# PUBLIC SECTOR INTERPRETING AND INTERCULTURAL MEDIATION IN NORWAY

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## PUBLIC SECTOR INTERPRETERS

### PROFILE

Norway has PUBLIC SERVICE INTERPRETERS

Public service interpreter is the term used in Norway for interpreters working in institutional discourse, i.e., encounters between an institution or the professional representing it and the person(s) seeking the institution’s services’ (Agar 1985). Norwegian official documents accordingly define public service interpreting as interpreting that enables professionals and official servants to hear, guide and inform their clients in the case of language barrier (JPD 2005; NOU 2014, *Interpreting Act under* hearing 2019). The Norwegian definition takes on the perspective of the professional in charge of the institutional encounter, and hereby the responsibility for bridging the language gap instead of ascribing this responsibility to the speaker of the minority language. The Norwegian delineation also embraces courtroom interpreting, since the same interpreters work in the courts and community settings. The term “community interpreting” is not in use in Norway.

Since 2005, interpreters practicing in the Norwegian public sector are listed in Norway’s National Register of Interpreters. The register is transparent and information on the interpreters’ qualifications and contact details are accessible at [www.tolkeportalen.no](http://www.tolkeportalen.no). The register currently has five categories: the top category (1) is reserved for practitioners who have passed both an accreditation exam and completed minimum one semester (30 ECTS) university level training. Categories (2) and (3) display practitioners who have passed the accreditation exam or completed training, respectively. The two bottom categories are for practitioners who have passed an exam on written translation (4) or have passed an oral bilingual vocabulary test (5). To enter categories 4 and 5 contenders must complete a weekend course on interpreting ethics. The categories of the national register are under revision and will from 2021 on, include practitioners with BA in PSI in the top categories.

According to the current register, license and mandate for serving as interpreter in the PSI setting is (a) documented basic bilingual skills and (b) documented knowledge of the interpreters’ code of ethics or area of responsibility in the public sector.

### EMPLOYMENT

The majority of PSI practitioners are freelance and are hired directly from the register (although not a commercial register) or via interpreting service providers, which are municipal or private agencies or generic in-house services of bigger hospitals and asylum institutions. The practitioners’ remuneration is not regulated except for the courts and asylum institutions. Therefore, interpreters’ hourly remuneration varies from € 20 (when hired via agencies) to € 90 (when hired directly by the court). Interpreting expenses are covered by the Norwegian state in all institutional encounters, both in legal and medical settings.

### PRACTICE

All interpreters listed in the National Register are to follow the code of conduct as defined by Norwegian authorities (KAD 1997), that is to render as accurately as humanly possible one person’s speech into another language at the time the speech is made, observe an impartial role and absolute confidentiality. The Norwegian interpreters’ code of conduct explicitly states that they are not to act as cultural mediators or cultural advocates. As mentioned under profile, in the Norwegian market interpreters are not specialized to work in specific settings, and most work both in the ‘community’ and courts or in the conference setting.

### TRAINING

Since 2007, at Oslo Metropolitan University (OsloMet) approximately 1000 students covering 57 working language (in addition to Norwegian) have completed a one year university level basic course (30 ECTS) in the consecutive interpreting of institutional dialogues. Through blended learning the course accepts students living all over Norway and Europe, but the students must have Norwegian as one of their working languages. In addition, approximately 500 students completed up to 90 ECTS, in add-on courses on different interpreting methods such as notetaking, remote interpreting and simultaneous interpreting, and sight interpreting along with courses on individual and cultural variation in interpreting.

Since 2017, Oslo Metropolitan University offers a full BA on Public Sector Interpreting. The BA is organized as blended learning over a four-year trajectory, and includes the aforementioned courses.

### CERTIFICATION

In 1997, Norway established a National Interpreters Certification Exam – NICE (Mortensen 1998, 2012). The NICE is an independent exam that tests the candidates’ practical skills in consecutive interpreting of institutional encounters, both medical and legal. To sit the oral test, the candidates’ must first pass a written component. Hitherto, approximately 3000 candidates in 40 language combinations (where one working language is always Norwegian) sat the test, whereof less than 300 candidates in 30 languages passed. The certification exam’s pass rate is accordingly 10%.

## INTERCULTERAL MEDIATOR

### PROFILE

There is no officially recognized definition for “intercultural mediator” in Norway. The multiplicity of terms in use in reports (Holm-Hansen et al. 2007: 127-131) signify this state of affairs: *naturlig hjelper* (“natural helper”), *minoritetsrådgiver* (“minority advisor”), *kulturveileder* (“cultural guide”), *kulturtolk* (“cultural interpreter”), *kulturfortolker* (“cultural construer”), *linkarbeider* (“link worker”), *helsekommunikator* (“health communicator”).

These functions seem to perform a plethora of different tasks, sometimes including interpreting, and even serving as “role models” for service users from their own country of origin (PROBA 2003).

The function of *linkarbeider* is defined (although vaguely) in some official documents as someone paid to help migrants find their way in the Norwegian society, predominantly in the domains of the social- and healthcare systems and the child welfare services.

### EMPOLYMENT AND PRACTICE

As far as we have been able to establish, cultural mediator is a concept often associated with the Child Welfare Services and some social- and health care settings, where their services are often combined with other job tasks – such as indicated in the below case description. Thus, they predominantly work part time.

The costs of these services are covered by the Norwegian state and municipal budgets, but are often outsourced to private agencies that specialize in the “asylum and migration business”. The costs are never covered by the minority service users, however.

Remuneration to the “cultural mediators” varies, and depends on how they are hired. For example, when hired by the municipality directly, as the case described next show, remuneration offers are between 350 000 NOK to 465 000 NOK per year, depending on the practitioner’s qualifications.

A brief case description serves to illustrate the situation:

In a recent employment announcement from the social services of an Oslo suburb (retrieved online 01-01-2019), we have found the following work description for “cultural interpreter” (*kulturtolk*) in combination with “administrative assistant” where the main qualifications sought are described as follows:

-completed secondary school

-service minded

-some experience from work within the field of cultural sensitivity

-good cultural knowledge

In sum, the qualifications for this type of function are very vague.

### CERTIFICATION

None.

### TRAINING

There is no systematic training for intercultural workers in Norway.

In its program on professionals’ further education OsloMet offers courses on diversity issues for professionals working with people with different cultural backgrounds. The course’s aim is to raise knowledge and understanding of the complexity of identities in the labor market and social life in general in a society characterized by diversity. This path to integration is an alternative solution to employing the function of intercultural workers that is believed to be more sustainable. This means that diversity issues are main streamed and are not treated isolated as issues of “cultural mediation”, which may lead to othering and segregation.

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