

TecDoc-Net Colloquium for professional education and training of technical communicators in Europe

9 April, Rome

Delegates of the TCeurope member organisations and partners of the TecDoc-Net project met in Rome to present project results, exchange their expertise in the area of professional education and training of technical communicators and discuss current topics.

The topics of overriding interest can be summarised in the following questions:

- 1. What are the parameters that determine the current situation and future challenges of the profession ?**
- 2. What are the consequences for education and training ?**
- 3. How can inter-European knowledge transfer be continued and improved ?**
- 4. What will be the future role of the network and TCeurope ?**

These questions can be seen from three different angles:

- The specific situation in the different countries
- TC within Europe
- TC on the international market

1. What are the parameters / dimensions that determine the current and future challenges of the profession ?

TC as a field of activity and a profession is characterised by several particularities: It can be basically integrated in two large fields: the technical/engineering field and the communication/language field. Within these two fields, TC comprises a number of specific tasks that relate to a wide range of disciplines. This means that TC is very specific and, at the same time, multidisciplinary. Apart from this, TC is done in almost all industrial branches. Despite this, the importance of TC is usually underestimated within manufacturing companies. The profession is starting to be recognised in the industry in the UK and Germany (the countries with the largest TC organisations). In most countries, TC is not recognised as a profession. Formal recognition by the responsible public authorities and recognition in the industry is thus the overriding objective of the national organisations in this context.

Although there are common basic characteristics, the actual job profile differs from one country to another. The current situation in Europe is still very diverse. There are great differences between educational systems, programmes, national markets and the requirements of the industry on the labour market. For TC within Europe, harmonisation and common standards are the big issue. The systems will converge little by little but it will take years. The guidelines provide a starting point and a common basis for harmonisation. This will also contribute to the competitiveness of the European industry on the global market. Globalisation is the next great challenge that the profession has to face. The internationalisation of large businesses bring about an increasing demand for TCs in many countries. Work processes become more complex and international. For TCs this means a constant need for further training and a significant increase of the localisation market. The general shift on the global market towards countries like China and India seems to threaten the European industry. The European specialists will, however, remain competitive provided they adapt to the new requirements through constant further training. Specialisations will shift, tasks will be distributed differently but not all the work will be done in India only because labour costs are lower there. There are other factors such as cultural aspects etc. Not only globalisation but also the technological developments oblige TCs to keep pace with the state of the art. Developments in technology and in work processes are so fast, that things will hardly ever consolidate. Therefore, educational institutions as well as TC associations have to be flexible and to adapt constantly to the evolving environment.

2. What are the consequences for education and training ?

The role of universities and other educational institutions is changing from being a mere public service to becoming service companies who have to compete with others. The mentioned trends represent challenges for educational institutions but also a vast market with new opportunities. When providing training opportunities, educational institutions have to take into account these parameters: globalisation, the evolution of the national markets, changes in work processes and technological developments. To market their programmes, universities have to make sure that these meet the requirements of the national market. The scope and structure of the programme play an important role. Instead of implementing a full study programme it may be more suitable to create modules at undergraduate level that can be re-used and re-combined with courses in other disciplines. Downsizing can be another strategy: A BA degree is sufficient to qualify students for work and from the view point of the industry it is more affordable and convenient to hire a graduate at BA level than at MA level. An investigation on how many high trained and low trained staff will be needed in the next years could be very useful.

Technical Communication usually seems very specific and less attractive to young people than other subjects. The subject becomes more attractive when it is linked to multimedia, information design, communication, engineering sciences, marketing, etc. Several cases have shown that it helps just to rename the programme into e.g. "Text design". TC is integrated in two large fields: Technical fields/engineering and non-technical fields/communication/languages. Therefore it makes sense to join subjects, e.g. languages plus sciences or technological/legal subjects or engineering sciences plus languages/communication. A specific focus of the programme, e.g. on management or information development aspects enhance future career perspectives of the students. TC programmes can also be focused on comparative stylistics which are very important and usually not covered sufficiently.

