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# PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR COMMUNITY INTERPRETING IN SWITZERLAND: TOWARDS NEW FIELDS OF WORK

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## Abstract

In 2015 almost 250'000 hours of community interpreting – as public service interpreting is called in Switzerland – took place in hospitals, psychiatric wards, social services and schools. Since 2009 the numbers have increased by more than 10% every year, and they will probably continue to grow: The demand for interpreting services is not yet met in a satisfactory measure. Furthermore other domains such as justice, work integration or asylum procedures are moving into focus.

At present, the Swiss landscape of community interpreting consists of 18 regionally organised interpreting services, one national provider for telephone interpreting and one profit-oriented provider. The INTERPRET qualification system for community interpreters, successfully established more than 10 years ago, is part of the higher professional education and training system of Switzerland. It combines professional experience and training and leads to two qualification levels: The INTERPRET Certificate (corresponding to EFQ level 4) and the Federal Diploma of Higher Education in Intercultural Interpreting (EFQ level 5).

**Keywords:** *Interpreting at courts and for authorities; professional education and training; quality assurance; Federal Diploma of Higher Education in Intercultural Interpreting; INTERPRET*

## Abstract in Spanish

En 2015 los intérpretes comunitarios prestaron más de 250.000 horas de servicio en el sector público, principalmente en hospitales, centros de salud mental, servicios sociales y escuelas. Desde el año 2009, la cantidad de intervenciones está aumentando cada año en más de un diez por ciento, y es probable que lo siga haciendo en el futuro. La demanda de servicios de interpretación aún no está cubierta y van ganando importancia nuevos ámbitos de trabajo, como la justicia, la integración laboral o los procedimientos de asilo.

El panorama suizo de la interpretación comunitaria abarca dieciocho servicios regionales de interpretación comunitaria, un proveedor nacional de interpretación telefónica y una agencia de interpretación orientada a los beneficios. El sistema de cualificación INTERPRET, creado con éxito hace más de diez años, está integrado en el sistema suizo de formación profesional superior. Combina la formación teórica con la experiencia práctica y conduce a dos niveles de titulación: el INTERPRET certificado (nivel 4 del Marco Europeo de Cualificaciones, MEC) y el Certificado Profesional Federal en interpretación comunitaria y mediación intercultural (nivel 5 del MEC).

**Keywords in Spanish:** *Interpretación en los servicios públicos; formación y aprendizaje permanente, control de calidad; Certificado Profesional Federal en interpretación comunitaria y mediación intercultural; INTERPRET*

## Abstract in German

Im Jahr 2015 leisteten interkulturell Dolmetschende – dies die Schweizerische Bezeichnung für Dolmetschende im öffentlichen Bereich – knapp 250'000 Einsatzstunden. Die Einsätze fanden grösstenteils in Spitälern, psychiatrischen Einrichtungen, Sozialdiensten und Schulen statt. Seit 2009 steigen die Einsatzzahlen jedes Jahr um über 10% an und werden wohl auch in Zukunft weiter zunehmen: Der Bedarf an Dolmetschleistungen ist noch nicht gedeckt, und neue Einsatzbereiche wie die Justiz, die Arbeitsintegration oder das Asylverfahren gewinnen an Bedeutung.

Die Landschaft des interkulturellen Dolmetschens umfasst 18 regionale Vermittlungsstellen, einen nationalen Anbieter für Telefondolmetschen und einen profit-orientierten Dolmetsch-Anbieter. Das INTERPRET-Qualifizierungssystem, vor mehr als 10 Jahren erfolgreich aufgebaut, ist

eingebettet in das Schweizerische System der Höheren Berufsbildung. Es kombiniert Ausbildung und praktische Erfahrung und führt zu zwei Abschlussniveaus: Dem Zertifikat INTERPRET (auf Stufe 4 des EQR angesiedelt) und dem Eidgenössischen Fachausweis für interkulturell Dolmetschende und Vermittelnde (Stufe 5 des EQR).

