

TNP 3: Sub-Project 1 - Languages for language-related industries and professions

Initial findings of the consultation with employers and graduates in language-related industries

To meet the broad aims of the consultation – assessment of the content and quality of HE language provision in relation to needs in the language-related industries – two online questionnaires are being employed. The first, addressed to graduates in the area of languages who are using foreign languages in their work, aims to appraise the relevance of their HE qualifications to the skills demanded by this work. It contains questions on personal and academic background, work situation, higher educational experience, and recommendations for changes to HE programmes in the area of languages. The second, addressed to private and public enterprises whose primary output is language-related, and which employ graduates in the area of languages, investigates the changing character of the language-related industries and the relevance of current HE provision to the skills required in these industries. It contains questions on the organisation and its primary activities, the qualifications of employees and the relevance of these qualifications to their work, and recommendations for improvements to HE language programmes and communication between employers and HE institutions.

The consultation and evaluation of data is continuing. Although the quantity of data collected is as yet insufficient to support detailed statistical analysis, clear trends are discernable and will be reported here in the form of responses to three key questions.

First, what changes are currently taking place in the language-related industries? Graduates report that demand for the kind of language-related work they do at present is changing, mainly as a result of globalisation, EU expansion and technical advances. Many claim that, beside traditional work such as translating and interpreting, much of their time is spent on non-language tasks, such as project management. Responses from employers, mainly translation and interpreting companies and agencies of various sizes, mirror those of graduates and stress that primary foreign-language-related activities undertaken by their employees are not only translation and interpreting, but also project management, technical documentation, editing - including web-page editing - and terminology. The picture is of multi-faceted work in an expanding field, demanding professional standards of its employees, as well as organisational strengths, good (intercultural) communication skills, customer awareness, cost consciousness, and up-to-date technical knowledge.

Second, how well does HE prepare language graduates for work in the language-related industries? Approximately half of the graduates surveyed so far think that their degree prepared them only adequately for their current work; a quarter describe HE preparation for work as being of marginal use. However, criticism of the content of current HE programmes varies by country and is therefore not amenable to generalisation. Employers claim that two-thirds of their language graduates were adequately prepared for their work when they took up employment, with the lack of project management and organisational skills mentioned by some as a shortcoming.

Third, what measures need to be undertaken in HE to equip students for the demands of work in the language-related industries and professions? A common theme in responses from graduates is the need for more practical experience, obtained through work placements and real-life tasks in class, and for training in the use of new technologies. This need is echoed by employers. It is generally agreed that an improvement in the level of consultation and cooperation between employers and HE institutions is desirable and could be facilitated by the setting up, perhaps using alumni organisations and professional associations, of forums for the exchange of information between HE institutions and employers.