

Henter, S. (2016). How Happy are Translators with their Studies? *Current Trends in Translation Teaching and Learning E*, 3, 24–66.

## **HOW HAPPY ARE TRANSLATORS WITH THEIR STUDIES?**

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### **Abstract**

Although the translation industry is thriving with steady growth and a value of several billion Euros, many translators in Europe seem to hardly be able to make a living of their profession. In many countries, the average income of a freelance translator would actually be below the poverty threshold. The gap between market requirements and the actual skills of translators seems to be quite obvious. Many complain of not having the necessary technical knowledge and of lacking business skills. What conclusions can be drawn on the gaps between needed and actual skill set among translators analyzing how happy they are with the subjects they have studied at university?

Key words: University studies, translation skills, educational satisfaction, skills gap, lack of knowledge, market requirements

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The translation industry is one of the few that were not heavily affected by recessions in the last 7 years. According to Gillespie (2012), the translation industry had an estimated worth of \$33.5 billion in 2012. A report by IbisWorld (2015) states that translation services are expected to keep growing and reach \$37 billion in 2018. Although the United States represent the largest market for translation services, Europe is a close second.

Both Krassny (2014) and Nilssen (2014) mention the translation industry in their lists of the most (economically) interesting industries in which to start a business. In addition, *The Language Guide for European Business* (2011) reveals that more than 2 out of 5 small and medium sized companies in Europe are involved in some kind of international activity, and one quarter of those businesses export goods to other countries. The ELAN study (2006) shows that many of them are losing money because they are still lacking linguistic strategies for their communication with foreign markets, and that—apart from acquiring language skills inside the company—includes the help of professional translators. So how is it that young translators often

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struggle to find work as in-house linguists or get positioned as freelancers, although the demand for linguistic services is quite high in comparison with other industries? Why do so many complain that they don't have enough clients or that they can't make a living off the few jobs they get? The Google search "how to find clients as a freelance translator" has nearly 2 million results. Online courses for Translators are in high demand. ProZ, a platform for freelance linguists, lists 499 courses in the category "Business of Translation and Interpreting" and 209 in "Software, tools & computing". As Liu (2015) puts it "(...) undergraduate programs in translation have raised considerable concern over their applicability to industry practice, since many graduates find themselves unprepared professionally for working in the translation industry". Obviously, there seems to be a gap between the industry requirements and the skills of recently graduated translators.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

Our idea was to simply ask translators how happy they are with their studies, what they liked and what they did not, and how far their studies have helped them to do their current job in order to find out where there could exist gaps between the education offered and the perceived value of acquired skills graduated

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translators have. To do this, we created an online survey (Attachment 1) based on the principles established by Ferrando (1992) that we then sent to different translator's associations, universities and colleagues asking for volunteers to respond to our survey. The survey was also published and promoted on social media. We wanted the survey to take no more than three or four minutes to complete in order to achieve a high number of participants. For this reason, we only focused on the main subjects we were interested in:

**1. Demographic Data:**

We asked for the participant's country of birth, country of residence (as we expected that due to our profession many may live abroad), gender, year of birth, native language and education.

**2. Work Related Questions:**

We wanted to know their working languages, specializations and if they were actually currently working as language professionals or not. We were also interested in what they earned, and if they considered that amount to be enough compared to other wages in the country they live in.

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### 3. Education Satisfaction

In the third part of the survey, we wanted to know how happy the participants actually were with their studies. Here, the linguists only had to mark if they agreed/didn't agree/were indifferent, and then in a last section had space for comments about what they personally liked/ disliked about their studies.

## 3. FINDINGS

### 3.1 DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

In the course of three months, we were able to collect 155 answers to our survey from volunteers living in the following European countries:

Table 1: Country of Residence

Country	Country of Residence
UK	49
Spain	40
Germany	18
Italy	7
France	6
Finland	5
Belgium	4

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Hungary	4
Scotland	4
Ireland	2
Poland	2
Portugal	2
Turkey	2
USA	2
Austria	1
Brazil	1
Denmark	1
Egypt	1
Netherlands	1
Rome	1
Sweden	1
Switzerland	1
Total	155

However, for many participants, their country of residence didn't coincide with their country of birth, as there seems to be high mobility for some countries:

Table 2: Country of birth

<b>Country</b>	<b>Country of Birth</b>
Spain	48
UK	39

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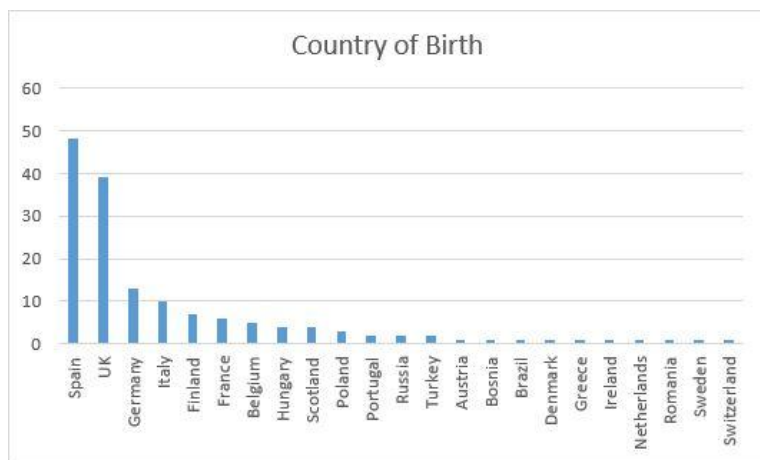
Germany	13
Italy	10
Finland	7
France	6
Belgium	5
Hungary	4
Scotland	4
Poland	3
Portugal	2
Russia	2
Turkey	2
Austria	1
Bosnia	1
Brazil	1
Denmark	1
Greece	1
Ireland	1
Netherlands	1
Romania	1
Sweden	1
Switzerland	1
Total	155

Most of our voluntary participants were from either Spain or the UK. Although 69% said they still live in their country of birth, Spain and the UK are

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inverse in the two tables (48 persons were born in Spain and 39 in the UK but 49 people currently live in the UK while 40 said they lived in Spain), while the number of participants being born and living in the same country stay nearly the same for all other countries. Maybe this hints at a trend of Spanish linguists working abroad.

