



APPRAISAL OF THE PRODUCTS/GRADUATES OF THE ADVANCED SCHOOL OF TRANSLATORS AND INTERPRETERS (ASTI) INTERPRETER TRAINING PROGRAMME

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ABSTRACT

At a time when the Anglophone crisis is tearing the two English speaking regions of Cameroon apart with its social, economic, and even political consequences overflowing in other regions of the country, many solutions have been proposed and even implemented by the Government. Among these, the decision taken on 20th November 2019 to recruit about 500 translators/interpreters within a period of 5 years into the public service to mediate between the two main official language communities of the country in public service settings, a decision long overdue according to some observers and researchers. This study is an attempt to appraise the products of the interpreter training programme of the Advanced School of Translators and Interpreters (ASTI) of the University of Buea, which remains the main supplier of the State in terms of interpreter graduates. Using a survey questionnaire, it seeks the perception of two main stakeholders of the interpretation arena in Cameroon: lecturers and professionals who respectively taught and studied in the programme during specific periods. The study considers their views about the products/graduates of the ASTI interpreter training programme over the periods 1988-1993 when the programme operated under the average system, 1993- 2008 when it operated under the credit system, and 2008-2015 when it moved to the current BMP system. The findings reveal very informative trends and raise questions as to how the current situation of the country is likely to affect those trends.

Keywords: Appraisal, Products, Graduates, Advanced School of Translators and Interpreters (ASTI), Interpreter Training Programme.

1. Introduction

Evaluating the various aspects of interventions has increasingly become an important field of research in and out of academia. To support and guide this endeavour, theories and models of programme evaluation have been developed. Indeed, literature abounds on “programme evaluation” but little technical literature is found which defines “programme” as understood in the context of this study in unambiguous terms. It is when a qualifier (educational) is appended to the term that its real meaning as per this research starts emerging. It will thus be defined as “educational programme” rather than simply “programme”. Indeed, the latter pertains first and foremost to the business and management area. It is borrowed from that area into educational institutions

perceived as businesses which are to be managed according to admitted and well-grounded management principles. Therefore, in the context of this study, an “educational programme” (or “training programme”), as understood by Gile (1995: 12, cited by Ulrych, 2005:11), is characterized by its duration, its progression, the types of materials used, its admission standards, graduation standards, etc. A more straightforward definition is borrowed from Fiola (2003:345) about professional translation, and can also apply to professional interpretation: “Le terme « programme d'études » désigne ici un ensemble intégré de mesures visant au développement des savoirs, des savoir-faire et des savoir-être nécessaires pour qu'un apprenant soit compétent en traduction professionnelle [The term 'educational programme' refers here to an integrated set of measures aimed at developing the knowledge, know-how, and interpersonal skills required for a learner to be competent in professional translation]” (Author's translation).

From another perspective, Gile (2009:7) defines an interpreter training programme through the functions it performs at individual, social, and professional levels. At individual level, it can help individuals who wish to become professional interpreters enhance their performance to the full realisation of their potential; it can also help them develop their interpretation skills more rapidly than through field experience and self-instruction. At social and professional level, it can help raise general professional standards in the marketplace by selecting the best candidates at admission and the truly skilled at graduation. This may in turn positively impact the social status of interpreters, especially if standards are set at postgraduate academic level. Through the professional circles they are connected to, training programmes can also help beginning interpreters and translators start their professional careers by introducing them to professional organisations and clients. This is a particularly important function in conference interpretation, as interpretation schools maintain close links with major international organisations and other institutional clients, and invite their representatives to take part in graduation examinations. Though important, these social functions are context dependent and vary considerably from one country to the next and from one market to the next. Also, the following statement from Kiraly (2005:1098–1111) concerning the translation services market may also apply to the interpretation services market:

[...] market research is a mainstay of modern business practice. If we want our products and services to be accepted by the market, we must conduct survey research among market participants. If we want to investigate the efficacy of the Translator Education programs we offer, one of our main sources of information will be the translation services market.

