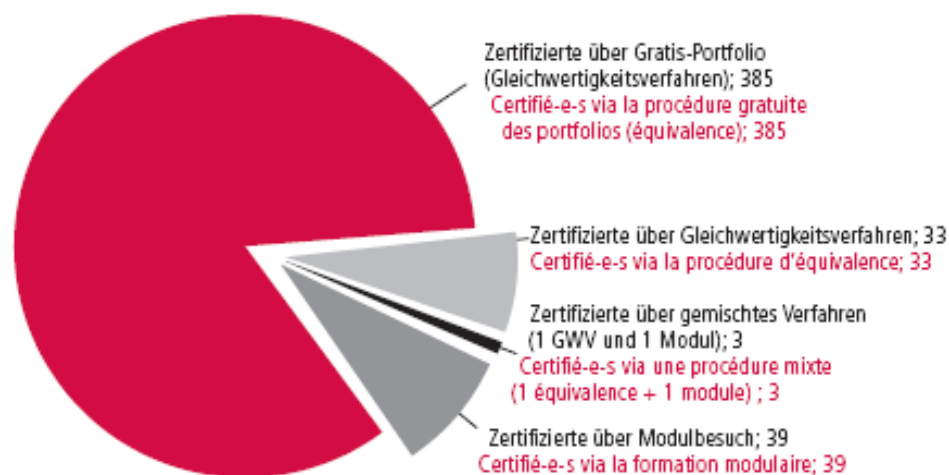
We have precise information concerning the results of the first phase of application of the new procedure, that took place in 2005 / 2006, anticipating and accompanying the development of the ordinary qualification system. In 2005, 317 Community interpreters obtained certification through a VPL procedure, while about 40 obtained only a partial qualification (in 18 cases due to the lack of required language skills at level B2).

Community interpreters - RPLO procedures in 2005



Community interpreters – Qualification procedures: an overview 2005 - 2006

(Stand/Etat 31.12.2006)



At the end of 2006 (*Jahresbericht 2006*, INTERPRET Association) the number of certificates delivered through a RPLO procedure, still belonging to the start-up phase, increased to 385. In the meanwhile also the first training offers accredited by the modular system had been launched. Since 2006 the qualification can be achieved both through participating in training modules and through applying for validation of prior learning. During the first year 39 certificates have been delivered after training, 33 through RPLO, and 3 partially accrediting prior learning, complemented by formal training.

It's not easy to identify the potential number of people who could have applied until now for a validation, in order to define the success of this alternative qualification path if compared to the ordinary one (participating in training modules). In 2004 – 2005 a massive information campaign

was launched by INTERPRET, in order to animate already active interpreters, presenting them the new qualification scheme. The number of these interpreters is of course very difficult to estimate; normally they work as volunteers, and for a limited amount of interpreting hours, depending on the interest and sensibility of local authorities towards Community communication problems.

Nevertheless, available data clearly shows that validation procedures played - as expected - a fundamental role in the start-up phase of the qualification system, and still continue to attract a certain number of candidates, despite it is now subject to the payment of a fee. Also calculating that after the initial phase (2005 and partially 2006) the majority of interpreters obtained a qualification participating in training modules, we should consider that today much more than half of the certified Community interpreters active all over the country gained their recognition through a validation scheme.

1.3 Role played by institutions and social partners

The system has been planned, designed and implemented activating a very complex partnership. Formally the promoter, and actually the body in charge of developing and managing the qualification scheme (validation and training), has been the INTERPRET Association (www.inter-pret.ch). Nevertheless a fundamental role in promoting interpreting services and the qualification system as a whole has been played by:

- Training Centres, already offering courses, who aimed at accrediting their modules applying to INTERPRET (see the list of accredited bodies on the above mentioned web site) in order to obtain financial means to develop training by the Federal Office of Public Health,
- Interpreters Placement Agencies (see the list on www.inter-pret.ch), established in the context of a joint initiative to foster interpreting services; these Agencies have been supported, in their start up phase, by the Federal Commission for Integration (EKA), aiming at making them able to act at the local level to assure interpreting services, promoting them, hiring certified Community interpreters, and placing them on the basis of mandates received by final users institutions (Hospitals, educational bodies, etc.).

Also the Swiss federation for Adult Education (SVEB) and the above mentioned Federal Authorities (Federal Office of Public Health, Federal Commission for Integration...) played an important role in planning and promoting the system, developing regulations and procedures (see further details).