Fig. 1: Country of Birth





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Fig. 2: Living in Country of Birth

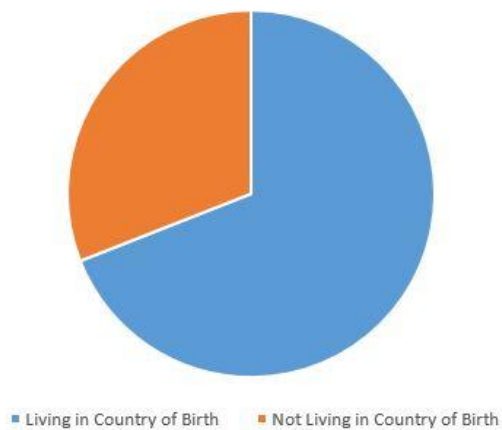
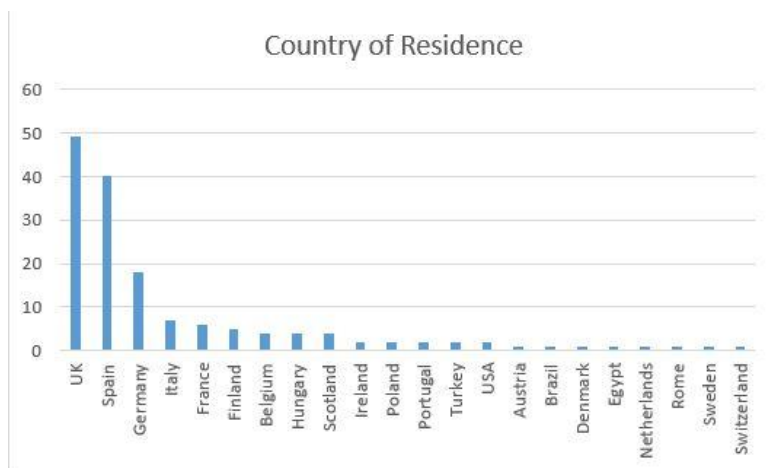


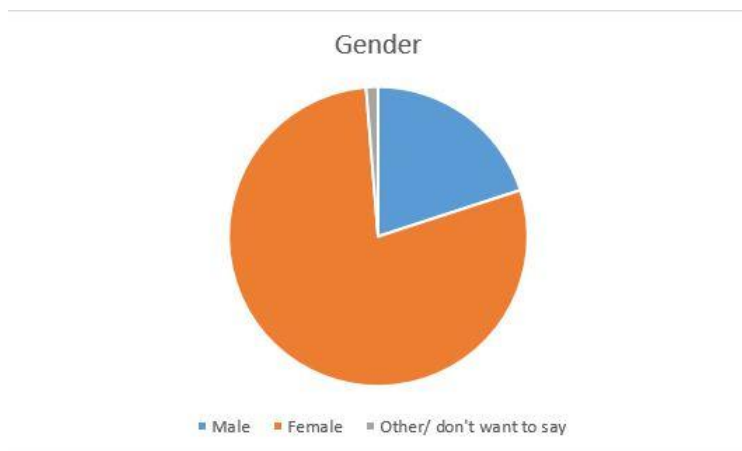
Fig. 3: Country of Residence



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70% of the participants were female, and the average age was 36 years. 57% said they did not hold a Master's or other postgraduate degree. For 26%, English was their native language, while 20% were native Spanish speakers and 9% natively spoke German.

Fig. 5: Gender



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Fig. 6: Native Language

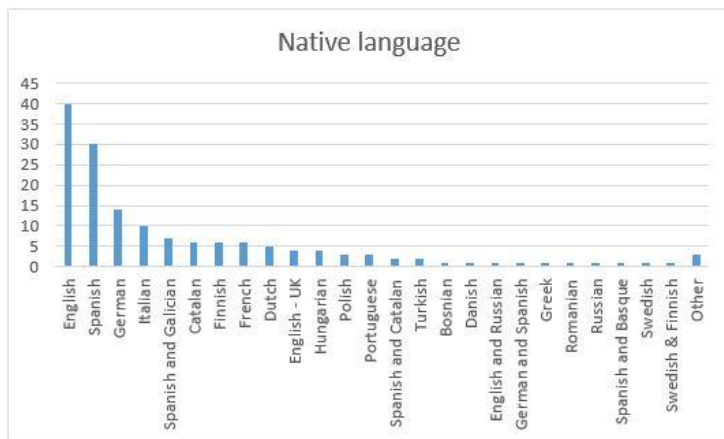
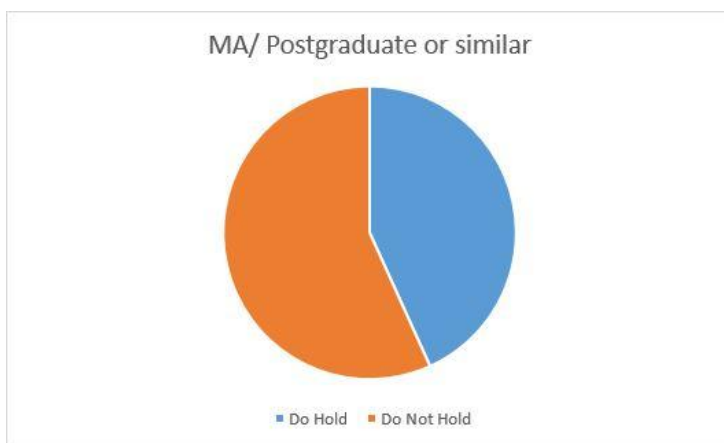