In line with the above, this study draws from the study carried out by ASTI entitled “A Tracer Study of Graduates of the Advanced School of Translators and Interpreters (ASTI) from 1987 to 2003”, but away from the latter, it seeks the perspectives of some key stakeholders (lecturers and professionals) of interpretation in Cameroon on careers and markets for the graduates of the ASTI interpretation training programme. A cursory look at the research carried out on ASTI over the past decade or so also reveals that virtually all the works have focused so far on the translation discipline, including PhD level works. Even though some findings of these works might apply to both translation and interpretation, no study has, as of now, explicitly and exclusively targeted the interpretation discipline. Even the book on “Perspectives on Translation and Interpretation in Cameroon” by Chia, Suh, and Ndeffo (2009) mainly has translation as its main focus. It is important for this gap to be filled at a time when research in interpreting studies is gaining ground under the BMP context at ASTI. Thus, this study is grounded in the theoretical management-oriented CIPP (Context-Input-Process-Product) model developed by Stufflebeam (1966), and investigates more specifically the products of the ASTI interpreter training programme from inception (1988) till 2015, from both lecturers and professionals' perspectives. Below are the results of the survey.

2. Lecturers' (1988-2015) Perspectives

• Lecturers' perception of careers and markets for graduates

- Percentage of graduates that end up earning a living as professional interpreters

Half of the lecturers of the period 1988-1993 perceived that 80% of the graduates end up earning a living as professional interpreters, 60.0% (3) for the 1993-2008 period while this proportion dropped to 16.7% (2) for the 2008-2015 period; over this period, the highest proportion was recorded for the category 30% and they were 33.3% (4) of lecturers that mostly perceived that only 30% of graduates end up earning a living as professional interpreters. On the whole, the proportion of graduates that end up earning a living as professional interpreters decreased over time, with the cumulative proportion within the category <70% increasing from 0% over 1988-1993 to 20.0% (1) over 1993-2008 and reaching 66.7% (8) over 2008-2015.

Over the period 1988-1993, the main employers were the public service, NGOs, private individuals and parastatals. Over the period 1993-2008, the main employers were NGOs (100%), followed by the public service and parastatals (80.0%). NGOs still remained the main employer as perceived by lecturers of the period 2008-2015 with proportion of 83.3% (10), followed by the public service 58.3% (7) while parastatals and interpretation firms come at the third position with proportion below majority of 33.3% (4). It is however worth noting that employers diversified as time goes on then increasing employability opportunities. Also, the role of the public service as one of the main employers of interpreter graduates decreased over time. The irruption of interpretation firms over time onto the scene of employment is also worth noticing.

- **Markets where the graduates are usually present as professional interpreters**

Across the three periods, the market where the graduates are usually present as professional interpreters is Africa (57.9%), followed by Europe (31.6%), then Asia (27.8%). Cameroon and Northern America coming at the fourth position (15.8%). This raises the question as to know why and how a programme set up and designed at inception to supply the public service of Cameroon with its own interpreters ended up supplying mostly Africa, Europe, and Asia.

- **Is it always possible for the trainees to determine exactly which market they will join after graduation?**

To this question, no lecturer of the period 1988-1993 said no, 60.0% (3) of the period 1993-2008 said no while this proportion rose to 83.3% (10) over the period 2008-2015. The table below details lecturers' perception of careers and markets for graduates. This confirms that at inception, it was clear to all graduates that they would serve in the public service; this became uncertain over time, as the public service could no longer absorb all the graduates, and as employment market opportunities diversified.

