# Translation of Personal Official Documents: What Australian Practitioners Say

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**ABSTRACT**

The translation of personal official documents has been, to a great extent, an opaque process: little research has been conducted and, accordingly, little is known about professional practices in this area. The literature and guidelines available tend to be based on the professional experience of the author rather than on research into the wider professional context. In this paper we report the findings of a translator survey conducted in Australia to identify the main challenges translators face, the common practices, and the quality and integrity issues in this area of translation. The findings suggest general agreement on the need for accuracy, completeness and attention to detail, but at the same time some variation in professional practice and in the translators' understanding of quality. While translators are generally confident about their ability to deal with the challenges associated with personal official documents, their responses also indicate a need for specific training and more consistent guidelines and quality assurance processes in this area of translation practice.

**KEYWORDS**

Translation, personal official documents, quality, integrity, security, translator views.

## 1. Introduction

Massive population movements, arising from military conflict, political situations, or economic circumstances, are evident throughout the globe. Australia as both a traditional place of refuge, and a welcoming continent for the economically ambitious, has established a sophisticated infrastructure for attempted regulation of migration flows, while other countries are overtly struggling with elements of settlement and attendant issues of security and integration. One aspect of regulating population flows, assessing risk and encouraging integration is the translation of personal official documents — private administrative, educational or legal documents that refugees and immigrants submit before or upon arrival, and that are then crucial for institutions to establish identity and assess claims and applications.

Personal official documents range from the seemingly mundane (e.g., driver licences) to those critical for identity (e.g., passports, birth, marriage or death certificates), documents related to status (military service, penal clearance, health status, legal status documents) to economically significant documents (educational qualifications, employment or financial documents). While issues of identity and status in home countries is of concern to security and regulatory authorities, equally significant is the recognition of qualifications and economic status if host societies are to gain the benefits of migrants' skills, expertise and capital.

Significantly, these growing population shifts bring radical linguistic diversity, with new waves of migrants using languages little known in the host society and raising issues of competence to translate from these languages. Fuentes Luque (2002: 5), looking at "Translating Official Documents for African Immigrants", warns that "[t]he influx of immigrants from developing countries poses new challenges not only for politicians and social agents, but also for translators, who are confronted with official documents of varied and often unfamiliar ethnic, legal, and cultural backgrounds".

Despite its significance, the translation of personal official documents has received little research attention in comparison to other areas such as technical, audiovisual or literary translation. There has been scattered work on this area in several countries (e.g., DiSalvo 1999, Lambert-Tierrafría 2007, Mayoral Asensio 2014 [2003], also a few sections in Alcaraz Varó and Hughes 2014 [2002]), but little research has been undertaken into the practices of professionals and the expectations of institutions and other stakeholders.

This paper is part of a larger study aiming to identify current practices relating to the translation of personal official documents in Australia, and requirements of quality and integrity from the perspectives of certified translators, language service managers and public service staff. The paper reports the findings of the first phase of the study, which consisted of translator questionnaires on quality and integrity in the translation of personal official documents.

## 2. Translating personal official documents: special features, special requirements

As mentioned above, compared to other areas of translation, the translation of personal official documents has had only a small and patchy literature (in English at least). Despite this, the available literature shows a very significant place for this kind of translation, initially closely linked to diplomatic relations and international affairs, long before the massive movement of people around the world in the twentieth century.

As an aspect of private international law, the Hague Apostille Convention (HCCH 1961) overturned and formalised the international legalisation of documents (including their translations) which for millennia had been the work of Notaries or Notaries Public — a tradition going back to Roman times (Ready 2021). Notaries would authenticate documents for use in their own country, but for international purposes such documents had to be legalised by the respective consular services of both original country who recognised that Notary, and destination country — a cumbersome process. With the growth of international trade and migration after World War II, the Apostille Convention ensured a degree of trust that the original consular legalisation

would be accepted prima facie in the destination country if they were members of the convention. However, as the Apostille "only authenticates the origin of the public document to which it relates and not its content (reliability or accuracy)", there have been concerns that it might be abused by dubious issuers who seek to give their phoney documents, especially academic "qualifications", a sense of legitimacy (HCCH 2009: 13).

Migrants, refugees, businesspeople and others arrive in Australia with a variety of documents, only some of which may have gone through the Apostille process. But whether for settlement or commercial purposes, Australia accepts many kinds of personal official documents relating to identity, status or qualifications, and then has to deal with the issue of their translation so that documents can be used in any local institutional setting with confidence. Mayoral Asensio (2014[2003]: 4), who has contributed the major study on official translations, has defined the texts subject to this type of translation as any text "liable to be the object of official translation if it falls within a judicial process or a request of acknowledgement of rights before any kind of administrative body".

The emphasis on legal and administrative requirements here is crucial. While the Apostille system (or still ongoing legalisation for those countries not in the Convention) can authenticate documents in the original language, the agent who undertakes translation of such documents is carefully, though variously, defined in different parts of the world. Governments will take an interest in who can translate such documents, and usually impose other demands in terms of the qualifications of translators, judicial or notarial processes to go through for the translation to be recognised, which documents require notarisation, Apostille or legalisation, and formats of translations presented.