1.4 Social and economic context

As far as job market related issues are concerned in providing an impulse to the new procedure, many different factors should be borne in mind. INTERPRET certificate, as the new profile of *Community Interpreter with Advanced Federal Certificate of Higher Vocational Education and Training*, has been developed first of all to promote the use of professional interpreting services (not existing in this form in the market until the years 2000). Nevertheless, considering demand and supply, other factors played a consistent role. A huge work to animate an actual demand of skilled and competent Community interpreters has been done to make visible the demand of interpreters, underlining the positive effects deriving at the social and economical level from a better mutual understanding in health and care or in educational services. Only using these proper arguments has been possible to convince the users of Community interpreting to move from the use of volunteers to the delivering of professional mandates. On the other hand also expectations arising from the supply side had a function; the new certification offered since the beginning professional opportunities to many immigrants trying to enter the job market, giving value to their experiential background and their intercultural attitudes and competences. Although not belonging to the landscape of “federal certifications”, the certificate delivered by INTERPRET has achieved a good visibility and recognition during the last years in Switzerland.

1.5 Legal framework

The framework in which the certification system is now positioned, as well as the efforts made to let it gain, in 2007, official acknowledgement in the landscape of Federal Higher Vocational Education and Training certifications, have already been described. No particular derogation or legislative modification were taken to launch the system, since it was designed and established by a private association, even if supported by the Federal Authorities. The possibility of obtaining a federal recognition of the VPL qualification scheme, within the framework of the ongoing procedure of recognition of the title, is based on the existing examples of modular qualification schemes (see for instance adult trainers) that already include alternative qualification procedures based on VPL.

1.6 Summing up

Federal and Cantonal authorities, recognising the need of fostering professional interpreting services, mainly in the health and care sectors, supported since the beginning the project launched by INTERPRET, aiming at promoting this work from a merely voluntary basis to a professional activity. The project, financed by the Swiss Federal Office of Public Health, started in the late 90's, and included the following steps:

- **1996/1999:** the Federal Office of Public Health established a working group to analyse the need and the quality patterns of intercultural interpreting services in the Health and Care sectors in Switzerland; at the end of the study the new Association INTERPRET was founded by the participants of the working group (interpreters and institutions)
- **1999/2001:** comprehensive field research , highlighting the importance of the interpreters and the benefits that could be achieved by the formal recognition and certification of their functions
- **2002:** On behalf of INTERPRET, and with the support of the Swiss Federal Office of Public Health, a commission of experts and representatives of institutions and interpreters studied the feasibility of introducing a global qualification system. They drew up a professional profile for intercultural interpreters and mediators, as well as proposals for a training and quality assurance scheme. The study also included projections concerning the “market potential” of the new qualification and analyses of the needs of different user groups. The study underlined the need to promote formal recognition of competencies acquired by the interpreters in a non formal or informal way, alongside short training modules, also with the aim to open them a way into the Swiss system of professional qualification and development.
- **2004:** The Swiss Association for Adult Learning (SVEB), on a mandate by the Federal Office of Public Health, and in collaboration with experts of the field, developed the qualification and quality assurance scheme for intercultural interpreting, taking the findings of the INTERPRET study 2002 as a starting point. The scheme included:
 - o the professional profile of intercultural interpreters, and a modular training curriculum
 - o the definition of processes for the validation of prior learning
 - o the definition of procedures for quality assurance (e.g. accreditation procedures for the training institutions)
- **2004-2005:** After having undergone the defined accreditation procedures, training institutions start the first training courses following the proposed curriculum. At the same time start of the central validation procedures for already active interpreters, through validation of prior formal, non formal or informal learning. (about 500 people applied initially, about 350 interpreters went through the whole procedure)
- **end of 2005:** start-up of the new financing system supporting Placement Agencies (*Vermittlungstelle*) aiming at promoting and assuring interpreting services; the system aimed at rationalising the sector, fostering the coordination of these Agencies at the local level,

providing financial resources to Agencies recognised by the Swiss Federal Commission responsible for integration policies, aiming at promoting intercultural interpreting and providing services in the field, assuring the availability of professional interpreters to public and private bodies dealing with intercultural communication issues.

INTERPRET association and institutions agreed since the beginning of the planning phase with the idea of promoting both an ordinary qualification path, based on training modules, and an alternative one, based on validation. They considered the characteristics of the profile and of the interpreters, and above all the presence of a significant number of intercultural interpreters already active in the field, sufficiently qualified (after the completion of formal and non formal learning path) and ready to be certified. In this sense a positive role in promoting the road of validation, as a mainstream at least in the start up phase of the system, has been played both by INTERPRET and by the SVEB, who defined the design and supported the implementation of the new qualification scheme, transferring experiences accumulated in the planning and management of the Adult trainers modular qualification system.