Fig. 7: Have MA/Postgraduate



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### **3. 2 WORK RELATED QUESTIONS**

The most popular working languages were English (29%), French (18%), Spanish (17%) and German (11%). Most said they specialized in three different fields (40%). However, 7% (or 18 people) also said they didn't specialize in anything specific, and 13 people stated they specialized in five or more areas.

The most common specializations were:

- Technical/Engineering 14%
- Medical/ Pharmaceutical 13%
- Literature/ Art 13%
- Marketing 13%
- Legal/ Patents 11%
- Business/ Finance 10%
- Science 8%

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Fig. 7: Most common Specializations

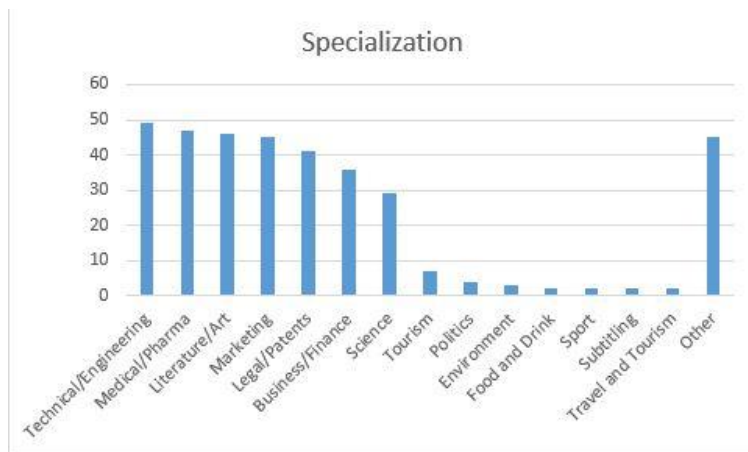
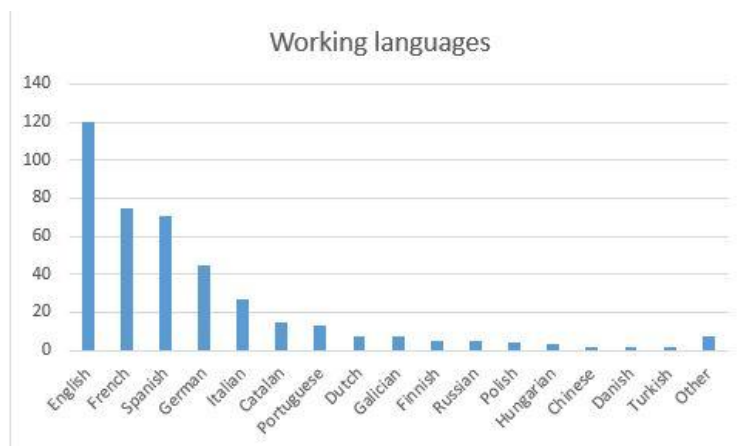


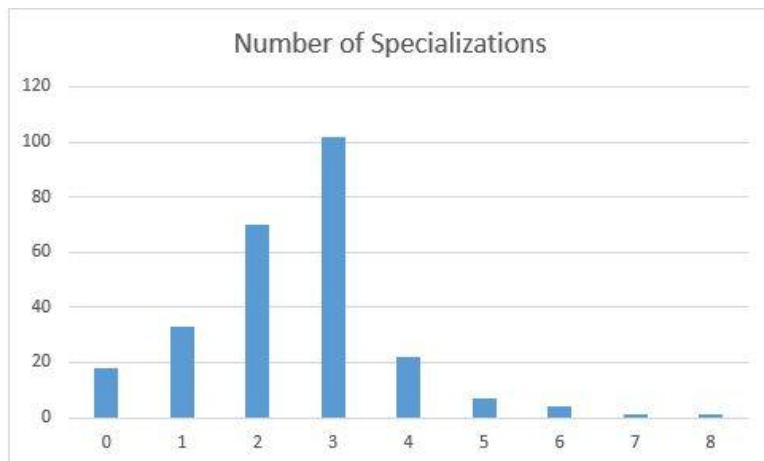
Fig. 8: Working Languages



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48% said they worked as freelance translators/proofreaders and 13% said they worked as freelance translators and interpreters. 11% said they worked as employed translators and 9% said they worked as freelance translators and teachers. Only a few worked in a job that was not related to their studies at all, e.g. as a dancer or bank clerk, and some combined their work as freelancers with other jobs like library assistant or auxiliary nurse.