A widely accepted system in many countries is that of the "sworn translator", where a translator has gained a qualification through a judicial process. Qualifications for becoming a sworn translator vary widely, from virtually no educational qualification to having strict certification criteria, and certification itself can vary greatly. The company Translated has usefully laid out the variety of requirements internationally (Translated 2020), pointing to the lack of a uniform system across the world, with most demanding requirements for certification coming from some European countries. In Italy, for example, translations must be approved by courts, while the USA has probably the most liberal requirements, demanding a declaration from the translator with no certification requirements; the declaration for translating a marriage licence reads:

> I [translator name] of [residence], hereby declare that I have a sufficient knowledge of English and [x] languages, and certify the above translation [of the marriage certificate] from [x language] as true and correct in all respects. (Comech 2020)

Yet, even in the USA the situation is highly varied and depends upon the expectations that public institutions have: the Oakland, California requirements for accepting documentation for citizenship purposes lays out a detailed system (DiSalvo 1999).

In Australia, most public institutions demand that, to be accepted, documents must have been translated by a practitioner certified by NAATI, the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (Translated 2020). The professional association, the Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators (AUSIT) has published their recommended *Best Practices for the Translation of Official and Legal Documents* (AUSIT 2014), based on those of the New Zealand Society for Translators and Interpreters (NZSTI 2005). The guidelines provide useful practical advice in relation to translation approach and how to handle the different aspects of personal official documents (e.g., names, headings, signatures, stamps, numbers, dates, etc.). They also outline expectations in relation to document security and translation certification (how to label translations of original documents, certified or uncertified copies; information to include as part of the translator's certification of the translation).

The present study relates to documents in the major areas of identity (passports, ID cards, etc.), qualifications (education and work experience), civil status (birth, death, marriage, etc.), and authorisation (e.g., licence to drive motor vehicles). Personal official documents across this range have distinctive linguistic features. In part, these are historical, representing archaic and often legal past influences; and in part they are highly constrained in the specific information they proffer. Translation academic Źralka (2007) points out that these documents exhibit rigid grammatical structures, a high frequency of passive constructions, omitted verb forms, and highly formal expressions of even mundane information such as dates or signatures (e.g., "witness my hand this…"). The issue for translators is the extent to which these features need to be rendered into the target language, which in turn depends upon the expectations of the institutions which will receive these translations. While it may be considered that a complete translation (as in any other areas of translation) is the objective, in fact a highly powerful recent trend is to reduce paperwork and make-work in translation by accepting extract translations with essential information on a template (See e.g., AUSIT 2014; Department of Home Affairs 2022).

Another linguistic feature of these texts, critical for translation, is highlighted by translation theorist Nord (1997) in her distinction between documentary translation and instrumental translation. She defines instrumental translation as "[a] type of translation process which aims at producing in the target language an instrument for a new communicative interaction between the source-culture sender and a target-culture audience" (1997: 139). This is the most common form of functional translation intended for information in the source text to be conveyed into

the target language in a way that meets target language norms and is acceptable to a target language readership. An often-quoted maxim in such translations is that they should not read like a translation, but like an original work in the target language (1997: 52). Documentary translation, such as for personal official documents, however, turns this on its head: it is "metatextual", i.e., "the target text, in this case, is a text about a text" (1997: 47). Documentary translation is absolutely source-focused, often reproduces the source-language system, and explicitly looks like a translation, not like an original piece of text in the target language (Nord 1997: 47-50). In the translation of personal official documents, this is made explicit in editorialising about the text, such as indicating a stamp or signature, or declaring this to be an extract translation.

These theoretical considerations have immediate practical relevance for translators, and provide excellent guidance of the rendering of texts to very strictly follow the original. This, however, brings us to the other issue confronting the translator: the translation recipient and their expectations. As Taibi and Ozolins (2016) explain, the expectations of receiving institutions are not the only demand on the translator — very often clients may want a particular aspect of the translation to be taken into account by the translator, ranging from stylistics and formatting to altering information. If translators are commissioned by agencies or language companies to undertake translations, they may also have their own house style for translations. Despite Nord's clarity on the necessity of source-text focused translation, even this can be interpreted very differently by different parties.

The disparity in what is expected and what is offered as translation of personal official documents has led in some jurisdictions to the use of extract or template translations instead of full translations on high-volume and highly predictable documents, beginning a standardisation process which is still very uneven. As part of its attempts to eliminate needless paperwork and standardise translations of personal official documents which might differ widely in their constituent states, the EU has attempted to achieve uniformity by establishing "multilingual standard forms to be used as a translation aid attached to public documents" relating to civil status, residence or criminal record (Article 1, Regulation (EU) 2016/1191 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 6 July 2016 on promoting the free movement of citizens). In Australia, AUSIT's guidelines also include extract translation as an option for standard personal official documents and advise that "templates are available for download in the Members Area of the AUSIT website" (AUSIT 2014: 2). The guidelines, however, might appear inconsistent as they state that "[t]he source texts should be translated completely and accurately", but at the same time suggest: "If the client requires only extracts to be translated, the sections that have been omitted should be indicated in the translation or a template for extract translations of standard documents be used that allows for all relevant translated information to be entered."