A very important role has been played in the initial phase by the experts representing needs and experiences of both the potential final users of interpreting services and the training bodies active in this field; these experts, afterwards partially included in the Quality Commission until its composition has been revised in 2006, acted as members of a “provisional” preparatory commission, managed by the SVEB, in charge of elaborating the qualification profile, regulations concerning the delivery of the title, and validation procedures. They contributed their in depth knowledge of the work done by the interpreters, creating a wide consensus on the basis of a pragmatic and technical approach to the design of the system, helping to overcome the complexity of the network in charge of establishing profile and rules.

Thanks to this bottom-up approach, the development of a RPLO based qualification path open to intercultural interpreters didn't have to cope with mistrust or political obstacles. The concept has been accepted by the stakeholders of the system as a reasonable choice.

Some tensions eventually arose in the implementation phase, initially due to the understandable difficulties encountered in the management of a so large number of dossiers, submitted by people applying for validation and certification. Decisions taken by the INTERPRET Association management board, in order to solve delays and inconveniences (effectiveness and rapidity of treatment processes, direct supervision of the experts on behalf of the Association Director), created between 2006 and 2007 some misunderstandings and conflicts between members of the Quality Assurance Commission, representing different points of view and interests (we have to bear in mind that any validation system finally implies delicate negotiations between stakeholders, related to professionals, final users, institutions...). At the end of the start-up phase, due to these tensions, we assisted to a reduction of the relevance initially assigned to representatives of external institutions and final users in the management of the new qualification system. Some members quit the Quality Commission. INTERPRET Association gained since that moment a fundamental leading role in managing the system, on the basis of a clear regulation establishing criteria for qualification, validation, expertise and also the characteristics of the members to be included in the Quality Commission. After the solution found in 2007 the work of the Commission restarted immediately, even in a more positive and trustful climate, as an interviewee remembered us.

Part 2. - Actors

2.1 Candidates

2.1.1. Profiles

We have already defined some characteristics of the candidates choosing in 2005/2006 the RPLO procedure to gain the new qualification. *Heterogeneity* seems to be the best word to explain their profiles. Professional and biographical profiles of these candidates are extremely various, depending of migration patterns influencing nearly always their life histories. Normally they acquired an initial education, sometimes a high level one, in their countries of origin, finding it very difficult to have it recognised in Switzerland. Not rarely they tried to cope with difficulties showing personal and political commitment, in favour of social and professional integration of the communities to which they belong. Their voluntary engagement in interpreting very often has to be seen as a component of an advocacy role, aiming at giving voice to the members of their community.

In this sense, despite the complexity of individual profiles of the candidates, some common patterns should be mentioned. First of all, moving from a variety of working experiences, they shared day by day a common professional background as interpreters, building up new competences less influenced by mediation and advocacy. Intercultural interpreters should act in a different way of intercultural mediators, showing neutrality when ensuring a more effective communication between local professionals (medicines, teachers, counsellors) and people belonging to migrant communities. Practical field experience in this kind of interpreting services and proximity to the interpreted “culture” are fundamental requirement to enter the job, and of course we always find them in biographies of these persons.

Also, we frequently find, in their professional careers a mix between sectoral experiences and interpreting activities. Normally people offered their interpreting skills acting as volunteers in the same sector where they found a first professional integration in Switzerland (it’s often the case in the health and care sectors, where e.g. people holding a foreign medicine degree could be employed with nursing functions) or valuing their relational network, for example applying to “community leaders” - already active as interpreters - to obtain a first working opportunity through interpreting, hoping to be hired then in a stable position. In many cases the first step towards interpreting they made was visiting one of the courses organised since the 90’s for this purpose by local NGOs and associations.

A migration background is also a fundamental feature characterising the candidates. Nearly all the candidates who applied for a validation in 2005 were immigrants, foreign citizens. In some cases persons playing an active role as community leaders, in other situation people trying to find a road leading to a better integration in the local job market, for example refugees, or women ³, trying to gain recognition for their education and skills, finding many closed doors due to the mismatching between their profiles and the requirements imposed by career paths coherent with their expectations. A small number of candidates, were second generation immigrants and people born in Switzerland, who actually dealt with migration issues and/or cooperation in intercultural environments.

In any case another common pattern in many individual stories was the expectation of gaining social visibility and dignity in the hosting country through the formal validation of their prior skills and experiences.