Fig. 9: Number of Specializations



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Fig. 10: Currently working as



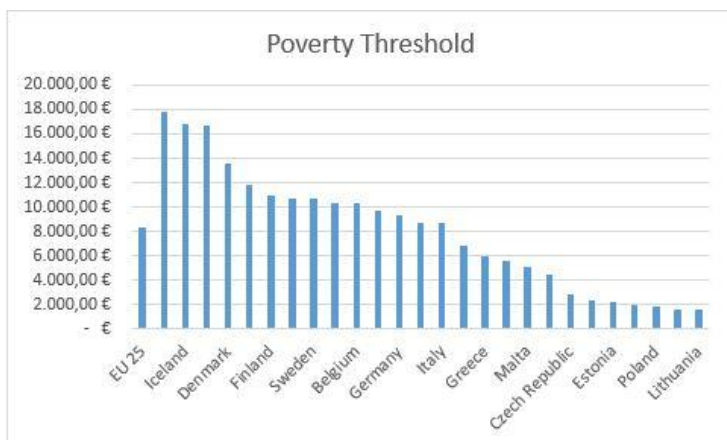
27% said they earned less than 1000 EUR a month and 36% said they earned between 1000 and 2000 EUR. In most European countries this is below the average monthly income, and in many it would actually be below the poverty threshold (Statista, 2016). The total of translators earning less than 2000 EUR a month is 63% of all participants. Only 8% said they earned 2000-3000 EUR gross, which corresponds to an average income in many European countries (Tomasz Nowak Consulting, 2005). Only 16% earned more than that. 46% said that what they earned was not enough to live in their respective country.

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Fig. 11: Earnings



Fig. 12: Poverty Threshold





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Fig. 13: Perceived value of earnings

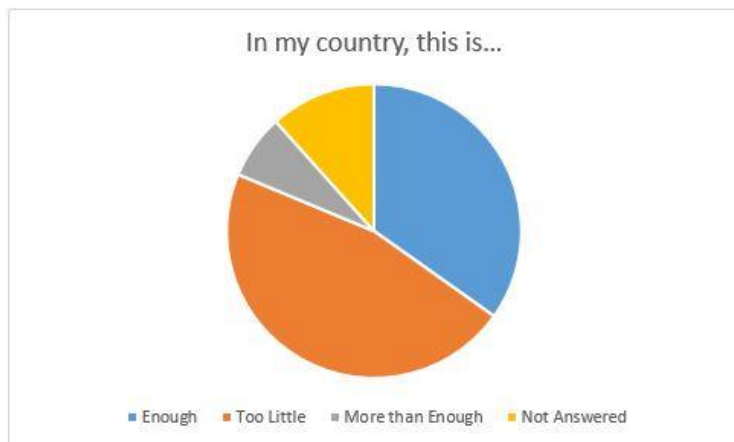
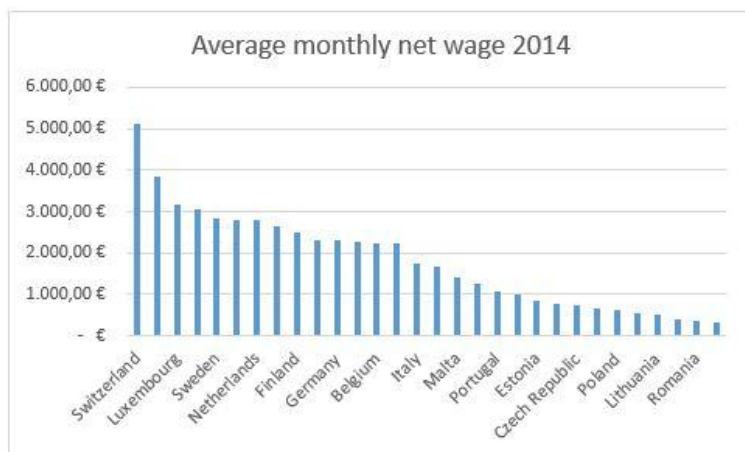


Fig. 14: Average monthly net wage

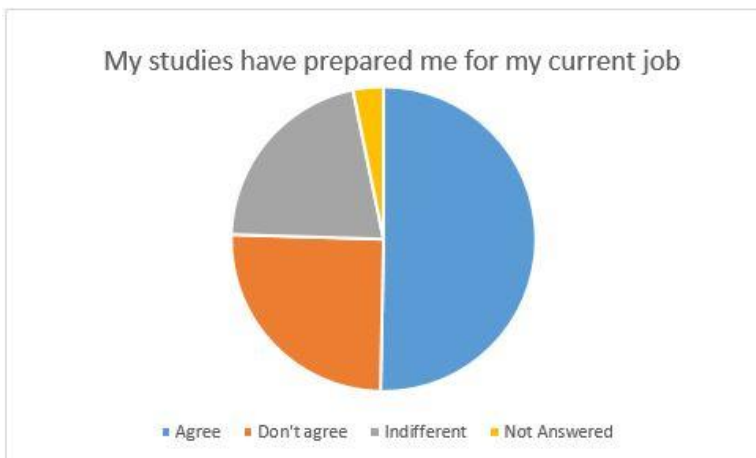


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### 3. 3 EDUCATION SATISFACTION

50% of participants would say that their studies have prepared them for their current job, but only 37% said that the subjects taught were related to real-life market needs and only 46% were able to choose some kind of specialization during their studies. However, 70% agreed that their teachers were well prepared. Only 14% said they had acquired skills to run a business and work as a freelancer. 39% learned how to use CAT tools during their studies. 54% said that, all in all, they were happy with their university education; 31% said they would change most of the subjects they had; and 61% said they would choose the same studies again.