Personal official documents are, by nature, practical and pragmatic, which makes extract translation efficiently suitable. However, information left out may be problematic — for the holder, institutions, or both. Lambert-Tierrafría (2007: 220, 223) proposes producing two translation versions of the same document, one *verbatim* (full) and the other "selective" (extract translation). However, while this might be useful for training purposes, it is impractical and ethically questionable in real-life transactions: a client does not need to pay for two translations when one can serve the purpose. Two guiding principles can provide clarity and reduce the zone of uncertainty in this area: the translation brief (purpose) and the role of the official translator as "public authenticator" (Mayoral Asensio 2014[2003]: 4):

- Where the translation will be used and what for will assist the translator in determining whether a template approach is possible or a full translation is required. The AUSIT (2014) guidelines also include a disclaimer alerting translators to the additional requirements that different government departments and authorities may have.
- The translator of official documents is a certified professional who "must consciously assume responsibility for all the consequences and liabilities of their function as public authenticator" (Mayoral Asensio 2014[2003]: 4). They therefore work as qualified and trustworthy certifiers complying with the requirements of the institutional regime and the professional standards. Whether they complete a template translation or a full translation, they will be entrusted to do so accurately and ethically. In the case of extract translations, translator notes provide a useful strategy to document any useful or important aspect in the original document, thus addressing potential concerns about completeness. Similarly, an ethical translator will not produce an extract translation that is inconsistent with the source document, as would be the case if a birth certificate, for example, contains a 'deceased' annotation but is translated without reference to this important update.

As the review above suggests, the translation of personal official documents has its own requirements, challenges and issues. However, the little literature available (e.g., Fuentes Luque 2002; Źralka 2007; McKay 2010; Mayoral Asensio 2014[2003]) is based on the professional experience of the authors, rather than research into the views and practices of relevant stakeholders. The study partially reported in this paper was an attempt to fill the gap. The following section provides an overview of the broader study and describes the research methods of the first phase.

## 3. Research methods

The broader project on which this paper is based was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Western Sydney University (reference number: H13582). The project aimed to identify the features that make translations of personal official documents efficient and effective,

in the sense of i) ensuring the quality (fit-for-purposeness) of the final product and ii) providing authorities with the necessary tools to enhance security. The project used both quantitative and qualitative methods, including questionnaires and interviews for translators, language service managers and public service staff, as well as analysis and assessment of a sample of translations into English (Taibi and Ozolins 2022). The findings reported in this paper relate to the first phase of the project, which consisted of an online questionnaire to elicit the views of Australian-based translators working on personal official documents regarding various aspects of translation quality and integrity. The questionnaire was designed online using Qualtrics, and it included a total of 31 questions, both fixed-choice and open-ended.

In addition to demographic questions, this instrument covered questions about key issues in the translation of personal official documents:

1) Challenges associated with commonly translated personal official documents such as birth records, driver licences, police clearances and educational qualifications: we wanted to identify the features that pose challenges for translators working in this area in order to link them to training needs.
2) Participants' understanding of quality requirements: as key agents in translation services in this area, it was essential to explore the translators' own understanding of quality criteria and the extent to which their training and experience enabled them to meet these criteria.
3) Full vs. extract translation: extract translation of personal official documents is common practice in Australia, but no previous research was undertaken on translator satisfaction with this option or on potential shortcomings and areas of concern.
4) Translation integrity: As Mayoral Asensio (2014[2003]: 4) points out, the translator of official documents is a "public authenticator", so it was important to ask translators about their strategies to ensure source document description, and about how they dealt with potential document fraud.
5) Relationships with translation agencies and clients: the translator's relationship with commissioners is related to quality, as clarity of instructions and expectations, and response to issues raised will contribute to better quality.

Before making the questionnaire available to participants, it was piloted with eight experienced translators who are also translation educators. The participants in the piloting were asked for feedback on question relevance and clarity, as well as on the presentation of the questionnaire in general and the space available for open-ended questions. The participants were also encouraged to comment on any other aspect of the questionnaire they considered important. Two participants mentioned clarity issues with two expressions ("diversity in documentation" and "differing amounts of

information"). One suggested adding "not applicable" to the options provided for some questions. Another suggested enlarging the answer boxes. All this feedback was implemented.

Survey participants were recruited indirectly, by approaching major language service providers and relevant organisations in different parts of Australia, and asking them to forward the project information sheet and consent form to their practitioners. In addition to large language service providers such as Multicultural NSW, Language Loop, 2M Translations and The Migration Translators, relevant organisations also included NAATI and AUSIT. Translators interested in participating were advised to send their signed consent form to the chief investigator. The only inclusion criteria were 1) NAATI certification or accreditation, and 2) Having translated personal official documents.

The survey was completed by 115 respondents from different parts of Australia, including Tasmania, Western Australia, South Australia, the Australian Capital Territory, but mainly from the states with the largest populations: New South Wales, Victoria, and Queensland. It is difficult to determine how representative the number of participants is, as the number of NAATI-certified translators was 9014 in 2021 (NAATI 2021: 23), but not all of them were part of the relevant population. The number also included retired translators, translators who have moved overseas, translators working in areas other than personal official documents, and certified professionals who work in unrelated sectors.