³ We lack of precise information at this level, but we would include both a certain number of women who followed their husbands to Switzerland, trying now to consolidate their professional and social condition in the hosting country, and women who entered Switzerland as immigrants, trying now to value their previous learning and education, in a context in which is still very hard to apply for an official recognition of foreign diploma

2.1.2 Motivations

The candidates aimed in many cases at applying for the certificate, in order to achieve a better positioning in the job market (sometimes also to enter further training), and at the same time to consolidate their professional and social identity in the hosting country. They hoped to value their experiences emancipating from the “grey area” of voluntary work, or enhancing their condition of independent free lance collaborators (a frequent situation mainly in the legal sector, where interpreters are normally hired by the institutions for specific tasks, on an *ad hoc* basis).

The most important motivation for the candidates opting for the validation path, instead of participating in training modules, was the actual possibility of valuing experiences and prior learning opportunities following a procedure encouraged and above all totally financed by the Confederation (therefore completely *free of costs* for the applicants). Interpreters who entered the procedure during the first phase normally aimed at valuing formal and non formal learning outcomes achieved participating to one or several of the many different courses organised during the 90's by NGOs active in cooperation and integration policies. At that moment they could make their informal learning visible, valuing competences acquired working in the field (usually they learned a lot “on the job”, experiencing their role and building up their competences thanks to their biographical intercultural background). The procedure was launched by supporting institutions considering this situation, in order to eliminate training redundancies and save money (financing RPLO individual paths costs less than financing collective courses), nevertheless avoiding a generalised acknowledgement of the attestations delivered by organisations offering courses.

2.1.3 Consequences

According to the interviews, the majority of candidates encountered positive results, both during the validation process and afterwards, considering consequences and implications of their new qualification. Considering the process, positive outcomes regarded:

- the possibility of gaining more awareness of attitudes and professional behaviours assured by reflective tasks to be performed in the self-assessment process
- increased self confidence, due to the positive response given by the experts in charge of delivering the “external” validation of experiences and skills.

As far as job and professional development opportunities are concerned, the RPLO effects are also generally evaluated in a positive way, although in many cases gaining a qualification didn't result in a short term “*more and better jobs*” to the interpreters. Nonetheless the use of interpreting services, even if not officially financed by the Federal or Cantonal authorities, has been indirectly promoted by the certification and quality assurance system, as well as in the framework of some pilot projects and initiatives.

The certification produced tangible results for the candidates:

- allowing certified interpreters to maintain and enhance their professional status, also thanks to the role of collective placement Agencies, in negotiating mandates and working agreements with the clients (well defined working conditions and better salaries, if compared to the ones delivered to their colleagues not disposing of the same certification)
- determining a global consolidation of personal and professional identities of the candidates in their new “visible” and appreciated role in the hosting country, with interesting spin-offs concerning careers and access to continuous vocational training.

Thanks to these positive consequences, interpreters seem in general convinced that the validation procedure was worth the efforts made to complete the dossier and pass the assessment.

Only a very limited number of people (5 cases, in about 350 applications, at least in the start-up phase) suffered direct negative consequences, failing the validation process. In these cases,

according to the contents of appeals nearly always submitted by the candidates, the impact of the failure proved to be heavier from the personal point of view than from the professional one. Paradoxically some of the failures have been encountered by candidates with a very long interpreting experience, who played a recognised role of “community leaders” in their social environment. These failures produced a negative rejection reaction. Denying recognition, experts have been perceived by the candidates as unable to keep away from prejudices concerning cultural differences, and therefore unable to evaluate in a neutral way the competences actually mobilised by them in their daily activity (instead well appreciated by clients and people belonging to migrant communities). It is difficult to say if such a phenomena really existed, considering the very limited number of negative responses. Interviewing experts and witnesses, we have nevertheless had the impression that misunderstandings occurred sometimes due to the difficulty in defining rigid borders between advocacy, mediation, intercultural interpreting roles; some candidates, generally playing a leadership role in migrants communities, preparing their dossiers and passing interviews, enhanced for sure their commitment in favour of migrants communities, and their sense of belonging to interpreted “cultures”, leaving the impression of a lack of consciousness concerning how to play in a correct way their professional role, keeping the right distance and neutrality. In these cases, entering in an ordinary training path (or at least having a proper accompaniment) would probably have been the right solution, to avoid the pitfalls of an external summative assessment of prior learning.

2.2 Experts and assessors

The procedure implies the mobilisation of at least two different kinds of expertise, to verify linguistic competences on one side (when not certified by recognised documents) and to assess intercultural communication competences as defined by the qualification profile on the other. The second aspect, referring to complex and delicate skills and behaviours to be assessed, deserves for sure more attention, starting from the nature of the expertise to be mobilised.