Fig. 15: Studies have prepared student for their current job



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Fig. 16: Relation to market needs

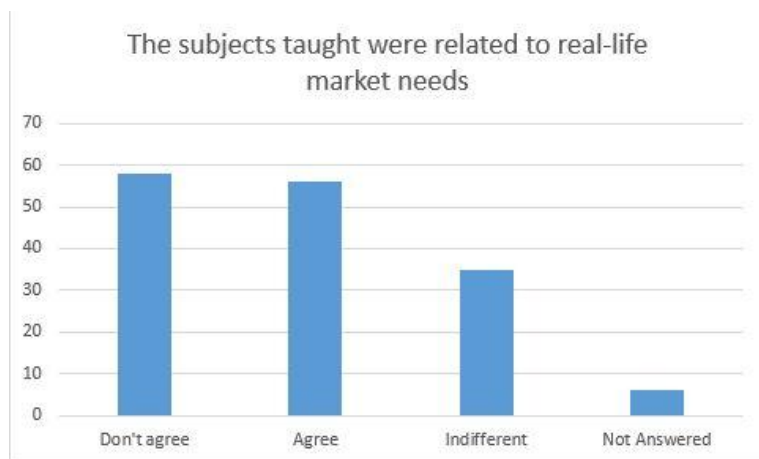
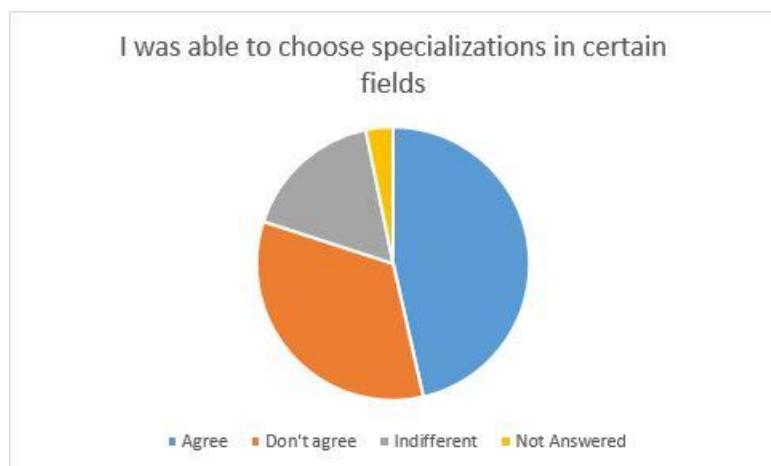


Fig. 17: Possibility to choose specialization



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Fig. 18: Student has learned CAT tools

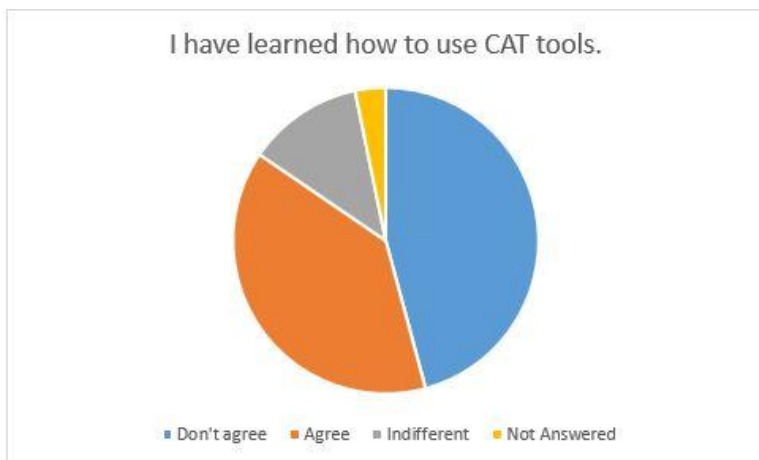
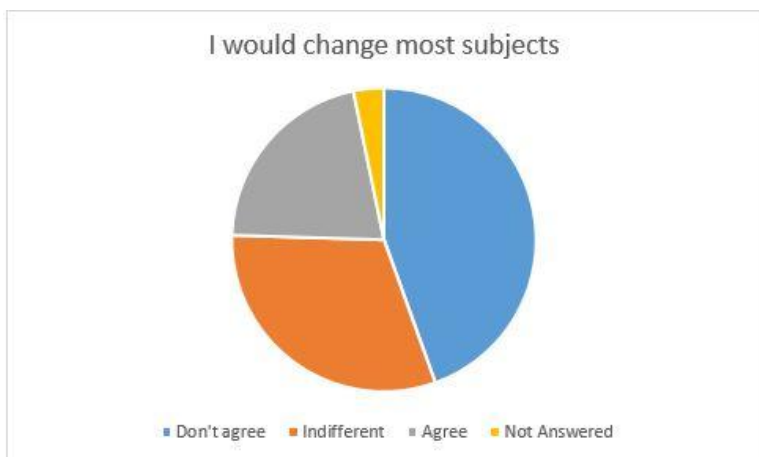


Fig. 19: Student would change most subjects



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Fig. 20: Teachers well prepared

