

International Certification Study: Lessons Learned

By Jiri Stejskal

Over the course of the past two years, we have examined the ways in which translators and interpreters earn their credentials in more than 30 countries on six continents. The following geographical regions have been covered in this series:

- Brazil (July 2001)
- South Africa (August 2001)
- Egypt (September 2001)
- Australia (October 2001)
- Czech Republic (November/December 2001)
- Canada (January and March 2002)
- Finland and Sweden (February 2002)
- Austria (April 2002)
- U.K. and Ireland (May 2002)
- Argentina (June 2002)
- Norway (July 2002)
- Denmark (August 2002)
- Japan (September 2002)
- Spain and Portugal (October 2002)
- Ukraine (November/December 2002)
- Germany (January 2003)
- Mexico (February 2003)
- Colombia, Uruguay, and Venezuela (March 2003)
- Belgium and the Netherlands (April 2003)
- Arab countries (May 2003)
- U.S. (June and July 2003)

The procedures employed in different countries vary widely, but there are certain discernible patterns common to all areas; some apply to credentialing in general, some are specific to the professions of translation and interpretation (T&I). On the general level, the purpose of credentialing is uniform across the board: to establish standards of professional practice; to elevate the status of the profession; to satisfy public demand for standards; and to extend the “shelf life” of academic degrees through continuous professional development. This does not come as a surprise. Michael Hamm

observes that, “According to...a survey conducted by the American Society of Association Executives, two top reasons that associations develop certification programs are to ensure professional competence and to enhance the prestige of the profession.”¹ On a level specific to our inquiry into the field of translating and interpreting, the credentialing process occurs under three possible scenarios:

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certification by a professional association; certification by a government; and certification by an academic institution. Let us first review various forms credentialing can take and then examine the three scenarios.

Credentialing Methods

Organizations throughout the world in all conceivable fields employ various credentialing procedures to establish a level of qualification for individuals or groups active in the particular area. In the U.S. alone, there are about 1,600 certification programs for individuals and over 200 accreditation programs for schools, institutions, businesses, and service providers.² The following

overview presents the basic credentialing methods used.³

Certification: A voluntary process by which an organization grants recognition to an individual who has met certain predetermined qualification standards.

Accreditation: A process by which an entity grants public recognition to an organization such as a school, institute, college, program, facility, or company that has met predetermined standards.

Registration: A process by which the possession of specific credentials relevant to performing tasks and responsibilities within a given field is verified.

Licensure: A mandatory credentialing process by which a government agency grants permission to persons to engage in a given occupation or profession by attesting that those licensed have attained the minimum degree of knowledge and skills required.

The confusion between “certification” and “accreditation” was addressed in the last issue of the *ATA Chronicle*. Even though the credentialing process for translators and/or interpreters is called “accreditation” in some countries (most notably in the U.S. and Australia), for the purposes of this study these programs fall under the category of “certification.” Certification can be further divided into the following subcategories⁴:

- Full-scale professional certification;
- Knowledge-based certification;
- Curriculum-based certification; and
- Certification of attendance or participation.

All four subcategories are used in the field of T&I. A credential ➡

awarded to individuals who meet specific eligibility requirements and successfully complete rigorous assessments of their knowledge and skills is usually referred to as “professional certification.” This is the credential used by most T&I organizations throughout the world, including ATA. “Knowledge-based certification” emphasizes a relatively narrow scope of specialized knowledge and frequently focuses on specialty areas within a profession in which a professional certification already exists. Certificates for legal translators and interpreters, such as those offered by the National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators (see June 2003 *ATA Chronicle*), or certificates in particular areas (for example, patents or literary texts), such as those offered by the Japanese Babel Co., Ltd., are examples of knowledge-based certification. Curriculum-based certificates are common in the academic environment. Candidates receive this credential when they complete a course or series of courses and an assessment process. These programs range from short-term programs with an exit examination, such as the program offered by Berlitz in Mexico, to Ph.D. programs.⁵ Finally, a certificate of attendance/participation does not qualify as an official credential, since no assessment of knowledge and skill is required and recipients do not need to meet any professional standards. As an example, ATA issues such certificates to attendees of the association’s annual conference and its professional development seminars.

