

Quality criteria and success factors for heritage interpretation

During the Interpret Europe Conference 2016 in Mechelen, the *workshop Quality Criteria and Success Factors for Heritage Interpretation* was held by the Swedish Centre for Nature Interpretation's Per Sonnvik and Lena Malmström as part of the conference's InHerit strand. The conference also constituted the finale of the InHerit project. The workshop was joined by 18 participants from countries all over Europe including Greece, Italy, Denmark, Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Poland and Malta.

There was a short introduction to the Swedish Centre for Nature Interpretation (SCNI), which is one of the nine partners of the InHerit project. A centre for development and competence resource for heritage interpreters in Sweden, the SCNI was inaugurated in 2007 by the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency and works with interpretation for both natural and cultural heritage.

At the outset of the workshop, all participants were asked to think of an occasion when they experienced very good heritage interpretation and write down what, in their views, signifies quality and competence within heritage interpretation. The notes were to be used later during the workshop.

An overview of the InHerit project and its results followed. One of the project's main achievements is the development of a heritage interpretation competence profile, which can be used as a reference framework in the professional field of heritage interpretation. The project defines competence as "a person's ability to perform a particular task or activity in a specified range of real world contexts". In order to have those abilities one need to have a particular combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes. The competence profile has defined areas of competence: research, planning, personal delivery, multimedia delivery, evaluation, promotion, management and training. In each area competences are described according to interpretation context and qualification level, which go along with the European Qualification Framework (EQF).

EQF is a translation tool that helps communication and comparison between qualifications systems in Europe. Its eight common European reference levels are described in terms of learning outcomes: knowledge, skills and competences. Learners, graduates, providers and employers can use these levels to understand and compare qualifications awarded in different countries and by different educational and training systems.

Participants were given a handout summarizing the competence profile. First they were asked to look at the short description of what kind of heritage interpreters the EQF level 5 is intended for. Then they were asked to look more closely at a specific competence area at that level: personal delivery.

The way the project describes competence was summarized in the picture below (Figure 1) that was put up on the wall.

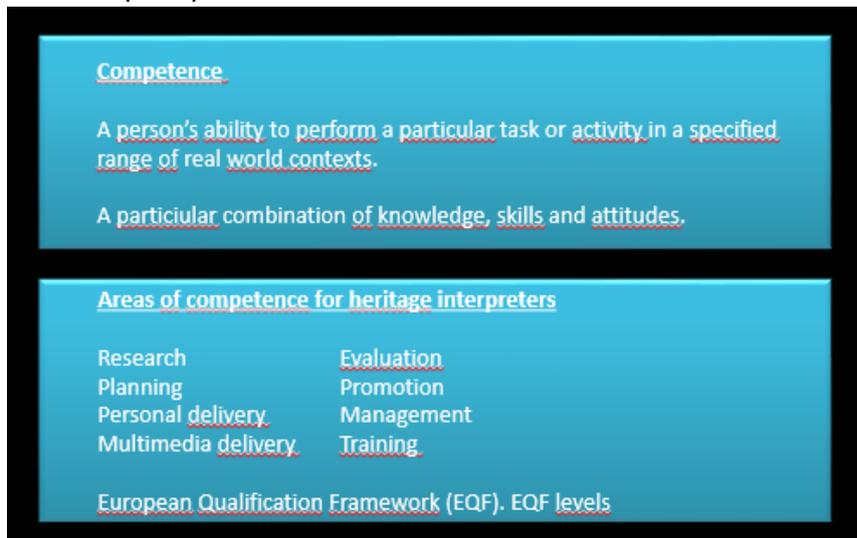


Figure 1

The participants were then asked to place their own post-it-statements about competence onto the picture, where they felt that they fitted best with what was written on the picture. Most notes were placed on the core competence areas: research, planning, personal delivery and multimedia delivery.

From the notes one can conclude that the workshop participants thought that competence within heritage interpretation is focussed mainly on communication with visitors. Their statements about competence related mainly to the interpreter being able to interrelate, facilitate and socialize with visitors in order to help them to reflect, learn, experience and connect to the heritage and engage in it.

While much focus was placed on personal delivery, there were also a few notes on media delivery. Some workshop participants focused on planning and using themes and messages. Some participants also thought that competence within heritage interpretation needs to focus on training and promotion/marketing.

After a short summing up of the post-it notes exercise, the participants were asked to take a stand on the following statement: "Is the result of the InHerit project, such as the competence profile, leading to quality in heritage interpretation?" They were asked to place themselves somewhere along an imaginary line on the floor, where one end represented that *I agree with that statement* and the other end *that I do not agree*. The participants ended up being quite evenly spread out along the line. Several participants that agreed with the statement felt that the competence profile reflected the competence within the field of heritage interpretation quite well and that the profile seems useable. Some that did not agree highlighted that it is

difficult to quantify demands on quality and competence since that depend so much on each situation.



The exercise led to a discussion about the relevance of a common European system for competence and quality and whether it work to use the competence profile in the participants' countries.

Mentioned here was the importance of not over-regulating the system or making it to academic. All systematizations have their limitations. Most of all, it is very difficult in any framework, such as this one or the EQF, to fully capture and visualise the heart and soul of interpretation: our beliefs, attitudes, inspiration, enthusiasm, etc. There are many aspects that are hard to pin down and that cannot be defined in any framework, but that are very important (if not key) to quality and competence in heritage interpretation. Moreover, what makes a fantastic guide in Greece does not necessarily work as well in another country.

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InHerit, the Grundtvig Multilateral Project for professional development of heritage interpreters, delivers a competence profile, a course curriculum and training material for heritage interpreters. Full texts are available on the project website. Follow the development of InHerit on: www.interpretingheritage.eu



Project partners

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This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This communication reflects the views only of the InHerit consortium, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information therein.