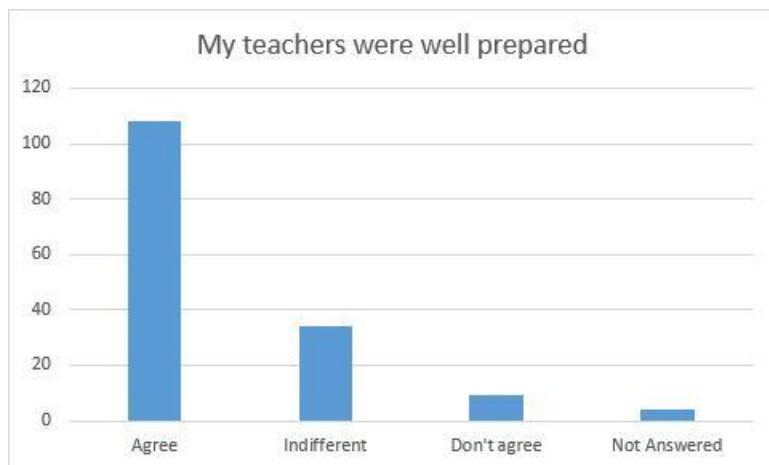
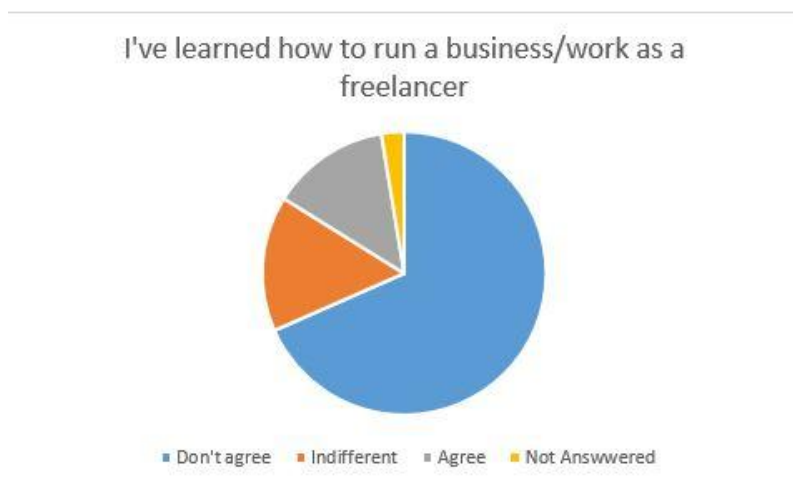


Fig. 21: Run a business/ be a freelancer



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Fig. 22: Student was all in all happy with studies

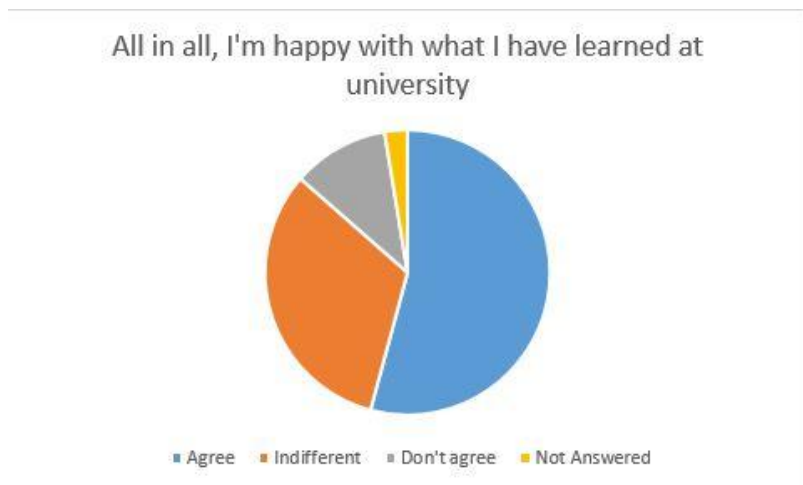
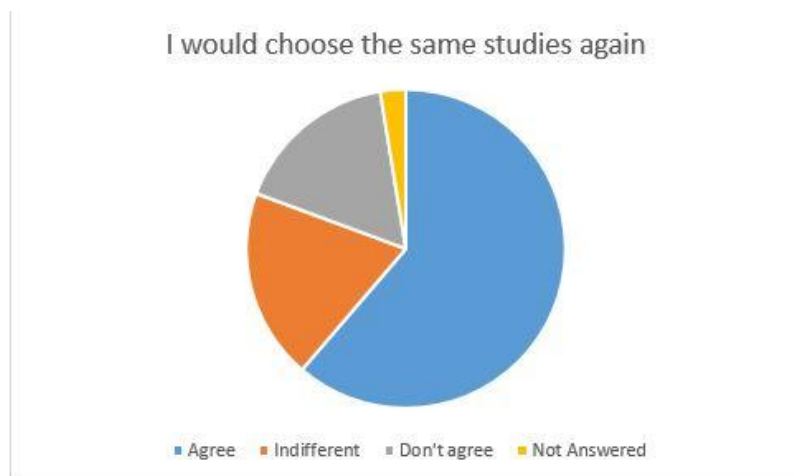


Fig. 23: Student would choose the same studies again



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## 4. RESULTS ANALYSIS

To respond to our initial question of how happy translators are with their studies, the immediate answer is most are content with the university studies they have chosen. 70% stated their teachers were well prepared, 54% said they were happy with what they had learnt at university, and 61% would choose the same studies again. In the countries with most respondents, there seemed to be a slight difference in the percentage of respondents who stated they were happy with their studies (UK 67%; Spain 43%, Germany 56%), but, of course, the sample size per country is small and can only be considered a hint in a certain direction and not representative data.

Table 3: Percentage of volunteers stating they were happy with their studies per country

<b>Country of residence</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Indifferent</b>	<b>Don't agree</b>	<b>Not Answered</b>	<b>Agree %</b>
UK	33	11	4	1	67%
Spain	17	15	6	2	43%
Germany	10	5	2	1	56%
Scotland	3	0	1	0	75%
Finland	3	2	0	0	60%
France	3	3	0	0	50%

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In the last section of the survey, where participants could comment freely on what they had liked or disliked the most about their university studies, many stressed interesting subjects and good relationships with teachers and classmates.