New study programmes and courses

In the scope of the TecDoc-Net project, new study programmes and courses were developed that take into account the national and regional particularities. Eric Schoop (Technische Universität Dresden) and Zygmunt Drazek (Uniwersytet Szczecin) developed a concept of a scalable qualification programme in Technical Communication for Poland. The development of this concept was motivated by the growing integration of business in Poland and Germany that brings about an increasing demand for harmonised qualifications. The objective of the concept was to derive qualification structures and contents for TC in Poland comparable to Germany using existing teaching cooperation between TU Dresden and Uniwersytet Szczecin as well as expertise in distance learning and e-learning. To reach this goal, the information gathered during the first project stage on the situation in Germany and Europe was evaluated and a market analysis for Poland was made. The educational system in Poland is very complex and at this moment there are no programmes in Technical Communication. This was the starting point for the development of a curriculum for a Bachelor of Science programme, the development of a post graduate programme and the compilation of material for distance learning. Furthermore an Internet portal for students and teaching staff was created. The next steps planned for the future will be to draft a business model, to build up cooperation with additional partners, to evaluate the first semester of the courses, to refine and implement formally the Bachelor of Science and to develop an Executive Master programme in English language for engineers that will be offered in Dresden. The programme is focused on engineers because due to the regional economic situation, there is more demand for graduates in engineering studies with additional communication competencies than for communication specialists.

The post graduate programme "Additional qualification in Information Management and Technical Communication" is an on-site week-end course given in Szczecin in Polish language with a duration of 6 months. The Bachelor of Science programme "ImTeKo" ("Information Management in Technical Communication") is a distance learning course given

in German language for students of Uniwersytet Szczecin with a duration of 4 years. The planned Executive Master programme will be a combination of weekly on-site courses and virtual classroom techniques. The post graduate course and the Executive Master programme are both addressed to graduates of engineering sciences.

Another Master programme, the first study programme in TC in the Netherlands, was developed at the University of Twente, under the direction of Michaël Steehouder. In accordance with the job profile in the Netherlands where TC is not exclusively confined to technical products but also comprises the government sector (e.g. tax forms), the medical sector (e.g. instructions for the use of medicine), the programme encompasses the following domains: organisational communication, marketing communication, health communication, ITC and new media, technical communication. It is divided into a pre-Master programme and the actual Master programme, the latter of which comprises courses on knowledge management, user support, interface and interaction design, science and business journalism, communication of service organisations as well as a research and thesis project. The target groups are graduates in social sciences. The focus is thus much more on the communicational than on the engineering aspects which corresponds to the specific economic situation in the Netherlands. There are, compared to Germany for instance, much less large manufacturing companies.

Certification

Although there are new programmes being developed, the existing offer is far from covering the need for trained technical communicators in Europe. Even in a country like Germany with a relatively long tradition in the field of TC, 80 % of professionals performing TC tasks have no formal qualification in this field. In this situation, certification may become an important instrument to define and assure qualification standards. For all those TCs who are trained on the job, certification schemes organised by the national societies are a way to achieve formal qualification. This is of great importance in countries where degrees and titles are an important career factor (e.g. in Germany), and, obviously, less significant in countries where formal proofs of professional development are not necessarily required (e.g. in Finland). Certification schemes are currently operating in the UK, in Germany and in Sweden. The Swedish scheme is, however, a scheme for self-assessment that has little weight for the industry. The scheme in the UK shall be reviewed and re-organised according to the European TecDoc-Net guidelines. An example for an operating certification scheme is the programme organised by tekomp in Germany. The programme is basically divided into three parts: counselling, qualification and certification. Candidates can consult an expert to assess their level of competence and to define which skills and competencies they have to develop further. They can acquire the relevant knowledge in courses offered by a platform of private training institutes and universities. The core competencies and related building blocks are listed in the tekomp guidelines for education and training of technical communicators. When the candidates are sure to have covered all the required subjects and acquired all the knowledge that is necessary, they present a written assignment and pass an oral examination. For organisations who wish to implement their own certification scheme, the TecDoc-Net guidelines provide all the relevant information on the core competencies.