Table 1: Lecturers' perception of careers and markets for graduates

Characteristics	Categories	1988-1993	1993-2008	2008-2015	Total
% of graduates that end up earning a living as professional interpreters	20	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	8.3% (1)	5.6% (1)
	30	0.0% (0)	20.0% (1)	33.3% (4)	27.8% (5)
	60	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	25.0% (3)	16.7% (3)
	70	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	8.3% (1)	5.6% (1)
	80	50.0% (1)	60.0% (3)	16.7% (2)	33.3% (6)
	100	0.0% (0)	20.0% (1)	8.3% (1)	11.1% (2)
% of graduates that end up earning a living as professional interpreters	Don't know	50.0% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	5.6% (1)
	<60	0.0% (0)	20.0% (1)	41.7% (5)	31.6% (6)
	≥60*	50.0% (1)	80.0% (4)	58.3% (7)	63.1% (12)
From your experience, what % of graduates ends up earning a living as professional interpreters per sector?	Don't know	50.0% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.05% (1)
	Public service*	50.0% (1)	80.0% (4)	58.3% (7)	63.1% (12)
	NGOs*	50.0% (1)	100% (5)	83.3% (10)	84.2% (16)
	Private individuals*	0.0% (0)	20.0% (1)	8.3% (1)	5.6% (1)
	Private administrations*	0.0% (0)	40.0% (2)	16.7% (2)	21.0% (4)
	Parastatals*	50.0% (1)	80.0% (4)	33.3% (4)	47.4% (9)
Church and local communities*	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	16.7% (2)	10.5% (2)	

	Interpretation firms*	0.0% (0)	20.0% (1)	33.3% (4)	27.8% (5)
	Other fields	Teaching, assistant director, communication officer, freelance interpretation, translation language editing, proof reading, journalism, translation, diplomacy, business, administrative staff, court interpreter, tourism.			
Markets where the graduates are usually present as professional interpreters	Cameroon*	50.0% (1)	20.0% (1)	8.3% (1)	15.8% (3)
	Europe*	50.0% (1)	60.0% (3)	16.7% (2)	31.6% (6)
	Asia*	0.0% (0)	60.0% (3)	16.7% (2)	27.8% (5)
	Africa*	50.0% (1)	80.0% (4)	50.0% (6)	57.9% (11)
	North America*	50.0% (1)	20.0% (1)	8.3% (1)	15.8% (3)
	Is it always possible for the trainees to determine exactly which market they will join after graduation	Yes*	50% (1)	40.0% (2)	16.7% (2)
	No	0.0% (0)	60.0% (3)	83.3% (10)	68.4% (13)
	Don't know	50% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	5.3% (1)
How graduates get introduced into the interpretation job market	Through mentorship by elder professional*	0.0% (0)	60.0% (3)	50.0% (6)	47.4% (9)
	Through mentorship by their lecturers*	0.0% (0)	40.0% (2)	25.0% (3)	26.3% (5)
	Through mentorship by association of professional translators and interpreters of Cameroon*	0.0% (0)	20.0% (1)	8.3% (1)	10.5% (2)
	Through their personal connection*	50.0% (1)	80.0% (4)	66.7% (8)	68.4% (13)
	Through direct application to potential employers*	50.0% (1)	60.0% (3)	41.7% (5)	47.4% (9)
	Multiple Response Set [MRS] (Job prospects/opportunities)	28.9% (11)	53.7% (51)	32.5% (74)	37.7% (136)

*Considered in MRS, 19 indicators.

The possible openings for employment was the lowest for the first period (1988- 1993), increased to 53.7% during the second period (1993-2008) before dropping to 32.5% over 2008-2015.

- **How graduates get introduced into the interpretation job market**

It was perceived across periods that graduates mostly get introduced into the interpretation job market through their personal connection – 68.4% (13) – and to an average extent through mentorship by elder professionals or through direct application to potential employers – 47.4% (9). Details are outlined in the table below.

