There’s a joke told by recruiters about questioning a job candidate’s vague claim to have gone to Harvard only to be told, “Yeah, I went to visit my friend.” Another quip concerns a panicky aircrew member running down the aisle asking if there’s a doctor on board and eliciting the response, “I have a PhD in linguistics!”

The point is less the humor than to ensure propriety. When we’re dealing with a professional matter, such as checking up on a qualified practitioner who is paid for their services, we want to know that we’re not hiring a cowboy. This applies just as much to plumbers as it does to brain surgeons. It’s often infeasible to check firsthand that the guy suited up in the scrubs or the guy wielding the plunger is up to the task, so we rely instead on qualifications, often codified in the form of degrees and certificates. Their degrees hang on their office walls. Craftsmen may display their license numbers on all their business stationery and even on their trucks! They are issued by a governing body that manages its members’ credentials, ranging from renewals to discipline when standards have not been met.

**Language certifications**

A quick survey of the Wikipedia page for certification shows how numerous certifying bodies are, but there’s an obvious omission among them. There is no listing at all for languages. There are a good number of certification programs in the language industry, so how can this be? The truth is that our community is probably the most diverse on the planet. Not only do we have numerous languages all with their own associations, we also have an extremely diverse range of skills and technologies that we bring to bear in facilitating global communication. But is this a good excuse? After all, the healthcare community is equally diverse and yet it is scrupulously governed. I think this calls for deeper digging.

Let me first state that the importance of academic qualifications is not in question here. We have wonderful educational establishments all over the world and they do a remarkable job in producing a new batch of well-educated young people each and every year. Education is still our bedrock.

We’re concerned more with what happens when graduates begin to morph into young professionals and we’re also concerned with examining what traction professional linguists, translators and interpreters gain from being certified members of the language community.

Let me continue by asking, at what point does a linguist become a recognized specialist in a subject? Is it the same for all languages in all locations? Are corporate linguists different in this respect from freelancers? You can probably already guess that the critical subject of compensation as well as recognition is lurking in here too. Of the certification bodies that we do have, how alike or unalike are their requirements? What exactly are the steps involved in their respective processes? And how are they administered? We all wish there were easy answers to these questions and many others, but that’s far from being the case.
Yet another point showing how we lag in certification is in continuous education. Doctors must make time to keep abreast of the constant flow of new drugs, devices and procedures that become available. If they can manage with their hectic schedules, linguists must do likewise. But how do you find the time if you’re a freelancer trying to run your business in a cutthroat world? There are recertification programs available, but we have a problem that is global and that is the absence of standards across the board from language to language and country to country. We also need to face the fact that if strict certification rules and regulations are applied, how does that affect compensation rates? Put bluntly, what actually is the value in being certified? In our world, legal and medical interpreters are required to be certified — what will the effect be if that is applied to all specializations? Again, there are no easy answers, but the questions persist.

**The Translation Commons Group: Certified**

These questions continue to be asked and in truth need to be addressed across the board. That is the spirit we have adopted in forming the Translation Commons Certification Group.

One figure I consistently turn to on matters relating to translation, especially regarding tech and language industry practices, is Jost Zetzsche, who is involved in this project and is a member of the Translation Commons Advisory Board. He is well-known throughout the community and held in high esteem for his in-depth knowledge and authoritative voice. He is a shrewd analyst of our community’s unique place in the cultural and business worlds and deft at offering solutions to improve our working lives. Equally accomplished and also held in high regard is Arturo Bobea, whose experience as an interpreter is outstanding. He too is renowned for both his acumen and standing as a reliable source of information on the working lives of interpreters and their hard-won skills. I am fortunate to be working with both of them as part of Translation Commons’ effort to raise the profile of certification as an issue that will benefit the entire community.

When I asked Zetzsche to outline his ideas of what we might achieve with this initiative, he responded at length: “What we hope to achieve with this is to provide a platform that allows translation professionals to showcase their academic and certification accolades along with similarly qualified colleagues. For translation buyers or LSPs, this will offer the possibility to hire professionals with a greater degree of certainty. As we find, for instance, with language combinations that are not often encountered or even in the more typical language combinations when demand outstrips supply. Since academic degrees or certifications are of course not the only thing that can describe someone’s qualifications, the next step will then be to also add a rating system so that there will be further qualitative benchmarks.” The fact that we can anticipate innovation in an intrinsic professional capacity indicates, at least to me, how much life there is in our community. Let’s face it, the field is always open for ideas in how we might best appraise quality and authoritatively assure it.

Bobea reminded me that “perfection in our industry is subjective; it depends on many factors as it is not an exact science, and it’s hard for us to agree on what it even is in most cases.” Bobea is aware from the immediacy of interpreting in ensuring that language quality is accurate and consistent. He went on to tell me that, “Certification is the closest guide towards standardization we have available; one that has been researched, built, reviewed, tested, followed-up on and adjusted. Being certified provides a sense of proficiency in those standards and participation in the industry as a whole, not only as an individual.” Understanding exactly what is at stake and its value to the community does not just come from theory and procedures resulting from it. It requires working experience. “With this project, we aim to highlight those professionals that have gone the extra mile, that have gone through the process, that want to represent the industry with the highest standards of practice,” he says. He went on to describe his vision for what we might achieve in this work: “We also want to provide global information and resources, whether it would be for those who seek to belong to that elite group that is building the industry up, clients or LSPs looking for quality professionals, or even for those who are trying to have more exposure. We seek to become a hub of information that is currently scattered or not easily found otherwise.”

**Future**

We plan to harness the team’s insights and skills to bridge the gap that will allow an effective flow-control from an education in translation to a professional status ensuring that translation buyers’ requirements are fulfilled. The bonus I see here is that each time a customer is delighted, the status of our community is enhanced. If that happens regularly, then language professionals will receive due recognition for their skills instead of being taken for granted. At least, that’s the hope. [M]