The RPLO system under examination provides some interesting and original solutions concerning the role played by the experts, their recruitment and the relationship between validation and certification. The experts are first of all members of the Quality Commission, named by the umbrella association in charge of managing the system. In this sense the system avoids a rigid distinction between assessment and certification phases. In the start-up phase, considering the wide number of applications, a certain number of dossiers were assigned to every expert. The experts analysed the dossier, eventually asking candidates to integrate single aspects of them, and/or to produce new documents. In addition experts conducted an individual face to face interview with every candidate, to examine more in depth single aspects concerning experiences, skills, awareness of his/her professional identity and role. Experts produced at the end of their examination a written validation report, presenting it to the colleagues of the Quality Commission, responsible for a collective decision (certification).

In the start-up phase the Quality Commission was named by FSEA; now it is named by INTERPRET, selecting experts according to the existing regulations: at least one expert has to be selected between adult trainers disposing of a diploma, and another one (but normally more than one) should be found between the already active certified Community interpreters. Experts are asked to master German, French and Italian, at least at in an oral and written way.

Experts represent both intercultural heterogeneity, including first or second generation migrants, and specific professional expertise (nearly all the members of the Quality Commission are now certified intercultural interpreters). In addition, above all in the initial phase, they represented also associations and institutions demanding interpreting services and/or providing training in the same field. The massive validation campaign realised in 2005 has been managed *de facto* by the same

“experts” originally included in the commission in charge of elaborating the qualification profile and the regulations. Therefore they perfectly mastered the qualification profile to be assessed, and they succeeded in implementing reliable criteria, standards, indicators to evaluate the candidates, assuring, as far as possible, equal treatment of candidates and homogeneity of the assessment procedures as a whole.

After the start-up phase, as we have already mentioned, the membership of the Quality Commission changed, and INTERPRET established some more precise regulations concerning the Commission. Nowadays the experts active in validation, dispose above all of experience as interpreters and sometimes of qualifications in adult education (see above). A specific training in managing a validation procedure has not been until now asked of them, but as usual they learned, and they continue to learn “on the job”, valuing their experiences and activating reflective exchanges with their colleagues to cope with the peculiarities of an assessment procedure. They make use of intervision opportunities and exchanges occurring in the Quality Commission. The introduction of new experts normally includes a phase in which the new expert acts in “tandem interviews” with an experienced colleague.

An additional, very important, task assigned to the experts responsible for the start-up phase has been the elaboration of a complete “*tool-kit*” aiming at supporting the candidates in elaborating the dossier, collecting evidence, preparing their assessment. This “*tool kit*”, now available on line, proved to be really effective, and achieved the result of simplifying the procedure, without activating a complex and expensive institutionalised accompaniment.

Lacking an institutionalised accompaniment, INTERPRET realised after the approval of the new qualification path a wide information campaign, fostering also the commitment of local associations and placement Agencies in stimulating the interest of interpreters, institutions, acting as a “first help” counter for the people interested in submitting a RPLO application. Profiles and experiences of coaching consultants, who could have acted on behalf of Interpreting Agencies or training centres accompanying the candidates on a voluntary or professional basis, remain nevertheless very difficult to define.

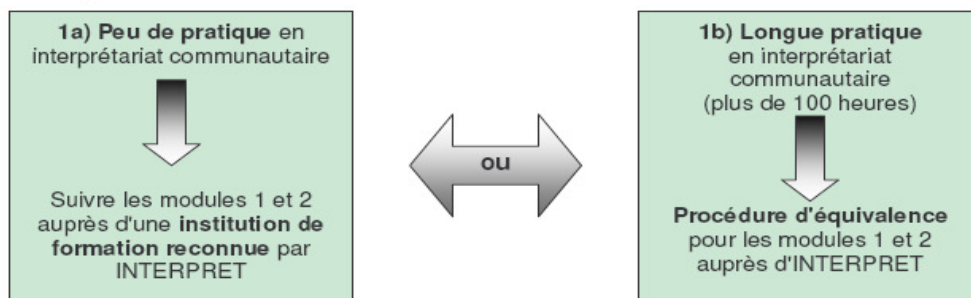
Language skills are assessed, when needed, by trained experts whose mother tongue is the one to be assessed (for interpreted languages). The assessment consists in a telephone interview. The scope of this assessment is limited to the verification of the possession of the minimum standard level of skill required by the certification. Linguistic competence is assessed taking into account the “communicative” skills of the candidates, and their capability in effectively bridging gaps occurring in interpreting situations, between the “reality” of the treated issues and the perceptions of the people involved in *trialog* situations, always affected by cultural meanings assigned to the issues and social representations. The competence in the local language is assessed through a full-scale oral and written examination based on the specific qualification profile of intercultural interpreters. Assessors responsible for the evaluation of linguistic skills have to prove solid personal and professional skills referred to the mastery of an assessment procedure, and are obliged to follow a preparatory training (seminar) concerning procedures and standards considered in the assessment phase.