Registration and licensure are credentialing forms favored in civil law countries (i.e., in most of Europe and in Latin America). Such a credential is invariably granted by the government, and candidates become “sworn” or “authorized” translators

and/or interpreters. These credentials may or may not involve an assessment of the candidate’s knowledge and skill, but they always include stringent eligibility requirements, especially regarding a candidate’s citizenship status, permanent residence, and age. Government certification is described in greater detail below.

Credentialing Bodies

As previously mentioned, translators and interpreters can earn their credentials through professional associations, government-sponsored programs, and academic institutions. Certification by a professional association is strongest in common law countries, whereas certification by a government body is usually employed in civil law countries.⁶ Academic programs exist in both civil and common law countries, and are particularly strong in countries where certification is not offered by the government or professional associations (for example, in China and Israel). Frequently, an academic credential serves as a prerequisite for membership in a professional association. In some countries, all three forms of credentialing coexist, such as in the U.S. As a general rule, however, in common law countries, credentials granted by professional associations carry more weight than those granted by the government, while the opposite is true in civil law countries.

Certification by professional associations, such as ATA, the Canadian Translators and Interpreters Council (through its 12 provincial and territorial bodies), or the Australian National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters, is usually tied to membership in the given organization. The main qualification assessment of the candidates is then usually performed via stringent

testing. In most cases, other requirements apply in addition to membership and the successful completion of a certification examination.

Eligibility and Continuing Education Requirements

The new set of requirements for ATA’s credential, namely the continuing education and eligibility requirements, was described in the July issue. In general, continuing education requirements are not as common in T&I credentialing as they are in other professions, so ATA is leading the effort in this area. Eligibility requirements are far more common and include the following (in various combinations):

- Membership, either in the organization offering the certification or in another T&I organization;
- Education;
- Experience;
- References or referrals from peers, clients, or employers;
- Mandatory mentoring program;
- Mandatory seminar on ethics or best practices; and
- Screening test in the language of the given country.

The first three are the most common eligibility requirements enforced throughout the T&I industry worldwide. Education and experience are usually coupled on a sliding scale, where more education requires less experience and vice versa. References are required by some professional associations, for example, in Ireland, Ukraine, and Argentina. Mandatory programs and seminars are currently used in Canada.

The screening test is a criterion least used by professional associations. In the programs described in this series, only the Arabic and

Translation Studies Division of the Center for Adult and Continuing Education at the American University in Cairo requires candidates to show proficiency in Arabic of at least Advanced+, as defined by the American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages. While the Center is really in the category of academic institutions (described below), the screening test is of interest to us here because ATA's Board, Eligibility Requirements (ER) Committee, and Accreditation Committee recently gave a lot of thought to the possibility of introducing screening tests as one of the eligibility requirements for ATA's credential. However, technical and logistical difficulties tipped the scale toward using the mainstream requirements, but the ER Committee will continue exploring this area.

Certification by the government falls into the registration/licensure category, which means that certain tasks can be performed only by "authorized," "sworn," or "public" translators or interpreters. This type of certification process is typically governed by legal statutes, which date back to the 19th century in some countries. This means that government-sponsored certification has been around for much longer than certification by professional organizations, the latter being introduced only quite recently. In the U.S., government certification applies to court interpreters, but many countries apply this concept to translators as well. For example, in Argentina, "certified public translators" are considered to be assistants to justice, and are the only ones authorized to act in an official capacity as court assistants, experts, and/or interpreters. Certified translations are required in a number of official contexts: personal documents, certificates and diplomas,

public deeds, documents that are involved in legal actions, expert witness reports, and commercial documents such as contracts, financial statements, corporate documents, etc. A government-certified translation will also be required in circumstances involving other types of documents, such as medical reports or expert opinions that are part of a legal procedure, or an audit or a claim in an insurance company. Similar procedures are employed in other Latin American countries and most of Europe, particularly in the member states of the EU. In some countries (for example, Norway, which is not a member of the EU), the title "government-authorized translator" uses similar wording that carries the same weight as the title "certified public accountant."