Table 2: Frequency at which graduates use methods to get introduced into the interpretation job market

How graduates get introduced into the interpretation job market	Frequency of use 1 (least frequent) to 5 (most frequent)				
	1	2	3	4	5
Through mentorship by elder professionals	26.3% (5)	10.5% (2)	31.6% (6)	0.0% (0)	26.3% (5)
Through mentorship by their lecturers	47.4% (9)	10.5% (2)	21.1% (4)	10.5% (2)	5.3% (1)
Through mentorship by the Association of Professional Translators and Interpreters of Cameroon	5.3% (1)	52.6% (10)	26.3% (5)	0.0% (0)	5.3% (1)
Through their personal connections	5.3% (1)	5.3% (1)	10.5% (2)	5.3% (1)	52.6% (10)
Through direct application to potential employers	26.3% (5)	10.5% (2)	10.5% (2)	21.1% (4)	31.6% (6)
How graduates get introduced into the interpretation job market	Frequency of use 1 (least frequent) to 5 (most frequent)				
	Very rarely	Rarely	Frequently		
Through mentorship by elder professionals	36.8% (7)	31.6% (6)	26.3% (5)		
Through mentorship by their lecturers	57.9% (11)	21.1% (4)	15.8% (3)		
Through mentorship by the Association of Professional Translators and Interpreters of Cameroon	10.5% (2)	26.3% (5)	5.3% (1)		
Through their personal connections	10.5% (2)	10.5% (2)	57.9% (11)		
Through direct application to potential employers	36.8% (7)	10.5% (2)	52.6% (10)		
Overall (MRS)	37.2% (29)	24.3% (19)	38.5% (30)		

All the lecturers perceived that graduates did not know about any formal instrument on the mentorship of young graduates into the job market by elder professionals, almost all – 94.7% (18) – of them again were of the opinion that graduates did not know about any formal instrument on the mentorship of young graduates into the job market by lecturers, while 84.2% (16) acknowledged that they did not know about any formal instrument on the mentorship of young graduates into the job market by potential employers. However, and to the opposite edge, lecturers stated that graduates know about some formal instrument on the mentorship of young graduates into the job market by the Association of Professional Translators and Interpreters of Cameroon (APTIC), or any other professional association in Cameroon – 89.5% (17).

Table 3: Lecturers knowledge of formal instrument on the mentorship of young graduates into the job market

Characteristics	Categories	1988-1993	1993-2008	2008-2015	Total
know about any formal instrument on the mentorship of young graduates into the job market by elder professionals	Yes	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
	No	100% (2)	100% (5)	100% (12)	100% (19)
know about any formal instrument for mentorship of young graduates into the job market by their lecturers	Yes	50.0% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	5.3% (1)
	No	50.0% (1)	100% (5)	100% (12)	94.7% (18)
know about any formal instrument on the mentorship of young graduates into the job market by the Association of Professional Translators and Interpreters of Cameroon (APTIC), or any other professional association in Cameroon	Yes	0.0% (0)	20.0% (1)	8.3% (1)	89.5% (17)
	No	100% (2)	80.0% (4)	91.7% (11)	10.5% (2)
Know about any formal instrument on the mentorship of young graduates into the job market by potential employers	Yes	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	25.0% (3)	15.8% (3)
	No	100% (2)	100% (5)	75.0% (9)	84.2% (16)

• **Were students (formally or informally) allowed to spend more than two years on the programme?**

To a weak proportion (40.0%), lecturers perceived that students (formally or informally) were not allowed to spend more than two years on the programme for the periods 1988-1993 (average system) and 1993-2008 (credit system), while the same proportion could not state their mind, thus implying that lecturers were not really aware or knowledgeable about this regulation.

3. Professionals' perspectives

• **Description of mode of accessing the profession or the market**

The following question was to be answered: Upon graduation, did you feel there were aspects of the profession you needed to acquire or reinforce before accessing the market?

44.9% (22) of professionals perceived that there were aspects of the profession that graduates needed to acquire or reinforce before accessing the market, thus attesting of the incomplete nature of the training or the inadequacy of the training to readily meet the job market requirements upon completion. This is also testimony of the demanding nature of the market. The programme needs to factor this reality into its processes.