The TecDoc-Net guidelines “Professional education and training of technical communicators in Europe”

Seen from the European viewpoint, the variety of degrees and qualification standards is still so great that comparability is difficult. This represents an obstacle to mobility and the creation of a homogeneous European labour market in the field of TC. Education is, however, changing due to Bologna Treaty that will bring about the implementation of Bachelor and Master schemes and the introduction of ECTS throughout Europe. This will contribute to harmonisation and transparency but, with regard to the qualification of TCs, is not sufficient. The European guidelines provide the basis for future Europe-wide qualification standards. In this document, the diversity of educational programmes, degrees, qualifications and job profiles were brought on a common denominator. Descriptions made in different documents published by the national associations, expertise of TC specialists, researchers and educational experts and results of investigations made during the project merged into a

common document. The document gives an overview on the current situation of education and training of TCs in Europe, existing ways of qualifying, the current situation of the profession, the job profile including current and foreseeable future developments as well as a detailed and comprehensive description of personal aptitudes, core competencies, specialist competencies and important related competencies on three different levels: entry level, professional level and expert level. The guidelines are unique because they provide information that can be applied throughout Europe and by all the parties concerned: By employers for job descriptions and the assessment of the qualification of their staff, by students to choose technical communication as their future profession, by technical communicators to self-assess their competencies, by the national organisations to evaluate and re-organise existing certification schemes or develop new certification schemes as well as by educational institutions. The document paves the way for the development and implementation of new study and training programmes, for Europe-wide qualification standards and for the recognition of technical communication as a profession in its own right in all European countries.

3. How can inter-European knowledge transfer be continued and improved ?

For harmonisation in education and the creation of a European labour market, knowledge transfer is indispensable. There are, however, a series of obstacles that have to be removed. One of the difficulties that arise in countries where there are no existing programmes is the lack of qualified teachers. Train-the-trainer-seminars or workshops that are held by teachers from partner institutions on-site or abroad, either in English or in one of the national languages can help to tackle this problem. Language barriers are, however, an important obstacle for mobility of teaching staff. Like in the case of TU Dresden and Uniwersytet Szczecin, a teachers exchange and bi-lingual courses (German with simultaneous translation by elder students into Polish) can be a practicable solution, not only in regions located close to a border. In any case, knowledge transfer between countries and institutions is essential. The creation of the data base of educational institutions and programmes on the TecDoc-Net web site was a first step. As a second step, the partners envisage to create a pool of curricula and learning materials in the original languages that the interested institutions can translate in their national languages when needed.

Exchange programmes for students and teachers are another way of cooperating. Universiteit Twente and Fachhochschule Hannover agreed on a students exchange. Courses taken by students at Universiteit Twente are recognised in Hannover and vice-versa, and students of each of the two universities are admitted to write their thesis at the partner university. Fachhochschule Hannover was the first university of applied sciences in Germany where a full study programme in Technical Communication was implemented. In September 2005, a Bachelor and a Master programme will start; the Bachelor programme with a duration of three years and the Master programme with a duration of two years, part-time. Furthermore, there is a so-called "Tele-course", an Internet-based distance learning course that could be easily shared with other universities. A joint Internet-based distance learning scheme to which students of all the partner universities of the network have access could be developed in a future project.

What will be the future role of the network and TCeurope ?

The project showed that in the years to come, information and knowledge exchange within Europe will remain the main purpose of the network. Knowledge transfer to non-European countries can be taken into account when harmonisation within Europe is achieved. TCeurope will be the main actor and assume the leading role in the networking activities.

The overriding objectives that crystallize for the future are:

- On the national level: recognition of the profession
- On the European level: harmonisation and Europe-wide qualification standards
- On the international level: competitiveness

These goals require the development and implementation of study and training programmes in conformity with the TecDoc-Net guidelines, awareness-building in the industry as well as lobbying in the relevant public institutions. To disseminate the job profile further and to obtain official recognition, it will be necessary to contact the national labour agencies and relevant ministries.

Future cooperation is envisaged for the following tasks:

Train teaching staff

Remove language barriers (Content is there but mainly in the national languages. The main issue is to find ways to finance translations)

Organise exchange programmes for teachers, researchers and students. (This requires agreements on mutual recognition of courses and degrees)

Organise the Exchange of teaching materials

Define a common "pick-list" of modules for teachers and students

Create a common e-learning environment

Develop e-learning course modules in several languages

Create a virtual discussion group



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