Among the participants, there was a bipolar distribution in terms of translator age: a third of the participants (33%) were over 60, while those between 30 and 40 contributed with 24% respondents. The other age groups were relatively less represented: 9% aged below 30, 20% between 40 and 50, and 13% aged 50-60. The contingent of translators was mostly very experienced, judging from the years of experience stated: 39% had over 20 years of experience, 34% between 10 and 20 years, 16% between 5 and 10, and 11% had less than 5 years of professional practice. The survey was open to all working languages, but Chinese emerged as the largest group (21 respondents), followed by Spanish (12 respondents) and Arabic (8 respondents). Thus, 35.65% of the translators surveyed work in the target languages that will be the object of in-depth analysis in our translation assessment stage. The other respondents (approximately two-thirds) covered some 40 other languages (e.g., French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Japanese, Khmer, Malay, Maltese, Nepali, Persian, Polish, Swahili, Thai, Turkish, Urdu, and Vietnamese), with several translators working from multiple languages.

The questionnaire data was analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The qualitative part consisted of manually codifying and comparing the open answers provided by the participants, and identifying recurrent themes in

relation to the challenges, quality issues and professional practices in the area of translating personal official documents.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Documents: Sources, types and challenges

While many translations in Australia are sourced through translation agencies, this is not the case with personal official document translations: nearly half the respondents (46%) reported that less than 10% of the personal official documents they receive for translation are through translation agencies; only 5% of translators receive all such assignments from agencies. Translations are sourced from many avenues, including most prominently through private clients who search for language-specific translators on the NAATI website, with word of mouth in second place and government/welfare agencies registers in third place, but also with considerable sourcing through social media, business connections, advertising and recurring clients.

The survey asked specifically about four kinds of personal official documents: birth records, driver licence, police clearance and educational qualifications. In addition to these, the participants reported having translated over 20 other document types, including:
- marriage records, including religious/astrological records,
- national/regional/district ID,
- death certificates,
- military service,
- a wide variety of religious documents,
- medical documents,
- financial documents, including credit cards,
- land sales, lease and property records,
- employment documents, including work references and payslips,
- passports,
- residential records.

Diversity in country/region of origin and variation in the amount of information available in documents were reported as the main challenges facing translators of personal official documents. In relation to diversity in documents from different countries or regions, two-thirds of the respondents (66.07%) commented that this was an issue in the case of birth records, while the percentage was lower but still significant for other document types (46.36% for driver licences and 44.95% for police clearances). In relation to variation in the amount of information provided, 64.86% of the respondents reported it to be an issue in birth records, 51.38% reported it in the case of driver licences, and 47.66% for police clearances. Other issues reported include poor legibility (including handwriting), naming conventions, and overall, the age of the document,

considering in most cases this would be the earliest document the clients would have received in their life.

Educational qualifications represented the category of documents identified as most problematic by respondents: 63% explicitly said so, while the challenges of these documents were commented on by every single respondent. While the broad stages of education (primary, secondary, tertiary, vocational/technical) are more or less universal, the nomenclature of institutions, awards and individual subjects of study varies dramatically around the world and, crucially for the respondents, with often no clear equivalence with Australian educational regimes or nomenclature. One respondent economically summed up the issues encountered by all respondents:

> Example 1: The English translation of those key names [of qualifications] should be direct, not free interpretation, but at the same time meaningful and not confusing or misleading. No attempt should be made to put what the translator may believe is the equivalent of overseas qualifications in Australia, which is the role of various institutions in Australia that assess qualifications gained overseas. This approach makes the job of those institutions easier and shows the client that it's not the translator that assesses their qualifications, which is what many clients actually expect with some even suggesting what the translator should put as being, in their opinion, the "correct" translation, or simply one that they may believe might help their cause.

A central concern for all respondents was how to convey all essential features of the educational record so that it could be clear to Australian institutions on what basis educational recognition could be awarded. This was critical in such a high-stakes area where careers could be at stake. All respondents were very clear that it was not their place to identify or suggest equivalence to Australian qualifications.

## 4.2 Extract or full translations

Australia has been one of the world leaders in extract or template translations, where institutions determine the information they seek for a particular class of document, and produce a template where translators fill in the details from the source document without needing to provide a full translation. Ozolins (1998) records the growth of extract translations in Australia from the 1980s, decades before this approach to translation was adopted in other jurisdictions (Lambert 2007, European Commission 2014). From the survey responses, there has been a steady spread of the use of extract (template) translations, which is generally welcomed by the respondent translators. Slightly more than half of the participants (53.04%) expressed satisfaction with extract translations and saw them as a much more efficient way of conveying information and obviating the need for translation time for ultimately not useful information. Extract translations are also less costly for clients, as this respondent noted:

Example 2: Compared to full translations, extract translations are also easier to read as they only contain relevant information, take less (sometimes much less) time to prepare and cost the client less.