Table 4: Upon graduation, did you feel there were aspects of the profession you needed to acquire or reinforce before accessing the market.

Upon graduation, did you feel there were aspects of the profession you needed to acquire or reinforce before accessing the market?	Batch				
		1988-1993	1993-2008	2008-2015	Total
	No	n	2	9	16
	%	33.3%	69.2%	53.3%	55.1%
Yes	n	4	4	14	22
	%	66.7%	30.8%	46.7%	44.9%
Total	n	6	13	30	49
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Then, professionals highlighted a number of skills they needed to acquire or reinforce before accessing the market as presented on the following table.

Table 5: Upon graduation, what skills did you need to acquire or reinforce before accessing the market?

Upon graduation, what skills did you need to acquire or reinforce before accessing the market?	Period		
	1988-1993	1993-2008	2008-2015
Accounting,		√	
Communication		√	
public relations		√	
An area of specialisation or even two, contact with research institutes focused on intercultural communication (translation and interpretation as I experience was deeply related to intercultural issues)		√	
Consecutive interpretation			√
Consolidate my interpretation abilities			√
Contacted by employer, skipped the test but had an interview		√	
Corporate literacy		√	
Entrepreneurship			√
Entrepreneurship, life skills			√
General knowledge			√
How to get contracts, how to manage when you are contacted to perform			√
How to deal with accents			√
I knew nothing at the time of graduation about seeking			

out clients sending quotes and responding to request for quotes, invoicing			√
Marketing and finance			√
Law			√
More practical or professionalisation of training			√
Conference terminology			√
public speaking	√		
Situational awareness (Mastery of current events)			√
Context specific requirements			√
How to sell my qualities			√
Managing accents			√
Specialised (interpretation) knowledge		√	
The networking aspects			√
Work ethics and entrepreneurship/professional practice	√		

• **How professional interpreters got their present job**

Professional interpreters got their present job through various channels, as follows:

- Took advantage from an opportunistic collaboration: In this frame, the interpreter was asked by a colleague to help him out and in the process, his own talent was identified and this led to employment as explained by this interpreter: "A colleague asked me to help him discharge a contract, since he was busy servicing another meeting at the same moment".
- Recommendation: The interpreter was recommended by a colleague or someone else as perceived in this quotation: "A colleague recommended me".
- Competitive entrance examination: The interpreter took part in a competitive entrance examination and was eligible as explained: "A competitive entrance examination was launched by the MINFOPRA (Ministry of Public Service and Administrative Reforms) for the recruitment of 60 senior translators. I compiled documents and succeeded written and oral exams"; "I was recruited as a translator through a direct competitive examination (written and oral) and posted to the SG/PR (Secretariat General, Presidency of the Republic)".
- Recruitment test/internship: The interpreter applied for employment and passed the recruitment test as testified by this interpreter: "An advert was placed, I got informed through a company worker, did the test and was recruited for the duration of the project"; "I applied for a position of translator/interpreter. I was interviewed and later on I had to undergo an internship before being finally recruited after six months".
- Out of family ties: The interpreter got himself employed by a family member or relative as explained by this one: "I applied and was recruited by a relative without interview/recruited out of family ties".
- Interest in freelance adventure: This interpreter thus explained his passion for freelance adventure "As a researcher, I decided to work as a freelance interpreter because I am mostly interested in interpretation, social life and relations between individuals from different cultural backgrounds"; "search for translation offers online, make a bid and get accepted, contacted for interpretation activities by senior interpreters"; "I am currently operating as a freelance and I try as much to secure long term contracts with my regular clients". Worthy of note here is the fact that during his/her "idle"

hours, a freelance interpreter searches “for translation offers online, makes a bid and get accepted”. The interpreter training programme should factor this in and prepares graduates also for this reality.