**Keywords in German:** *Behördendolmetschen; Aus- und Weiterbildung; Qualitätssicherung; Eidgenössischer Fachausweis für interkulturell Dolmetschende und Vermittelnde; INTERPRET*

## 1. The Swiss model

INTERPRET, the national association for community interpreting and intercultural facilitation, endorses a high quality service, able to keep up with market demands and aiming to guarantee access for all to public services and mutual understanding in society. As a national association, INTERPRET represents the community interpreters and intercultural facilitators, the regional service providers and the regional training institutes. At present (2017), the landscape of community interpreting consists of 18 subsidized and regionally organised interpreting services, one national provider for telephone interpreting and since 2016 one profit-oriented provider. Additionally, some institutions (for example hospitals) have their own in-house services at their disposal without using regional interpreting services. Moreover, a considerable number of institutions such as schools are working with lists of independent interpreters. However, these means are less sophisticated and lack a system of quality assurance. Data about these interventions are not nationally collected. As with non-professional interpreting, qualifications and quality assurance is an issue: Some hospitals do have concepts of training for employees switching roles between interpreting and their initial basic tasks, other institutions do not. On a national level, professional education and training is provided through 12 regional training institutes, that offer courses accredited by INTERPRET.

Community interpreters are active mainly in the education, health and social welfare sectors. Their core task consists of accurate and complete mutual interpreting during conversations between professional staff in the mentioned sectors and migrants not sufficiently proficient in the local language. By community or intercultural interpreting INTERPRET intends bidirectional oral translation (generally in the form of consecutive interpreting) of a conversation between speakers of different languages, taking into account the social and cultural backgrounds of the parties involved. It could be called a “dialogue in a threesome”, in which the interpreter is physically present or connected by telephone or video.

## 2. Community interpreting: an emerging profession

About 2'000 community interpreters for the three Swiss official languages (German, French, Italian) and around 80 community languages are available through a network of regional interpreting services. Over the last years, the volume has been growing by 10-15% annually as the following figure shows:



Figure 1: Hours of community interpreting from 2011 to 2015

In other words, in 2015 more than 670 hours of interpreting took place in Switzerland every day.

The qualification scheme for community interpreters in Switzerland has been operating successfully for over 10 years. Between 2000 and 2004, on the basis of local initiatives and with substantial support of the Swiss Federal Office for Public Health, national training standards for community interpreting were defined and a modular training scheme was developed. With the INTERPRET Certificate a national standard qualification was established. Moreover a framework for the validation of equivalent competencies was put into place and a quality assurance system established.

In 2009 a higher level qualification was introduced: the Federal Diploma of Higher Education in Intercultural Interpreting (situated on level 5 of the European Qualifications Framework). The path to the Federal Diploma includes more training modules, a national examination and a considerable amount of reflected professional practice.

A survey conducted in 2014 among community interpreters revealed that their main field of activity tended to be the health, educational or social sectors, but that they were also active in other domains, such as justice, work integration or asylum procedures. In order to add new training possibilities for those fields of activity and for the whole domain of intercultural facilitation, the Federal Diploma was revised in 2014.

### 3. The INTERPRET system of professional education and qualification

The INTERPRET qualification system for community interpreters and intercultural facilitators is part of the system of higher professional education and training. This non-academic educational path is widely spread, accepted and firmly established in Switzerland for all kinds of vocational education and training. It focuses on skills and expertise acquired during the practical professional experience, supported by formal further training.

In the case of the INTERPRET framework, a modular system of education has been put in place consisting of ten modules leading to two levels of professional qualification.



Figure 2: Overview of the INTERPRET system of professional education and qualification

### 3.1 INTERPRET Certificate

To obtain the INTERPRET Certificate applicants must provide evidence for the following achievements:

- (1) Modules: Successful completion (or validation of equivalent competencies) of *Module 1* and *Module 2*.

*Module 1*: Community interpreting (at least 150h study time, including 78h presence).

*Module 2*: Knowledge of schooling, health and social systems (at least 90h study time, including 39h presence).

- (1) Language competences: Proof of knowledge of the local language (German, French or Italian) and examination of the interpreting language.
- (2) Practical experience in the field: a minimum of 50h of practice as community interpreter.

