

# Room for improvement

## Do today's translation degrees provide the best preparation for tomorrow's freelance translators?

### Megan Onions shares her thoughts



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When I first started looking for universities offering undergraduate translation degrees in the UK, there wasn't much choice. In fact, I think there were only around three or four. The students of today are already in a better position in that respect, with a significant number of highly regarded translation courses available. A great deal of translation graduates leave education at this point, but I chose to further develop and hone my skills by completing a part-time Master's degree in Translation. One year in, I have started to evaluate my experiences and question whether translation courses really provide their charges with all of the skills they need to work as professional translators, especially those who work on a freelance basis.

I'll start at the beginning... the way the majority of undergraduate courses are structured is that students choose a certain number of mandatory modules, consisting of core knowledge such as translation theory, introduction to CAT tools and practical translation sessions. There is then the option to select additional modules up to a certain value (120 credits per year at my university). In my (recent) experience, these optional modules range from source-language history, culture and literature to specialist knowledge such as business German or legal French. This is where students can start to experiment – or specialise.

After two years of this type of study, I embarked on my year abroad. To the best of my knowledge, students of a BA in

languages (eg BA Italian or BA German and Spanish) are generally required to spend the entire academic year in just one of their source language countries, completing an intensive language course for the other source language during the remaining three months or so before beginning the final year of their degree. In contrast to this, specialised translation degrees like mine (they may not all be the same) expect students to split their time and devote one semester to each source language placement, which I feel is

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essential for students wishing to work with two source languages later on. I was also delighted to be offered a range of different options where my year abroad was concerned. Generally speaking, there are three options for a placement:

1. Study at a partner university
2. A work placement in a foreign company/organisation
3. Working as a language assistant at primary, secondary or college level – translation students are expected to swap countries mid-way through the academic year, so this option was not available to me.

I was both lucky and sensible

when given these choices in that I decided (and was able) to get as broad a range of experience as possible. For this reason, I successfully applied for a paid translation internship at the headquarters of Volkswagen in Wolfsburg, Germany, for the first half of my year abroad. This gave me a great taste of what professional in-house translation involves and introduced me to new online resources such as Linguee<sup>1</sup> and ProZ<sup>2</sup>. I also dealt with CAT tools (mainly Trados) on a daily basis, something that I was not yet confident in doing. The availability of work placements abroad like mine is a fantastic opportunity for students to start gaining relevant experience, skills and contacts as soon as possible. I consider this to be an area of particular strength of translation degrees.

Another strong point is UK universities' partnership arrangements with respected translation courses abroad. The MA in Translation at my university (Swansea in Wales) is a member of the European Master's in Translation (EMT)<sup>3</sup> network and therefore has links to highly regarded institutes in Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Spain and the Netherlands, at both BA and MA level. As a result, after I handed in my Volkswagen ID tag and bid farewell to Germany, I headed to Geneva, where I spent my second semester abroad studying at the prestigious *École de Traduction et d'Interprétation* – another valuable experience on the road to establishing myself as a professional translator.

In the final year of my degree, the focus changed to reflect the approaching end of the programme, with the introduction of a terminology module and a period of 'work experience', which involved MA students forming the management and senior linguists of a fictitious agency and the BA students working

as junior translators. This was one of the most valuable parts of my course, as it gave me (and other students who did not benefit from work placements abroad) a realistic insight into a real-life professional environment. Modules such as this and other, intensive translation sessions build up the students' skills and, importantly, confidence.

My experiences with both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees have been very positive, and the knowledge and skills that I have gained have put me in a good position in terms of my career.

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However, I feel that more can be done to shape and support the development of the next set of freelance translators and, indeed, interpreters. Specialised translation courses provide training in CAT tools, practical translation projects and even work placements, but what about offering advice from the point of view of freelancing? What about client acquisition? What about marketing and building an online presence?

Translation degrees could include optional modules on some of the fundamental aspects of freelance translation, which appear to be missing from the current selection. In light of the current lack of some very useful information, some students are taking additional courses to supplement their knowledge and ready themselves for the freelance market. I wasn't able to read through every single course description – some of us have work to do (!) – but

it seems that the majority of courses are setting students up with the perception that agencies are the only way to go. What about the free birds out there?

In my experience, freelancing and working with direct clients is not often promoted as a safe or prosperous option. At the start of our work experience module, representatives from translation agencies (two local, one London-based) advised us on the dos and don'ts of presenting ourselves on a CV and told us about the importance of punctuality, reliability and other attributes that constitute their 'ideal translator'. This is all well and good, and I work with both agencies and direct clients on a regular basis, but what about some variation in presenters? Translators who have founded their own companies would make a valuable contribution to a balanced view of potential career paths. I would be more than happy to go back to my former university and give talks about my experiences with freelancing, for example.

### **So what else can be done?**

**Tools for diversification** The more areas that a freelancer can cover, the better. Whether these are additional source languages, specialisations, or other, related services such as subtitling, the wider the scope, the more potential clients there are. The opportunity to develop such skills is therefore essential. There is already some provision for, say, interpreting options within a translation degree and vice versa, and other areas like subtitling are sometimes accessible. I understand that budgets and other restrictions prevent every related field being covered, but I do feel that some skills closely linked to translation, such as editing and proofreading, and more separate

areas like transcription and voiceover, should be offered as modules. As I see it, this would provide aspiring freelancers with a well-stocked arsenal of services with which to enter the market.

**Books** I also think that extending the range of available translation resources to include titles such as *How to Succeed as a Freelance Translator* by Corinne McKay and *The Entrepreneurial Linguist* by Judy and Dagmar Jenner would be very beneficial to students. Whether this is by way of directly supplying them, adding them to the library shelves, or simply recommending them is clearly down to individual budgets but, personally, I have found these particular books to be incredibly valuable in terms of setting myself up as a freelancer, and I continue to do so.

What's wrong with equipping students with the skills to strike out on their own? Ambition and entrepreneurial spirit have to be there, of course, but the ins and outs of setting up one's own business can (and arguably should) be addressed at degree level. These are people who have made a conscious decision to go down this path and carve out a career for themselves in the language services industry. If optional modules can be taken which simulate the workflow of an in-house or agency translator, why can't students have access to the same level of support with respect to company registration or sole trader status, using social media for business purposes or marketing to direct clients? I have read about, learned and implemented strategies under my own steam, but not everyone is like me. Some might argue that the industry doesn't need people who can't or won't find these things out for themselves, but it is always a priority to nurture the next generation. Giving them the best possible knowledge and training is a vital part of that. Freelancing is a viable, enjoyable and financially rewarding option for linguists and it should be recognised as such. 

## THE OPTIONS FOR TRANSLATION GRADUATES

1. Work as a project manager – hard to have a sideline and gain experience.
2. Go it alone as a freelancer – extremely difficult at the start, start off with low rates, hard to increase them.
3. Find translation work abroad – traineeships, short-term placements.
4. Find related work abroad to hone language skills – I have done au-pairing and studied abroad, but only on a short-term basis.
5. Go into a related industry: writing, editing, etc. Difficult to cross back over with language skills fading.

### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> [www.linguee.com](http://www.linguee.com)

<sup>2</sup> [www.proz.com](http://www.proz.com)

<sup>3</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/translation/programmes/emt/network/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/translation/programmes/emt/network/index_en.htm)