However, many of these translators expressed concerns and identified shortcomings as well. Several others indicated that they only do full translations of personal official documents for different reasons: 1) Concerns about leaving out information that might be useful for the administration processing the translation (e.g., "it's better for the end Australian authority if they can have a mirror replica of the original", as one respondent put it); 2) Client preference: "in most cases clients tend to choose full translation instead of extract translation"; 3) Translation direction: where translations are of Australian documents into a language other than English (LOTE) for use overseas, and the norm in the country of destination is to produce a full translation; or 4) practical formatting considerations: "every document is formatted differently", as one respondent suggested.

A number of concerns were raised by the survey participants, who reported that the shift to extract translations was highly variable, with some institutions accepting extract translations, while others demand full translations, and some have no policy in this regard. A recurrent concern is that "translations of template documents do not represent the full document. The end user cannot know what the document holds just by seeing a template translation". This is especially the case, for instance, when the same document is reissued with additional information or institutional notes. In relation to this, a couple of translators mentioned that translators may inadvertently assume that some information is not important while it is for the client's case and interests. Another concern is client dissatisfaction with the presentation and amount of information provided in a template translation. In some cases, especially when the translation is from English into another language and the translation therefore is to be used overseas, preference for full translation is a matter of applicable norms and expectations in the destination country (e.g., Hungary and Japan in our data). Finally, one other concern is related to remuneration for this type of summary translation. As one respondent suggested, "The only downside is the very poor rate of payment for them [template translations], so a $15 job leads to $15 attention, and doing them too quickly". Such rates, however, apply only when translations are procured through intermediary agencies, not when sourced directly from clients.

As can be seen by the inconsistencies encountered above in the various source documents, not everything required in a template is necessarily there in the source document, and particular items in the source document may not have an easy equivalence in English, often necessitating a translator note. While such a need for a translator's note can attend any

translation, it becomes much more a necessity in extract translations with their cryptic demand for information.

## 4.3 Translator notes

Nearly all respondents at some time provide a translator note (in text or as a footnote) to document issues in the source document, or to explain items which would not be clear or understandable to a reader – the ultimate user of the translation. In some cases, this was due to obscurities or technical problems in source texts, and translators responded by translating everything that was visible in the source document and providing a translator's note for irregularities:

> Example 3: The key is to reflect the reality of the source document. Anything out of the ordinary, e.g. illegible, or barely legible text, deleted words or sentences, or fields left blank with no entries, should be brought to the reader's attention, usually in the form of brief notes in square brackets.

More difficult cases may come where there is, say, a variation in name across a range of documents with different names, details or spellings of the same person. Again, in relation to educational documents, a translator note is there to clarify what may not be clear in the source document, not advising on equivalence of educational qualification:

> Example 4: It is sometimes justified to include Translator's Notes in translations, not so much to explain aspects of divergence of educational levels and qualifications, which, as mentioned above, should primarily be the role of qualification assessing authorities, but rather explain the meaning of some not-so-obvious abbreviations or acronyms.

## 4.4. Document security and integrity

To the question "Have you had occasions when you had concerns about the authenticity of documents presented for translation" 64.29% responded negatively, while the rest (35.71%) confirmed having had concerns about the integrity of the source document. Although the affirmative responses are much lower than the negative ones, and the issue was experienced in a very small number of occasions in the respondents' experience, the percentage itself indicates an existing issue, especially with multiple handling of documents (e.g., translator receiving scanned copies through translation agency, lawyer or immigration agent). One translator even reported a potential fraud issue with their own translations and NAATI stamp: an alleged client sent the translator a copy of a translation bearing what appeared to be the translator's NAATI stamp, and asked for another copy, while the translator had no records of the said document.

The respondents are clear about the ethical and professional implications of translating fraudulent documents (e.g., reputation of the profession and the professional; criminal activity, etc.), but their courses of action vary. Some

decline assignments when they are suspicious, without further action; others decline and report:

> Example 5: I reject such projects and contact DHA, ASQA, or the police as needed.

Most rely on the translator's notes and disclaimers to avoid any professional or legal liability:

> Example 6: On certain occasions, I have declined the assignments to protect my professionalism. However, it depends on the "defect". I feel that I am not in a position to judge and be 100% sure of the authenticity. I'd just translate the document exactly as it is and add notes at the end about any cross-outs or alterations. If I can see them, it means the authority can see them too. Also, I wouldn't say that this is a translation of the original, I'd just say "of the Arabic document". I always uphold my professional ethics even if it will make me lose some money. I was requested to translate the front side only to some IDs for refugee applications but I refused.

> Example 7: I learnt from AUSIT to put a disclaimer like this: NOTE & CERTIFICATION BY THE TRANSLATOR I, XXXX, accredited and certified translator by NAATI, certify that this is a true and accurate translation of the attached document, written in Vietnamese. In providing this certification, I give no warrant as to the authenticity of the source document. Any unauthorised change to the translation renders this certification invalid.

When reporting concerns about document authenticity to the translation agency (or commissioner), a strategy is agreed upon in most cases, and it usually consists of translator notes or disclaimers as above. In a couple of cases, however, translators were not informed about the action taken by the agency.