- Recruitment by the government: Some were simply recruited by the government to be civil servants: “Civil servant (recruitment from school), UN system (recruited after responding to vacancy announcement and sitting a test)”; “Direct absorption in Cameroon's public service”; “I am on retirement since Dec. 2015; I got employed through the routine recruitment process”; “MINFOPRA launched and entrance exam. I completed and submitted my file, wrote the exam, went for oral and was transferred to the SGPR (Secretariat General of the Presidency of the Republic) at the MINDEF (Ministry of Defence)”; “Recruited among the 25,000 State agents special recruitment and posted at the Ministry of Basic Education”.

- **Operational ability of graduates**

Professionals generally perceived that after recruitment, they did not undergo some sort of in-house training before they were deemed operational by their employers – 80.6% (25) – thus implying they were operational at the end of the training.

However, they underwent in-service training on specific organisational needs:

- In house procedure and terminology;
- In house terminology;
- In-house terminology and practice legal training for interpreters/translators;
- It was more of supervised work than a trying per se. I was coached by senior colleagues;
- Mastery of in-house terminology “through the translation of in-house documents and as concerns interpretation, during the first six months I followed keenly the senior colleagues during debates, so as to get familiar with the working environment”;
- Technical jargon.

However, professionals perceived that the quality has dropped with the current trainees as they mostly – 91.5% (43) – agreed that they would organise a recruitment test if they were asked to recruit interpreters from the population of recent interpretation graduates. This was mostly explained by the growing offer.

Table 6: After recruitment, did you undergo some sort of in-house training before you were deemed operational by your employer? vs periods

Period	Stats	After recruitment, did you undergo some sort of in-house training before you were deemed operational by your employer?		Total
		No	Yes	
1988-1993	N	3	1	4
	%	75.0%	15.0%	100.0%
1993-2008	N	10	2	12
	%	83.3%	16.7%	100.0%
2008-2015	N	12	3	15
	%	80.0%	20.0%	100.0%
Total	N	25	6	31
	%	80.6%	19.3%	100.0%

Table 7: If you were asked to recruit interpreters from the population of recent interpretation graduates, would you organise a recruitment test, or simply select based on their academic records? vs periods

Batch	Stats	If you were asked to recruit interpreters from the population of recent interpretation graduates, would you organise a recruitment test, or simply select based on their academic records?			Total
		No response	I would organise a recruitment test	I would simply select based on their academic records	
1988-1993	N	1	5	0	6
	%	16.7%	83.3%	0.0%	100.0%
1993-2008	N	0	12	1	13
	%	0.0%	92.3%	7.7%	100.0%
2008-2015	N	1	26	1	28
	%	3.5%	92.8%	3.5%	100.0%
Total	N	2	43	2	47
	%	4.2%	91.5%	4.2%	100.0%

4. Conclusion

This article provided an appraisal of the products/graduates of the Advanced School of Translators and Interpreters (ASTI) Interpreter Training Programme from the perspectives of two key stakeholders – lecturers and professionals – and for three main periods of the history of the programme – the 1988-1993 period, the 1993-2008 period, and the 2008-2015 period. Its findings reveal important insights on the quality of products the school supplied the national and global market with, since inception. Moving away from the partitioning of the research domains in interpretation, the study also sets a bridge between the training environment and the professional world, thereby promoting the need for the professional market to inform the training and vice-versa. For this synergy to uphold the institutional aspirations to success and excellence for a better grounding in an unforeseeable future, it is recommended that feedback mechanisms between the university and the job market be strengthened. Also, considering that the private sector is increasingly absorbing most of the graduates, the programme needs to prepare them more adequately for this sector. This must start for example with students internship being extended to private institutions rather than being limited to public institutions. Finally, a formal instrument on the mentorship of young graduates into the job market by elder professionals, lecturers, and/or potential employers should be designed and implemented. This would help strengthen the synergy between the university and the job market, and improve employability of ASTI interpretation graduates.

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