*You learn the basics about translation and you get to know a lot of people with the same interests as you. Even though the subjects are not market-oriented, teachers try to help you and give you extra information which is not included in the program.*

**Study Participant (living in Spain, born 1991)**

*The course was good, the teachers were nice and the facilities were very good.*

**Study participant (living in the UK, born 1986)**

*The Postgraduate course in Literary Translation I took was well-organised and very interesting. It was mainly practical, with a general overview of the theory behind translation. The teachers are all professional translators, so they have an idea of the real market, and they were quite honest about the (small) chances of being able to actually work as translators (let alone make a living out of translation). They highlighted our strengths and weaknesses well, so that we could work on them and improve.*

**Study participant (living in the UK, born 1982)**



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*Everything... I love these special arts... I love having conversation about interpreting and translation... During my lessons I try to hand down my passion.*

**Study participant (living in Italy, born 1981)**

*I was very happy with my MA for several reasons:*

*- the class sizes were ideal - roughly 15 in the French<>English class*

*- the teachers were mostly part-time lecturers as they also work as translators/interpreters, and so were able to give us practical advice (although we sensed a general unwillingness to discuss rates)*

*- the course covers both institutional and technical translation, as well as the different types of interpreting. There was also an (sic) module on professionalism which covered CVs, covering letters, invoicing and finance, interviews, and so on, as well as guest speakers*

*- there were many events outside of lessons, on topics like starting up as a freelancer or working for the EU*

*- the teachers welcome contact after the MA is over*

**Study participant (living in the UK, born 1990)**

However, when commenting on what they disliked or what was missing during their studies, it also became very clear many would have liked further training in the specific fields of translation

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technologies and entrepreneurship. Meanwhile, the ones who had received education in these areas considered themselves lucky and at an advantage. Another aspect mentioned often was a lack of possible specialization.

*Prospective translators should be taught business/entrepreneurship knowledge because: 1) many become freelancers and 2) although translation falls under the category of Arts and, at least here in Finland, the general attitude is that Arts students are motivated by passion and not money, everyone should learn how to demand a proper price and conditions for their work and not let language service companies dictate these things to us.*

**Study Participant (living in Finland, born 1986)**

*The practical translation modules were very useful, as we could discuss our translations and the possible solutions. Also some modules such as Working as a Translator, where we learn how to develop our own business, and how to deal with clients and other aspects of the business, or Translation Technology, where we learn all about CAT Tools, have been really helpful to learn more about what we can expect after finishing the MA.*

**Study Participant (living in the UK, born 1987)**

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*Had I had not taken a particular optional module on CAT tools, my degree would have given very little practical skills to help me in my career. What is a shame is that this module was not available to all the students on my course. A module like that should be compulsory.(sic)Too mush [sic] focus was given to theory and literary translation; not enough (or none) to translation fields that are widespread in the professional world (etc. commercial, scientific, legal).The lecturers should be able to provide more real-world advice on how to get work afterwards (either as a freelancer or otherwise); on the different careers available afterwards.[sic]Internships should be an essential part of the programme, to ensure that you are more marketable after your degree.*

**Study Participant (living in France, born 1982)**

*Everything. The course was based on literature, we only studied translation in the last year (4th), and the CAT tools used were limited demo versions that eventually expired before the end of the school year! There were no specializations to choose from and no preparation for the "real world".*

**Study Participant (living in Portugal, born 1983)**

*the [sic] purpose seemed to be for all of us to go and work at the EU, nobody really taught us literary translation, no mention was made of how the publishing market works in italy [sic] or how to contact publishing houses, nor was there any possibility of learning technical translation, apart*

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*from some brief not really technical translations. and [sic] nothing was said about how to run a free-lance activity (for example, as for fiscal requirements, which can be very complicated in italy). very [sic] few of my ex fellow students work as translators or interpreters today, they are either teachers or do secretarial work. however[sic], i [sic] graduated in 1985 (no CAT tools existed al [sic] the time, for example) and i [sic] do not know whether things have changed since then.*

**Study Participant (living in Italy, born 1962)**

*I'd add a course Introduction to marketing/accounting for freelance translators.*

**Study Participant (living in Germany, born 1981)**

*I would add practical subjects that are more relevant to the market, how to start as a freelance translator, work opportunities.*

**Study Participant (living in the UK, born 1983)**

Internships and real-life working experience or simulations were also mentioned by several participants as a helpful experience on their way to becoming professional translators.

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*The opportunity to undertake a work placement in the translation industry would have been invaluable. More emphasis on real-life market needs rather than translation theory would have better prepared me for my career.*

**Study Participant (living in the UK, born 1986)**

*I don't want universities to be a place where students are seen as raw material for the economy. That's why I wouldn't want to "streamline" the curricula, but rather add extra-curricula responsibilities: Let people know early on that they will need to keep learning/specialising/working hard. Help them establish ties with associations and experienced translators, so they know who can help them with professional life after graduation.*

**Study Participant (living in Germany, born 1986)**

*Ideally, I would have liked more translation practice with personalised feedback. I have also read that in some universities (French/Spanish) they have set up dummy agencies with students taking on the roles of project manager, translators, editors/proofreaders so that the students can practise the skills required in the industry. I imagine that that is very difficult to organise but sounds great as a second best to finding an internship.*

**Study Participant (living in France, born 1959)**

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## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Two conclusions seem to arise from the analyzed data:

1. Most translators are happy with large portions of their studies.
2. There are several specific fields in which various participants stated they would have liked further training.

Positive aspects that were mentioned nearly throughout were:

1. Interesting study subjects.
2. Well prepared teachers.
3. Good group sizes/ relationship with classmates.

Participants who had received this training also positively discussed the ability to take specialization courses, courses on technology and business administration and participating in internship programs.