As Example 6 above shows, translators also have zones of uncertainty in relation to document authenticity. Many mention that it is not their responsibility to assess the authenticity of the document (e.g., "It is not my job to comment on authenticity of a document unless a criminal element is clear and visible"). Some go further to explain possible cases where a translator cannot be certain and therefore cannot make assumptions:

> Example 8: Even if there is a fake document, I cannot be certain whether it was or just poor quality print. But I do add about I, the translator, don't guarantee the authenticity of the document.

> Example 9: Documents can be issued by the relevant authority and appear as authentic but contain incorrect/false information (e.g. if issued by a corrupt employee for a bribe). In such a case, the translator can notice that only if the same client submitted other documents that contain contrary details. But even then, the translator cannot know if the issuing officer made an honest mistake, if something had changed in the client's details or if there is a valid reason for different details.

Some, on the other hand – translation agencies included— seem to believe that they are expected to engage in some sort of investigation:

Example 10: I have had this issue with some driver's licences and I brought it up with the agency. The agency directed me to an overseas website where you can verify the documents and I checked and was satisfied that it was genuine.

## 4.5. Translation quality

While several of the issues above have a direct or indirect relationship with quality, the translator questionnaire included four specific questions about quality: one about quality criteria in the translation of personal official documents, one about challenges in meeting quality standards, and the other two in relation to training.

In terms of quality criteria in this area of translation, most respondents mention accuracy, including factual information, attention to details in source documents, accurate terminology, institutional names and spellings of holders' names. Another criterion that a large number of respondents mention is completeness, not necessarily in the sense of complete translation of the entire document, but in the sense of conveying all the necessary and relevant information in each case, including through translator notes where it is necessary to draw attention to or clarify a particular aspect in the original document. While these two are the most cited, the respondents also suggested criteria such as the following:

- clarity and understandability: the need for the translation to be clear and understandable and to make sense for the public staff who would be processing it;
- presentation: Some translators understand this to refer to a user-friendly presentation; others refer to the need to reproduce the layout of the original document (including headings, tables, position of stamps, signatures, etc.);
- translator authentication: e.g., the certified translator's NAATI stamp on copies of the original documents in LOTE;
- speed of response and delivery;
- data safety.

The following examples summarise the most frequent translator views in relation to quality:

Example 11: Accuracy is the best indication of quality for the translation of official documents. The translation has to reflect the content and layout of the original document as much as possible. Authorities are very strict and there is not too much room for creativity.

Example 12: I usually focus on 2 criteria: 1. accuracy - must accurately reflect the content of the document 2. neatness/easy to understand, where translator should endeavour to format the translation that prints out neatly and all the translations should fall into the same/similar position as on the source text document

> Example 13: Completeness, accuracy and similar presentation (formatting) to the source document (table with the same boxes, text over the same number of pages as the source).

There are also translator insights that relate to language-specific expectations and suggest that quality standards might need to vary depending on language and document type:

> Example 14: Accuracy and consistency. However, I would say different QA models may be employed for different types of documents or maybe for different languages. And I strongly would not encourage to depend on a sole translation standard system, say EN 15038, to evaluate and assess the quality. They may apply to certain language systems, but not all. For example, quality control by back translation is not fully applicable when it comes to Chinese-English language pairs.

> Example 15: Accuracy, easy to read, mirrors the basic formatting and layout of the original. From a Japanese point of view, the document needs to be translated word-for-word. Japanese people are very fastidious about "exactness", so I pay attention to even the smaller details. I suppose this is a language-specific point, however.

Some respondents provided detailed views on quality, linking it not only to the translator's competence and approach, but also to the role of other stakeholders, especially translation agencies. They point out inconsistent practices and approaches to quality assurance in different agencies and raise questions about who is qualified to undertake translation checking. The respondent cited in Example 13 above, for example, provided an eloquent and detailed account, part of which reads as follows:

> Example 16: Completeness, accuracy and similar presentation (formatting) to the source document (…). Translators should be educated as do translation agencies staff and eventually clients as well, as to how translations are or should be done to achieve uniformity across all languages and all translators and agencies and so that the agency staff can respond to clients' unreasonable or unacceptable requests. At the moment, each and every agency has different requirements which is difficult for translators to learn if they work for a number of agencies and if they work for some of them only occasionally. Some have templates, some do not. Some have letterheads, some do not. Some insist that every single word has to be translated (…), some agencies send back the translations for 'corrections' because they think that something may be wrong (…) Another thing that some of the agencies require is that the translation be printed and the translator stamp affixed to both the translation and the source document, signed, both to be scanned and sent to them. When they receive them, they reply and thank the translator for the 'first draft', inform the translator that they would check it (agency staff that does not speak the LOTE) and then send it to the client to 'check' when the client does not know what they are supposed to check and gets the impression that they can request whatever changes they want. So, if there is an error that needs to be corrected or if the client and the agency insist that the translator add a translator's note (usually about the client's preferred name spelling), then the translator has to go back to it, print, stamp, scan etc. all over again which is a waste of time and money, after all.

