

# It's not just about the money



Melissa McMahon wonders what it really means to be a professional.

**AUSIT describes itself as “the national association for the translating and interpreting profession” and we refer to ourselves as professionals, but what exactly does “professional” mean?**

When Louis Vorstermans contrasted being a professional to being a businessperson in the last issue of *In Touch* (Spring 2013), it sent me scurrying to the internet to research the term. I realised I only had a vague, impressionistic sense of what “professional” meant.

Of course, like most words, it has more than one meaning. Sometimes it just means “non-amateur” (“I’m a professional translator”), sometimes “non-amateurish” (“it’s a very professional-looking website”). Behaving with professionalism can mean a range of personal qualities from good grooming to the ability to keep a cool head. These aren’t meanings that really pick out “the professions” as a specific kind of occupation or explain what “professionalisation” is about. We start to narrow things down when we use the term professional to mean a skilled occupation rather than an unskilled one, specifically one involving intellectual skills rather than manual ones and requiring a certain level of education. The idea that a profession is an occupation unlike others goes further than this, however, as Louis’ discussion suggests. When we bring in notions of independence, self-regulation,

public service and a non-commercial orientation we are invoking the concept of the “liberal professions”, and it is worth tracing the history of this concept, because its heritage is still very much a part of the perception and legal status of the professions today.

The concept of the liberal professions was developed in the Middle Ages in Europe with the formation of the universities, and itself refers back to the ancient Roman concept of the “liberal arts” or *artes liberales*. “Liberal” in the Roman context meant “of or befitting a man of free birth”. The liberal arts were the higher forms of learning, such as grammar, rhetoric and logic, that would equip the free man for civic life, marking a distance from the moral, political and physical bondage of the slave. The Middle Ages recognised divinity, law and medicine as the liberal or learned professions, but some education in the liberal arts (extended to include subjects such as geometry and music) was still the foundation for all of these more specialised courses of university study. This organisation of learning still informs our perception of the difference between a university education and a technical one today: above and beyond utilitarian ends or vocational skills, a university education is supposed to develop broader capacities of reflection and expression that are part of an ideal of civic virtue. When many technical colleges were amalgamated with the universities in the late 1980s under the Dawkins reforms, this was perceived as

a step in both the “professionalisation” of occupations like teaching and nursing and the “vocationalisation” of the universities, which were also encouraged to form closer ties with business and industry.

Even apart from the ideal of what an arts education contributes, the notion of performing a public service is a key component of our understanding of the professions (then and today). This aspect is clear in the original professional trinity of divinity, law and medicine, and in other traditional professions such as teaching, the military, engineering and nursing. The public service component is one of the ways that a profession is distinguished from a business, as the professional is not supposed to be motivated by purely financial considerations. We see this idea taken to the extreme in the original understanding of the “honorarium”, the traditional form of remuneration of a professional – “a payment in recognition of acts or professional services for which custom or propriety forbids a price to be set” (Webster). Because of their advanced learning and important function, a great deal of trust is placed in professionals, which is why one of the hallmarks of a profession is adherence to a code of ethics. The professional “professes” or declares adherence to a set of principles that embodies their independence and dedication to the public interest.

Professional independence is not just in relation to commercial considerations but also political influence. The term “liberal” in the liberal professions today most often refers to the self-employed status of the individual professional and/or the self-regulating status of a profession as a group. Not being subject to political directives was particularly important in feudal times. Just as the trades did with the formation of guilds, the professions acquired the right to organise themselves, set their own standards and exclude unqualified practitioners. The development of science, industry and social mobility in the 19th century contributed to a rise in the “professionalisation” of occupations: the development of more formal training paths and specialisation, and the restriction of areas of activity to those with specific qualifications. This trend has continued into the 20th century, to the point that some commentators consider ours to be the age of the professional or the “expert”.

How do translation and interpreting measure up against the “liberal” ideal of a professional? There’s no question that an interpreter in a medical or legal setting is performing a public service and is in a position of trust and responsibility demanding high ethical standards. It’s clear as well that translation and interpreting in general benefit society, even if not every individual translation or interpreting assignment makes a clear contribution to the greater good. Translators and interpreters are certainly relied on for their integrity and discretion as much as their skill. Many of my clients would have the skill to produce an extract translation of their own official documents, for example, but they would lack my “profession” of its accuracy, as an identifiable and accountable member of an accredited group. It’s notable that the traditional trinity of liberal professions – divinity, law and medicine – are all characterised by famously strict confidentiality obligations, and this is also one of the key tenets of our own code.

The classifications under which occupational data is collected agree on the status of our occupation. Both the Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO) and the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) classify interpreters and translators as professionals.



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Neither classification refers to the notions of public service or ethical standards in their definition of a professional, stressing instead the intellectual, scientific or creative nature of the work and the relatively high skill levels required.

What about education and qualifications? Translation and interpreting are currently taught in both “vocational” training institutions (TAFEs) and universities in Australia, but as we all know, the de facto entry requirement to the translating and interpreting profession in Australia is accreditation from NAATI, a government body. It is obtained by passing an examination, starting at a “paraprofessional” level in the case of interpreters. The professionalisation of translation and interpreting faces a tension, or a balance to be struck, between developing higher and more specialised levels of qualification at one end to ensure the best possible service, and maintaining a minimal entry point at the other end in order to be able to meet community needs in situations where access to higher education may be difficult or simply not practical – thus in order to offer the “best possible service” given the resources at hand. As has been pointed out in the recent report on improving NAATI testing (**Improvements to NAATI testing: Development of a conceptual overview for a new model for NAATI standards, testing and assessment**, November 2012, prepared by Sandra Hale with contributions from others), whether the entry path to the translation and interpreting profession is a formal university education or a testing system depends to a large extent on whether the country in question is host to large immigrant and refugee populations. The report also points out that both “ends” can work together and help each other in contexts where there is a mix of needs. Some sociologists have argued that it is more useful to think of occupations as more or less “professionalised” in specific ways rather than simply being or not being a profession.

It may be that in translation and interpreting, the process of professionalisation is an internal and repeated cycle, without this having to compromise progress at the “top end”.

It probably goes without saying that a lot in the understanding of the liberal professions bears the mark of social divisions and class attitudes to things like money and trade. Our understanding of the different aspects of professionalism has evolved as society has become more open and democratic, and some distinctions are no longer clear-cut. We would no longer assume that a university-educated person is more broad-minded or civic-minded than others, for example. Ethical codes are as much a feature of trades associations as professional associations, and always have been. We are not really tradespeople (because our skills are not manual), but we can’t afford not to have technical skills, specifically technological skills. We are not really business people, in the ways that Louis pointed out, but we can’t afford not to have “business skills” such as the ability to promote ourselves, price and sell our work, keep accounts, understand the market and develop good relationships with customers. There is certainly no conflict between the public service model of the professions and a concern with appropriate remuneration. Profiteering is as frowned on now as it ever was, but we no longer live in an era when having to earn an income is a sign of a drop in class in itself.

When we say we are professionals, we take something from both the “liberal” and the “making a living” senses. We mean that we have skills, qualifications and standards that deserve respect and should not be compromised, and we also mean that those skills should be recognised through appropriate financial reward.

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