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What is the place of interpretation in UK postgraduate education?

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This brief article attempts to summarise the key themes associated with courses delivering aspects of interpretation as well as offering a comment on the place of interpretation at postgraduate level in UK higher education. Deliberately, no specific institutions are mentioned and a number of well-known websites are available where a potential applicant can review the merits of institutions which they might be considering.

The courses which contain elements of interpretation education continue to broadly divide between those centring upon the natural or cultural and heritage environments. Courses concentrating upon the natural environment tend to lie within Schools of Biological or Environmental Sciences, Geography, Tourism, Planning or Rural Development and tend to focus upon aspects of environmental management and modelling, biodiversity monitoring, sustainability as well as more broadly rural land use, tourism, leisure studies and the 'green economy'.

Cultural and heritage-based courses largely exist within Schools of Archaeology, History, Education, Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities and Museum Studies. Courses which offer these specialisations are often explicitly aligned with the work of museums and galleries, heritage and archaeological landscapes as well as cultural and visitor centres. Courses focused upon museum studies also frequently blend elements of natural and cultural interpretation.

Within these courses, the field of interpretation manifests itself in a variety of forms from content with a single module of study focusing upon visitor management, personal interpretive skills and/or non-personal interpretation to courses offering typically two or three dedicated modules each focusing upon a particular aspect of interpretation such as the interpretive planning process, media design as well as media and programme evaluation. There are also a small number of courses where interpretation is a more dominant or indeed the dedicated theme.

In attempting to explore some of the key components of these courses more fully, it would appear that the principles and philosophy of interpretation, the types of interpretive media as well as the 'experience itself' are the most common topics of study. The evaluation of media or programmes as well as marketing and social media also seem to be widely covered as does the design of non-personal

interpretive materials. The role of interpretation as a visitor management tool appears in some of the environmental courses. The alignment of topics such as: learning and communication theory; ethnography, culture and audience diversity; bid writing and project management; volunteer management; certification and accreditation of the profession as well as a broader commentary on the range of issues facing the modern interpreter proved more difficult to identify.

The field of interpretation continues to develop and mature and the education sector does need to continue to refresh and update its courses to ensure that they continue to fully meet the needs of the profession. Consistency in terms of a minimum offering (the development of a 'core curriculum') seems critically important and this could be informed by the agreement at sector level of a core set of skills and competencies for the professional interpreter which is currently being developed through the Grundtvig InHerit Project. Based upon the research undertaken for this article, an update to the existing directory of 'recognised' courses would also seem to be of significant value to the profession.

In summary, the presence of interpretation within so many postgraduate courses is encouraging but also reinforces the importance through these courses of formalising the study of the profession to ensure that graduates have the skills necessary to provide meaningful interpretation which entertains, informs and educates visitors.

(573 words)

Useful sources of further information

UCAS Postgraduate courses: <https://www.ucas.com/ucas/postgraduate>

Find a Masters degree: <http://www.findamasters.com>

Graduate Prospects: <http://www.prospects.ac.uk/>

The Masters Comparison Directory: <http://www.masterscompare.co.uk/>

Grundtvig InHerit Project: <http://www.interpretingheritage.eu/en>