The procedures employed in government certification are quite uniform across the board in terms of eligibility requirements. The following set of criteria is used consistently in nearly all countries offering such a credential:

- Minimum age (18, 21, or 25);
- Citizenship;
- Place of residence;
- Legal competence of the candidate; and
- Clean criminal record.

Eligibility requirements imposed by the government are very different from those of professional associations. This is because the purpose of a government-sponsored credential is quite different from that of a credential bestowed by a professional association. Whereas a government-sponsored credential focuses on the moral integrity of the candidate and his or her capability to serve as an "assistant to justice," the professional association's credential focuses on the candidate's

linguistic competency. Most government certification programs, however, require a college degree and include a stringent examination of the candidate's competence in the given language combination(s). On the other hand, in some countries (Belgium, for example), becoming a "sworn translator" or "sworn interpreter" simply means that the translator or interpreter takes an oath before the court, but no attempt is made to assess the candidate's linguistic competency. Continuing education requirements are not common in government certification, but there are exceptions, the most notable of these being California, where such requirements are strictly enforced.

Credentialing by academic institutions has been described in this series on a somewhat random basis, but particularly when discussing countries that are either lacking any other form of certification or those in which other forms of certification have not achieved the desired level of credibility. An important aspect of this type of credential is that it is geared toward candidates who are just beginning their translation or interpretation careers. Certification by professional or governmental organizations, on the other hand, serves the needs of accomplished translators and interpreters. It should also be noted that certification by academic institutions is often a prerequisite for certification by professional or government organizations. Just like nonacademic certification programs, not all academic programs for translators and interpreters are created equal. Descriptions and, in some instances, evaluations of selected programs have been offered in this series for a number of countries, including the Arab-speaking countries, the Low Countries, Scandinavia, Mexico, Latin America, the U.K., Ireland, and Japan. ➡

ATA's Education and Training Committee is currently compiling a list of T&I academic programs worldwide, and further research and assessment of such programs is underway.

Where do we go from here?

The International Certification Study series is the first of its kind, and has filled a large gap in the industry's pool of knowledge. At its inception in June 2001, the purpose of the study was to "learn more about certification and similar programs of non-U.S. professional organizations for translators and interpreters." Emphasis was placed on the admission requirements to these organizations' examination/certification programs, and to "explore whether reciprocal arrangements among organizations with similar areas of interest are possible."⁷ In the course of two years, we learned a lot about credentialing procedures employed by professional organizations outside of the U.S., and ATA was able to apply this knowledge to its own credentialing program. We also learned about credentialing procedures used by various governments, an area which initially was not on our radar screen, but which seemed a natural complement to the investigation of credentials bestowed by professional bodies. When it comes to possible reciprocal arrangements, the study shows that while there is some interest, mutual recognition of credentials by professional organizations in different countries is not going to happen any time soon. An attempt is currently underway to establish criteria for mutual recognition of credentials within North America under the auspices of the recently re-established Regional Network of North America⁸, but the author of this series believes that an

international credential developed and administered by an international body, such as the International Federation of Translators (FIT), would be a more feasible and effective way of moving one's credential across the border.

This study has been exploratory in nature and much work still lies ahead. Our series of articles will serve as groundwork for a more detailed and serious inquiry into the credentialing procedures used in the translation and interpretation industry worldwide. Its author was recently appointed by Betty Cohen, president of FIT, as chair of the FIT Status Committee, an international body whose mission is to examine the status of the translation and interpretation profession throughout the world. The committee members are: Marion Boers, of the South African Translators' Institute; Mary Höcker, of the German BDÜ; Sveinung Løkke, of the Norwegian Association of Government Authorized Translators; Ann Macfarlane, executive director of the National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators and immediate past president of ATA; Roberto Puig, of Colegio de Traductores Públicos del Uruguay; David Wilmsen, of the American University in Cairo; and Huang Youyi, of the Translators Association of China. The FIT Status Committee intends to continue and further expand this study in order to map the situation of translators and interpreters worldwide and to work toward improvement in the status of our profession.

This article concludes the International Certification Study series. Past articles in this series are available online in pdf format to ATA members at www.atanet.org in the Members Only section. Nonmembers can request individual articles directly from the author at

jiri@cetra.com. The entire series is scheduled for publication in book form for the November 2003 conference in Phoenix.