When asked about the difficulties they face in meeting what they consider quality standards, most of the respondents replied that they were generally able to deal with the documents and the challenges they presented. Many (35.51%) acknowledged challenges, but most of these attributed the

difficulties mainly to the quality and presentation of the source text. Interestingly, quite a few of these translators candidly recognised challenges relating to their own knowledge and skills. One, for example, mentioned struggling with military and police ranks; another reported facing challenges when the personal official document is too technical: "Even when I tried to learn about the area. I don't get what they mean. I can only translate word for word, but I feel like it may not be high-quality". A third one admitted: "Sometimes even after checking two to three times, I am still not quite sure whether my translation is correct." Another said: "Italian is my second language and my comprehension of Italian is definitely weaker than my comprehension of English. My general knowledge of Italian institutions and practices is weaker than my knowledge of Australian institutions and practices".

Quality goes hand in hand with education and training. Nearly two-thirds of the participants (74 out of 115, i.e. 64.34%) indicated that they had never attended any course or professional development activity on translating personal official documents. The few who did attend such training mentioned a university program (e.g., Master in Interpreting and Translation), induction sessions offered by translation agencies or government language services, or NAATI and AUSIT professional development courses. Among those who completed tertiary education, one mentioned they "were taught basic information of official translation", and another commented: "The course was great but did not actually cover official translations, which was a shock when I enter the "real" world of translating as the majority of my work is official documents".

## 4.6 Relations with clients

Virtually all respondents pointed to issues surrounding clarity of expectations of commissioners and receiving institutions, variation of requirements, variation in quality of communication and clients' understanding of the role of the translator. A translator may have a direct client — say, someone who looked them up on the NAATI website or found them by word of mouth — or their client may be a translation agency which commissioned the translation. Given the ubiquity of direct clients requesting official translations, relations there become critical. As already seen in Example 1, clients may suggest ways to correct or enhance a translation, or need to explain variations of names or details in a sequence of documents — on the one hand putting pressure on translators, on the other hand often providing useful clarity.

Where an agency has commissioned translations, respondents pointed to many aspects of this relationship. While predominantly seen as supportive and in all ways professional in their dealings with translators, in some cases respondents reported agencies as being not caring, not able to answer questions, or being dogmatic and imposing their house style on what

translators do. These aspects will be examined further in the next phase of the project involving a survey of translation agencies.

## 5. Discussion

The translators' responses have provided a wealth of data and perspectives in relation to the challenges, practices and integrity and quality issues in the translation of personal documents in Australia. While some of the findings above are consistent with what is known in professional practice and the limited literature available, the data suggest a few problematic issues, especially in relation to quality assurance and document security.

It is not surprising that aspects such as document diversity depending on country of issue and, accordingly, variation in the amount of information provided, have emerged as main challenges in this area of translation. Translators processing personal official documents usually receive documents from a wide variety of sources and localities, and the wider the geographical scope of the working language (e.g., Arabic or Spanish), the more difference there will be in institutional terminology, and textual presentation and organisation. It was also expected that translators would face challenges relating to the inherent features of personal official documents (e.g., archaic language, institution-specific terminology, handwritten texts or segments, person and place names, etc.) as well as those resulting from the handling process (e.g., poor legibility as a result of scanned copies being commonly emailed to translators).

Personal official documents may appear to be straightforward and less challenging as translation material; they may even be perceived as "beginner's work" (McKay 2010). However, as the participants in this study have shown, this is a translation area that is fraught with challenges and risks. It is an area with its own complexities and difficulties and where serious mistakes are often made (Taibi and Ozolins 2016: 78, 93).

One translation practice that has been adopted in some countries, including Australia, to overcome the complexity and diversity of personal official documents, is templating. However, although most of our participants accept and engage in this standardising and efficient practice, many of them raise concerns about translation completeness and the translator's subjective judgement of what is relevant/important. As pointed out in the literature review, the guidelines of the professional body (AUSIT 2014: 2) might add to the uncertainty as they require complete and accurate translation, but at the same time leave extract translation as an option.

Concerns about translation completeness when using templates are reasonable, but, as most of the participants point out, extract translations are efficient (for both translators and public service staff) and cost-effective (for clients). If a 500-word Moroccan marriage certificate, for instance, is translated fully rather than as a standard template, the presentation of the

most important information will not be very clear and accessible, and the reading time (for legal and administrative staff) and the translation cost might treble. Lambert-Tierrafría (2007: 220) refers to the Mexican marriage certificate as a similar example:

> Again, the Mexican certificate is the most painstakingly detailed and includes information on the witnesses, their occupation and addresses, but crucial information that does not appear in the other countries' certificates, namely whether the marriage contract is subject to joint or separate ownership of property during marriage.

As mentioned above, it would not be fair or practical to do as Lambert-Tierrafría (2007: 220, 223) suggests: produce both a full and an extract translation. However, two guiding principles can address the tension between the two options: the commissioner's instructions (purpose of the translation) and the role of the official translator as "public authenticator" (Mayoral Asensio 2014[2003]: 4), which requires attention to the possible consequences in real life of each translation decision, description of the relevant features of the source document, and documentation of the translation itself (e.g., by indicating that it is a full/extract translation, using translator notes, adding a translator disclaimer, etc.).