The INTERPRET Certificate represents the basic qualification for community interpreters and is recognised as such all over Switzerland. It is situated on level 4 of the EQF, characterized as a specialist activity within the parameters of defined roles and predictable contexts that can, however, be subject to change. Since 2004 more than a thousand community interpreters have obtained the INTERPRET Certificate.

### 3.2 Federal Diploma of higher education

The basic qualification represented by the INTERPRET Certificate allows community interpreters to pass on to further training, to specialise and to obtain the title of “Intercultural Interpreter and Facilitator with Federal Diploma of Higher Education”. The path to the Federal Diploma includes the following achievements:

- (1) High school or professional training certificate
- (2) Language Competence: Language certificate C1 (CEFR) in German, French or Italian.
- (3) Successful completion of three training modules: The training modules are assigned to the field of community interpreting (field A) or intercultural facilitation (field B). Field A includes telephone interpreting (*Module 3*), interpreting at courts and for legal authorities (*Module 4*) and interpreting in psychotherapeutical settings (*Module 5*). Field B (*Modules 6 to 9*) focuses on the domain of intercultural facilitation, such as for example accompanying individuals in their integration process (*Module 6*) or conducting information and learning events in an intercultural context (*Module 8*). The applicant must prove achievement in one module from field A (community

interpreting), one module from field B (intercultural facilitation) and one module from either field A or B.

- (4) Successful completion of *Module 10* (operating in various settings, aware of changing roles: 26h presence and 45h study time). This module is the final module in the course of studies and prepares for the federal examination.
- (5) Practical experience in the field: 500h of practice as community interpreter and intercultural facilitator.
- (6) 26h of professional supervision.
- (7) 26h of further training or education in a relevant field.

The Federal Diploma distinguishes experienced interpreters. As described by the EQF, level 5, they fulfil a specialist activity in contexts where there can be unpredictable changes, requiring a clear understanding of roles, role switching and the ability to handle challenging, complex situations. Preparing for the Federal Examinations can take up to 2.5 years (at least 510h study time, including 290h presence). Combining practice and training is a typical qualification path in the Swiss dual system of vocational education and training. In 220 different professions, including community interpreting, higher professional qualifications can be achieved through federal examinations. Since 2009, more than a hundred community interpreters have acquired the Federal Diploma.

#### **4. New fields of work**

Till recently the professional worlds of court interpreters and community interpreters seemed to be incompatible. Although several community interpreters have been working alongside with court interpreters at the same courts – some actually as one and the same person with both qualifications – the skills of community interpreters were not recognised by legal authorities. Considering the fact, that some courts and/or authorities did not train their interpreters at all makes it difficult to understand why community interpreting has been defined as non-professional interpreting.

In the meantime, the new INTERPRET module „Interpreting at courts and for authorities“ has gained acceptance by some courts and some authorities as a qualification for the specific field. The awareness is growing that there might be differences between community interpreting and court interpreting in regards to context, vocabulary, specific knowledge, legal implications etc., but that the profession of interpreting itself requires identical skills, first of all: the capacity to transfer meaning as accurately and faithfully as possible from one language to another.

The success of this INTERPRET module might repeat itself in the domain of asylum procedures: with legal protection granted soon to all asylum seekers in Switzerland, the demand for interpreters is most likely to increase. The challenge will be to recruit enough qualified interpreters that match the language combinations asked for, at the specific moments they are needed. Training measures will be required in preparation. Obviously the INTERPRET qualification system is ready and might easily be extended to the specific requirements of asylum procedures.

Quality in (community) interpreting is foremost a question of the interpreters' professionalism, gained through training, practice and reflection. But not exclusively: The ability to work with an interpreter, to facilitate the “dialogue in a threesome” in a way that enables the interpreter to focus on his core task, is important as well.

The awareness of the importance of professional interpreting in public services is clearly rising. Without an interpreter, the work remains unsatisfactory or even arbitrary, as some professionals confirm. The awareness of the fundamental need of public service interpreting

is also raising in society and politics: the quality of a public service is per se only as good as the service granted to every single member of the society (the public).

Even though many issues still lack solutions (for example national funding for interpreting services in primary health care, legislation for a better coverage, adequate training options for interpreters with “new” languages in asylum procedures etc.), some questions are raised: a basis to build on.

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