Notes

1. Hamm, Michael. 1997. "Certification and Accreditation Programs." *Professional Practices in Association Management*. Ed. John B. Cox. Washington, DC: ASAE, pp. 335-43.
2. Pare, Michael A., ed. 1998. *Certification and Accreditation Programs Directory: A Descriptive Guide to National Voluntary Certification and Accreditation Programs for Professionals and Institutions*. Detroit, MI: The Gale Group. This 620-page volume, which describes voluntary credentialing in the U.S., is complemented by the *Professional and Occupational Licensing Directory*, which lists credentials required to practice a profession or occupation.
3. Knapp, Lenora G., and Joan E. Knapp. 2002. *The Business of Certification: A Comprehensive Guide to Developing a Successful Program*. Washington, DC: ASAE, p. 2.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.
5. Academic credentials were described in several articles in this series, particularly in the countries lacking professional certification. As was mentioned in the June issue, T&I programs in the U.S. are described in *Programs in Translation Studies: An ATA Handbook*, edited by Gertrud Champe, recently published by ATA. Another ATA publication,

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seven-minute limit [on interviews] is unfair.” On the other hand, some interpreters felt the need to shorten their students’ answers: “The students can get a little preachy about their projects,” reported Dr. Rosario Cambric, a Spanish interpreter. “Sometimes they provide more information than necessary to answer the judge’s questions.”

How did the judges feel about the interpreters’ work? I asked Dr. Brian Bagatto, a University of Akron physiology professor and ISEF judge, if it was more difficult to judge projects where he had to use interpreters to conduct the interview. “It’s not more difficult,” he replied, “just slower. I didn’t water down my questions or ask different types of questions than I

asked the English-speaking students, but I did pause for a second to rephrase my questions for clarity. I was satisfied with the answers I received, but sometimes I thought the interpreters gave extra information beyond what the students said.” His only suggestion for improvement would be “extra time to work with interpreter-assisted projects. Another 10 minutes or so [per slot] would have been really nice.” ISEF judge Russell Ezolt, an immigration lawyer from North Olmstead, concurred with Bagatto: “Language was not a barrier. The interview is a little more cumbersome, but you don’t lose anything in the process. Do you make a few changes? Yes. Do you adapt a little? Yes. Is it a problem? No. I

think it’s wonderful that the international students are here. Cutting them off because they don’t speak English would be incredibly small-minded.”

Hear, hear, Mr. Ezolt. Thanks to the hard work of more than 125 interpreters present that day, ideas took center stage, regardless of the language or country in which they were originally conceived. Furthermore, beginning interpreters got a chance to showcase their skills and network with potential clients while performing an invaluable community service.

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Translating and Interpreting Programs in North America: A Survey, compiled and edited by William Park, is scheduled for a new edition under a new name, *Park’s Guide to Translating and Interpreting Programs in North America*.

6. Civil law countries are those in Continental Europe and in Latin America. The common law countries are England, the U.S., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. There are also mixed jurisdictions: Quebec, Louisiana, Puerto Rico, South Africa,

Zimbabwe, Scotland, and The Philippines. (Source: Tom West, “Common Law and Equity,” presentation at the ATA Legal Conference in Jersey City, May 2-4, 2003.)

7. See the opening article in this series in the June 2001 *ATA Chronicle*, page 9.

8. See “Regional Network for North America” by Esteban Cadena in the April 2003 *ATA Chronicle*, pp. 17, 22.

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For detailed information on ATA’s Accreditation Procedures or to read past articles in this series, visit ATA’s website at www.atanet.org.

From the Executive Director Continued from page 9

approved a motion to issue a statement regarding the case of Mohamed Yousry, a judicial interpreter of Arabic who has been indicted for allegedly aiding and abetting terrorism. The official statement, to be published in the September issue, lays out the case, states that ATA is following the case closely, and describes the functions of the judicial interpreter, on which the case may hinge. More information will be posted online.

The minutes of the meeting will be posted in the Members Only section of ATA’s website (www.atanet.org/membersonly). Past meeting minutes are also posted on the site. The next Board meeting is tentatively set for November 8-9 at the Annual Conference in Phoenix, Arizona. As always, the meeting is open to the membership.

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