The above point about translation integrity leads us to another major concern in the area of official translation, and in the responses of translator participants in this study in particular: document security. Although just over a third of the respondents expressed concerns about fraud, the issue emerges as one of those that need addressing in a more standardised manner. The AUSIT (2014) guidelines include several recommendations that relate to document authenticity and translation integrity, including specifying whether the document received is an original or certified/ non-certified/ electronic copy; documenting special features that might suggest fraud (erasures, corrections, deletions, etc.); and using appropriate software to protect electronic translations against editing. However, they do not mention whether translators are expected to assess the authenticity of documents or what they should do if they suspect fraud. While most of our respondents believe that it is not within their remit to ascertain the authenticity of source documents, there are others who do. As reported above, some agencies even seem to encourage or expect translators to undertake investigative work when they have concerns in this regard. In relation to security too, AUSIT (2014: 3) advises:

> A printout or photocopy of the source document may be attached to the translation. The sheets should be joined together in such a way that any separation would cause externally visible damage (e.g. with staples, not paper clips).
> The left-hand corner of the sheets may be folded, stapled and sealed with the imprint of the translator's seal.

However, given the concerns expressed by the participants and the ease with which documents and translations can be tampered with, such security measures should be a requirement rather than an optional strategy. In light

of the translators' concerns and the inconsistencies identified, it appears that there are gaps to be filled in the professional guidelines relating to the translation of personal official documents, and that there is a need for more stringent measures to deter fraud in this area, and for a more consistent implementation by translation agencies and translators.

The aspects discussed so far are an essential part of quality assurance in the translation of personal official documents, but as mentioned earlier, the questionnaire also specifically elicited translator views on quality criteria and issues. The main quality criteria suggested by the participants (accuracy, attention to detail, completeness, and translator certification) do not require further comment, as they constitute the core elements of translation practice in this area (Mayoral Asensio 2014[2003]). We will only briefly discuss some of the views and practices that stand out because they identify areas for improvement:

1. Extralinguistic knowledge and translation skills: Apart from citing challenges inherent to the translation of personal official documents (diversity in administrative and legal systems, terminology, amount and presentation of information), some translators acknowledge limitations in their knowledge about different administrative systems and skills in translating certain types of official documents. This suggests that although translators are NAATI certified, professional certification needs to be preceded or followed by adequate training in this particular area. The fact that 64.34% of respondents did not complete any training or professional development activities on translating official documents does not mean that they did not have any formal training or internship in translation, but field-specific training would optimise quality standards and increase translator confidence about quality.

2. Presentation and accessibility: Two main views are noted in this regard: some translators understand that quality includes the need to produce translations that are organised and presented in a user-friendly manner, which enables the reader to identify and retrieve the necessary information easily; others understand quality presentation in the sense of layout that mirrors the original document as much as possible. Cleary, the question here relates to quality in the sense of visual presentation and efficiency, not to meaning transfer. When the original document is well organised (e.g., table format, headings and subheadings, etc.), translators will be able to reflect the original presentation without impacting efficiency of administrative processing. When it is a dense block of text without such readability features (e.g., Moroccan marriage certificate above), format faithfulness may not impact accuracy but is likely to reduce efficiency for the end user. It is well known in the translation of personal official documents that there are tensions between values, including between style and faithfulness, and between the need to attend to the client's

needs and those of the administration (Mayoral Asensio 2014[2003]: 10, 50).

3. Inconsistent practices and varying expectations among translation agencies: this last point draws attention to the fact that quality in this and other areas of translation is the responsibility of different stakeholders. The translator data in this study shows some variation in quality assurance requirements and processes from one translation agency or service to another. While only a small percentage (5%) of the translators surveyed receive all their personal official document assignments from agencies, it is well-known that most translators work as freelancers and receive work through different agencies. A set of consistently implemented quality assurance principles and strategies would enhance quality and security in this area, and is likely to improve the experience and satisfaction of the different stakeholders.

## 6. Conclusion

The results of this survey sketch a number of strongly consistent experiences among translators and just as strong worrying signs of inconsistency in the way translations are managed by commissioners and language service providers. One part of the inconsistencies resides in the given fact of extreme diversity of document types and administrative systems. The rendering of such diversity into usable translations for Australian institutions is not an easy task, and our respondents show a highly sensitive understanding of the challenges and the limits of their own capacity.

More worrying are the inconsistencies in house styles and processes that are imposed by language service providers. It is apparent that clearer and more consistent guidelines are needed on even elementary issues such as whether extract translations or full translations are required.

Finally, while our survey found translators confident of their ability to render even very complex documents satisfactorily, the overall impression is one of translators working in a vacuum, with respect to a range of issues including training, ongoing professional development and quality criteria, and most of all clear guidelines from end users and commissioners. The first step in addressing these issues is bringing them into the light from the lived experience of translators, and the concerns they have to produce satisfactory and coherent translations to satisfy both clients and end users.

### Limitations of the study

While the survey was completed by 115 translators from different parts of Australia, we acknowledge that the sample is not sufficiently large to claim representativeness.

## Acknowledgment

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## Data Availability Statement

Questionnaire data are available at: https://doi.org/10.26183/n7g1-9z37

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