Part 3. – The procedure

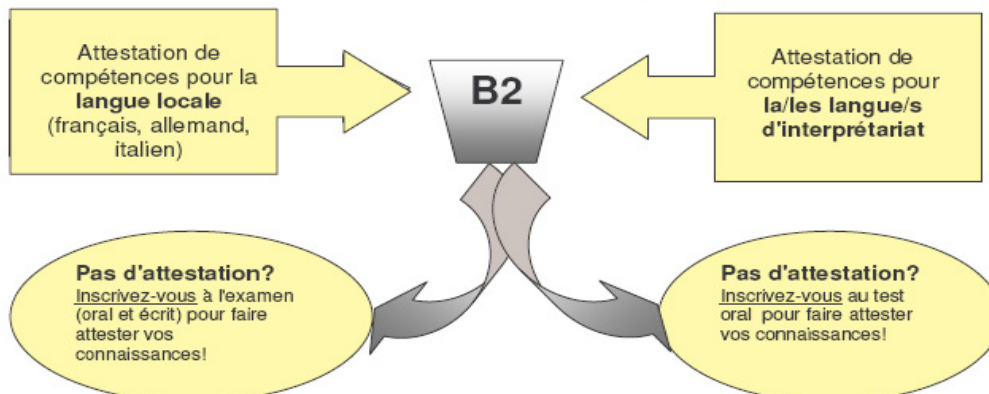
The following scheme provides a clear overview of the qualification system leading to the delivery of an INTERPRET certificate. The scheme puts in evidence the 2 alternative roads to certification, that might be also combined in a complementary mix between RPLO and training. To achieve the certification the candidates should demonstrate both linguistic skills (minimum level B2 of the European Portfolio in both the languages) and the mastery of intercultural skills defined in details by the qualification profile (see www.inter-pret.ch)

INTERPRET certification and validation system – an overview

1. Acquérir les attestations de module 1 et 2



2. Contrôler les attestations de compétences linguistiques



3. Attestation de pratique en interprétariat communautaire (50 heures)

The RPLO procedure involves the following steps, implying the use of a precise range of tools, in preparing the dossier, collecting evidence, and passing the final assessment interview.

Phase 1 – preparation and self-assessment (recognition and documentation)

1.1 Qualification profile

Candidates dispose of a detailed *qualification profile* (available through the web), and they are asked to use it as a guide and a check list to self assess the possession of competences defining the professional role and identity of the intercultural interpreter. A good mastery of a national language (D, F, I) is therefore asked – more or less the B1 level recommended by the regulations to start the application, correctly understanding the above mentioned requirements expressed in terms of competences and learning outcomes (statements) (B2 is the minimum level to be achieved at the end of it).

Competences to be considered belong to 3 main areas:

- linguistic skills (European Framework – B2 – as an “average level, considering that also B1 competences in written language could be admitted, when at the opposite oral level in speaking and understanding should exceed a “pure” B2),
- managing intercultural dynamics affecting communication and mutual understanding,
- understanding of the peculiarities of local and foreign “systems” in which interpreters work (i.e. being able to translate in an understandable way a question / answer according to the different cultural and institutional frameworks of operators and clients) translation skills and skills related to discourse management
- knowledge of Swiss institutions and procedures in the health, social and educational sectors

1.2 Evidence

Once the candidate has positively self-assessed his/her competences, with reference to the qualification profile, he/she is asked to collect evidence of the competences. Evidence is collected in a dossier, and might consist of different types of documents and declarations: CV, certificates produced by clients and users, project work, other relevant documents concerning non formal training paths, test results, and so on. The procedure admits the possibility of taking into account all forms of learning and experience (independently of the work environment). Also narrative declarations referred to working experiences could be admitted and taken in charge by the experts to identify the mastery of specific competences. Nevertheless only official documents proving the delivery of Community interpreting services (provided by Agencies or final users, excluding parents and relatives) could be considered as an evidence as far as the possession of required number of working hours has to be certified.

1.3 The dossier

The following documents are compulsory components of the dossier:

- a personal CV (with work certificates, when available), including a complete list of documented training activities (above all those relevant for the validation), and information concerning direct or indirect experiences in dealing with migration and/or intercultural issues
- evidences of working experience as interpreter (provided by organisations and/or confirmed by clients – at least 50 hours, of which 35 in one of the 3 specialisation sectors: social, education or health)
- a reflective report (written according to a predefined format downloadable from the web) in which a complex interpreting situation is described and evaluated by the interpreter (documenting the competences developed in Module 1 of the training scheme)
- a standard informative dossier and a “glossary” (in form of written documents and a complete inventory of documents and links) providing evidences of the knowledge of fundamental facts and organisational structures of institutions in the health, social or educational sectors, as well as a solid competence in managing key information and terminology in the sector in which the candidate normally offers interpreting services (documenting the competences developed in Module 2 of the training scheme)
- evidence of having participated in group supervision (for at least 8 hours), in form of an attestation delivered by the supervisor
- the official validation submission form.

Phase 2 – Assessment (validation)

- **Linguistic skills**
 - o **Formal certification (both languages):** a list of recognised certificates is provided on the web-site; it includes also the possibility to certify the competence through the possession of a school leaving certificate

- **Language test in the interpreting language:** phone interview, organised on behalf of an accredited centre: the candidate receives a photo, and the expert conducts a distant call interview starting from the photo and following defined guidelines and assessment standards
- **Language exam in the local language:** full-scale oral and written language examination, on the basis of the defined profile (ranging from B1 to C1 competencies in the various language skills)

2.2 Assessment of intercultural interpreting skills

In the assessment, competences referred to the 2 modules (see qualification profiles) are separately taken in account.

In general some key competences deserve special attention during the assessment, inspiring evaluation criteria and minimum standards to be achieved by the candidates.

1. Competence in identifying expectations, preoccupations and difficulties of both the operator and the client
2. Competence in reacting to communication difficulties
3. Awareness of the role (facilitating an effective communication)
4. appropriate use of interpreting techniques
5. Preparation strategies
6. Awareness of the limits of the role
7. Self evaluation with regard to the appropriateness and effectiveness of the interpreting process

Competences are evaluated analysing the dossier, especially the case description and evaluation. The interview also allows the experts to detect meta-competences, such as good active listening attitudes, and the capability to keep the right intercultural distance.

Phase 3 – Certification

The certification phase implies the production of a final validation report, written by the expert in charge of examining the dossier and interviewing the candidate, and the discussion of the report, including the appreciative evaluation proposed by the expert (acquired / not acquired), by the other members of the Quality Commission.

The decision, taken on the basis of the majority of votes, is afterwards officially communicated to the candidate. An appeal is always possible in the case of a negative decision, and in this case the dossier, supplemented with the comments of the recurrent, is handed over to another expert, who is asked to prepare a new evaluation, after a second interview, submitting the results to the Commission in charge of examining appeals.

Part 4. – Final remarks

Thanks to the wide number of candidates who passed the RPLO procedure to achieve the INTERPRET certificate, we can use this case study to identify in a reliable way strong and critical points of a validation process, when it implies the assessment of delicate skills, in which personal attitudes and soft competences play a fundamental role. Furthermore we might use this case study also to test the effectiveness and constraints of some choices, namely the development of an *on line* Guide, with specific tools aiming at supporting the candidates, making the RPLO “user friendly” and at the same time sustainable, avoiding the development of too complicated and expensive accompaniment procedures.

According to the interviews, **strong points** of the procedure should be considered:

- **the availability of a clear and detailed qualification profile**, including an effective description of competences to be assessed. Transparency of the requirements seems to be fundamental for the applicants. The bottom-up, participatory elaboration of the qualification profile and standards, and in addition the involvement of the same group of expert in the delicate implementation phase, allowed to build up a reliable procedure, reaching homogeneous standards of assessment;
- **the critical mass of dossiers treated in the start-up phase** created the conditions to verify and adjust the procedure and the tools, and to find step by step an homogeneity of judgment, refining criteria of analysis and above all setting up effective interviews to assess soft skills and the awareness of the candidates with regard to their professional role. An extended experience plays a significant role in coping with difficulties and critical aspects always characterising a new procedure to assess candidates on the basis of their informal and non formal learning
- **the use of articulated means of evaluation**: the written dossier, including evidence, is supplemented by an oral interview, reducing the risk of an over- or underestimation of competences resulting only on the basis of documents or the capability of the candidates to evaluate and describe their “*exposed attitudes*” and their theoretical background. In addition, the oral interview allows candidates disposing of a lower competence in written language to communicate and demonstrate their reflective attitudes and intercultural skills in a more flexible way
- **the flexibility of the procedure**, taking into account both formal and informal learning and experiences. Clever solutions have been found to limit the need of bringing “official” evidences, rarely available in case of voluntary work and informal working arrangements, allowing the candidates to “prove” competences through the dossier using written narrative declarations and evaluating interviews
- **the quality of the *on line* helping tools** (examples, forms and templates, ...) and above all the availability of a simple but effective *Guide* supporting the candidates in preparing their dossier and the assessment phase: the choice of skipping a structured preliminary information and guidance phase allowed the reduction of costs; **making the RPLO way sustainable both for the institutions and the candidates** (after the initial promotional phase, when it was possible to apply for validation for free, registrations costs arose between 300 and 500 € for the 2 Modules + about 150 € (CHF 220.00 and CHF 260.00) for each language test, if necessary...).

Globally intended, the INTERPRET RPLO procedure proved to be an effective and powerful “formative” mean, allowing the candidates not only to give the right value to their previous learning, but only to build up a more aware and solid capability in managing their professional role. As far as a RPLO process always implies reflection on our own experiences, it represents a fundamental path to achieve competence in a proper sense, and to consolidate one’s own professional identity.

Nevertheless some critical points, even if limited in their effects, emerged during the start-up phase:

- some obstacles have been provided by *the complexity of some deliverables and requirements to be accomplished*, above all for the candidates with informal learning paths; the elaboration of a reflective case study is not always an easy task, and also documenting a formal supervision could engender some problems; in general, as we have already highlighted, the level of mastery of written local languages needed to complete the dossier seems to be higher than the minimum standard level required for certification (B2)
- *the lack of an institutional accompaniment*, despite the availability of the above mentioned tools, resulted in some misunderstandings, as highlighted in single interviews, although in a very limited number of cases; it's hard to say if this limit hampered a wider participation to the RPLO process in the start-up phase (and we have to bear in mind that participation proved to be really wide), but we can at the opposite remember that INTERPRET coped with this potential obstacle both providing the candidates with telephone information delivered by Association Secretary (an estimation of over 2.300 hours of contacts, after the opening of a statistical collection of data, between April and December 2008); in addition many Placement Agencies provided directly associated interpreters with coaching and consultancy in preparing their dossiers
- finally the number of failures encountered by the candidates applying for validation (5 in over than 380 submissions) underlines that the *unavoidable complexity⁴ of any assessment of behaviours and attitudes related to the mastery of intercultural competences caused only marginal diseases and damns*. how to give the **right continuity to the system**, when the critical mass of candidates decreases **how to shelter the original “partnership spirit” between the stakeholders characterising the system** since the planning phase; this spirit has to be always kept in mind, now that the qualification system should be considered fully established, in order to assure the consensus of the network representing different interests and expectations, necessary to promote Community interpreting services, investments in this field, updating of the needs, and not only the access to a formal qualification.

Some lessons should be learned from the case study, considering it a paradigmatic example of how RPLO could be valued to make competences gained in voluntary work or informal sectors more visible and easy to spend in the job market:

- formalisation of competences is particularly important in VET and job market frames based on an higher consideration of diploma and certificates. At this level, the lessons of our case study look to be transferable, to develop reliable “formalisation” procedures of informal and non formal learning, both considering processes and tools -
- in many cases the borders between voluntary work and professional activity are difficult to define. Voluntary work could be an effective trampoline to gain a qualification and a better employability, and we could also turn some voluntary activities into professional tasks
- we should consider voluntary work as a “normal” area of workplace learning, aiming at fostering validation
- where certificates count a lot, volunteers are interested in validating their competences, making them visible and possible to spend both to access further formal training and in a transition to market professional activities.
- general suspicion concerning informal learning validation systems vs. social consensus still attributed to formal qualifications (fed of course also by formal training providers)
- difficulties in admitting the “*equality of status*”, and moreover the *equality of treatment*, between community interpreters, skilled thanks to their experiences in informal sectors, and now also qualified, and interpreters who gained a tertiary education diploma and are since the beginning active in “market services”

⁴ Intercultural dynamics might always affect the assessment phase; experiences provided by the 5 failures, even if rather limited, show how both candidates and assessors could be influenced by intercultural misunderstandings in their functions, when it proves to be hard the establishment of a transparent and trustful communication

- difficult positioning of emerging profiles, defined according to a competence based approach, in a certification framework still based on a training curricula approach
- “Prudence” in turning voluntary work into a “market” service: we need to overcome an opportunistic approach to the growing need of “understanding” and effective communication in social, health or educational services (*we are glad to have professional interpreters, but who will pay for them?*); policies promoted today by the Confederation and by Regional / Cantonal Authorities seem to be promising, when more or less all the stakeholders actually realise that more and better investments in Community interpreting could bring, in the middle term, higher economic and social returns in the quality and effectiveness of the above mentioned services.

Furio Bednarz, February 2009