Most complaints were regarding three main gaps in the education of translators:

1. Lack of knowledge about business/freelance activity.

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2. Lack of knowledge about technologies (CAT tools, etc.).
3. Lack of available specializations.

These results are similar to those gathered by Vigier Moreno (2010) in whose study Spanish sworn translators stated that the weakest points in their University education were interpretation, taxes, labor market, internships, knowledge about law and economy, how to handle clients, professional reality and informatics.

As this paper stated at the beginning, the translation industry is thriving. Despite this, many freelance translators in Europe do not seem able to make a living out of their profession. Around half of the participants in our survey stated they could hardly keep above the poverty threshold regarding their income compared to European standards. Although university classes are perceived as interesting and useful, after finishing their formal education, there seem to be difficulties for translators in finding and keeping clients, earning a living and positioning themselves in the market. As Vigier Moreno (2010) states regarding the specific case of sworn translators in Spain:

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La formación recibida por los licenciados en TI no parece dedicarse en gran medida a aspectos relacionados con la gestión profesional propia de la actividad de TIJ. Resulta muy desigual la instrucción en cuanto a fiscalidad, facturación, mantenimiento de la cartera de clientes, etc. Además, nuestro análisis revela que el asociacionismo de los TTIJJ, fundamentalmente, y la deontología, en menor medida, no reciben consideración como objetivos de formación.

Also, according to employers, there seems to be a general impression of unpreparedness among young translators:

From a popular utilitarian view, being awarded a bachelor's degree in translation only means that the candidate has fulfilled all the academic requirements and is thus eligible for graduation; more often than not, the graduate will prove incompetent for the actual practice in translation industry.

**Liu (2015)**

University curricula are full of useful and necessary subjects, and in how far business and technology skills should be taught at university is difficult to say. We cannot consider our education as finished when we come out of school, and of course, as professionals, we always have to go on learning new skills on our own. However, there are already schools that, at least, give some practical hints to the



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above mentioned subjects, and the students who can participate in these activities seem to appreciate them a lot.

Apart from whether these things should be included in university curricula or not – which depends very much on the needs and possibilities of every school – what may be an important part is a necessary mind shift in language professionals themselves. Linguists working as freelancers not only need to be specialists in their field, but must also lead their own little enterprise. Every small business must consider these roles and responsibilities, even if there's only one “employee”:

- Marketing & Prospecting
- Operations & Production
- Administration
- Client Services
- Technology
- Finance
- Compliance & Risk Management

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Also Mackenzie (2004) speaks of the different roles of translators:

From the above it is evident that in the translation industry today, the translator's roles require not only linguistic-cultural skills, but also interpersonal skills, since translation is becoming more and more of a team effort. Other skills required, particularly in the context of research and text production, are IT skills. These skills, which are now assumed to a degree not even imaginable in the 1970's or early 80's, include word processing skills, competence in using the tools available to assist the translation process such as translation memory tools, terminology software and the Internet. A further aspect of the translator's task that is often neglected is marketing ability. Without marketing that brings the translation supplier to the notice of the client, the twain may never meet. It may be argued that all of the skills listed above cannot possibly be taught in an undergraduate degree, but it makes sense to prepare students for working life by giving them at least an introduction to these realities.

Many linguists seem to not have the right skill set to manage these effectively, although most will be self-employed after they finish their studies. In addition, many students seem to want to be translators in the literary industry, even though it is clear the specializations that are most needed are in the technical, business and scientific fields. Many participants also mentioned that their respective universities seemed to focus very much on the

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literary field. Others do not seem to specialize in any area at all, as the number of fields that participants specialized in that was most mentioned was three, but there were participants that stated they specialized in up to 8 different areas. As Hurtado (1996) highlights:

La clave de la cuestión reside, a mi juicio, en que la “traducción general” hay que concebirla como la iniciación a la traducción real, que por naturaleza suele ser siempre “especializada” en uno u otro ámbito. Se trata, por consiguiente, de un espacio didáctico donde el estudiante ha de captar los principios fundamentales que rigen la traducción, asumiendo un método de trabajo, que le permita enfrentarse después a los diversos campos de especialización del traductor.

This means that “general translation” is only a didactic concept, while “real” translation is always specialized by definition. Also Martin (2011) affirms the need of specialization:

Everyone in the translation industry seems to agree that translators these days must specialize. There are mainly two reasons why this need has become increasingly apparent in recent years. The first is the exponential expansion of knowledge: there is simply much more to know about any given subject and many new subjects to know. No translator can be expected to have the knowledge required to translate all types of documents well and within a reasonable amount of time.

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Translators need to specialize in a concrete area to be able to effectively work in the profession.

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## **Attachments**

Attachment 1: Survey

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## Survey

Working languages

Specializations

- Literature/Art
- Legal/Patents
- Technical/Engineering
- Science
- Business/Finance
- Medical/Pharma
- Marketing
- Otro:

I am currently working as a...

- translator/proofreader (freelance).
- translator/proofreader (employee).
- interpreter (freelance).
- interpreter (employee).
- teacher.
- Otro:

I earn...

In my country, this is...

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	Don't agree	Indifferent	Agree
My studies have prepared me for my current job.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My teachers were well prepared.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The subjects taught were related to real-life market needs.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I was able to choose specializations in certain fields.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I've learned how to run a business/work as a freelancer.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have learned how to use CAT tools.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
All in all, I'm happy with what I have learned at university.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would change most subjects.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would choose the same studies again.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

What I like most about my studies:

What I would change about my studies/subjects: