

# Audio Description: A Laboratory for the Development of a New Professional Profile

ELISA PEREGO  
University of Trieste  
[eperego@units.it](mailto:eperego@units.it)

## ABSTRACT

ADLAB PRO (Audio Description: A Laboratory for the Development of a New Professional Profile) is a three-year (2016-2019) project financed by the European Union under the Erasmus+ Programme, Key Action 2 – Strategic Partnerships, coordinated by the University of Trieste, Italy. Its aim is to define a curriculum for ensuring professional Europe-wide audio description (AD) implementation in all cultural and media sectors through the creation of training materials to develop the new AD professional profile. This paper gives an overview of the project background, priorities and aims and focuses on the nature of its partnership and working activities (Intellectual Outputs) in order to provide a comprehensive picture of the project scope and impact and link them directly to the state of the art in the research field of accessible audiovisual translation.

## KEYWORDS

Audio description, project, training, curriculum, course design, best practices.

## 1. PROJECT BACKGROUND

The status and practice of accessible audiovisual translation (AVT) – in the form of audio description (AD) for the blind and visually impaired as well as respeaking and subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing – have recently received attention and full recognition both in scholarly literature (e.g. Díaz-Cintas, Orero & Remael, 2007; Kruger & Orero, 2010; Mazur & Kruger, 2012; Serban, Matamala & Lavaur, 2011) and in EU funded projects (DVT4ALL, ADLAB, HBB4ALL, ACT, etc.). However, despite the incessant advocacy of an inclusive society and the growing need for accessible audiovisual (AV) products, the professional figures working in the field of AVT and especially AD are still few, often untrained and not well defined. Furthermore, the provision of AD<sup>1</sup> is still uneven across Europe (ADLAB, 2012).

As a consequence, the need to define an effective and reliable curriculum for ensuring professional Europe-wide AD implementation in all cultural and media sectors through the creation of a European AD professional profile is now urgent. This must be carried out by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in cooperation with service providers and user associations to ensure that the profile meets multiple market needs and that the curriculum designed to train future AD experts is efficient and of high quality.

ADLAB PRO (Audio description: A laboratory for the development of a new professional profile) will create such curriculum and modular educational components for the training of AD professionals, and produce open-access flexible training materials to be integrated in various learning situations, also beyond academia.<sup>2</sup> The curriculum and training material will have an impact on various trainees' profiles, forming new professional figures and strengthening the competences of those who already work in the accessibility world, thus facilitating employability and catering for the needs of those service providers looking for trained AD experts across Europe.

ADLAB PRO capitalized on the results of a previous project, ADLAB (Audio Description: Lifelong Learning for the Blind), 2011-2014, led by the University of Trieste, that has distinguished itself by its impact, contribution to policy-making, innovative results and creative approach<sup>3</sup>. ADLAB has played a major role in media accessibility, producing the first EU strategic guidelines for the practice of AD (Remael, Reviers & Vercauteren, 2015). These now need to be integrated into a wider frame where the professional profile of the AD expert is defined, and associated competences, skills and training delineated.

- 1 The practice of AD is the insertion of verbal descriptions illustrating the essential visual elements of an AV product (films, museums, live events, etc.) for visually impaired people (VIPs).
- 2 The different agents targeted by the project include a wide variety of interested stakeholders across the accessibility value chain, including broadcasters, cultural and accessibility managers (cf. ACT project, Orero, this issue), translators, vocal artists, etc.
- 3 ADLAB was selected as a "success story" and obtained a final evaluation of 10/10. Cf. [www.adlabproject.eu/](http://www.adlabproject.eu/)

Following on from the latter phases of ADLAB, ADLAB PRO will continue to promote the ADLAB ethos extending, developing and validating new learning opportunities, as well as empowering end users and increasing the access to information for those who are still experiencing barriers to their social inclusion. These include visually impaired persons (VIPs) as well as other groups of vulnerable audiences (elderly, physically/mentally challenged groups, people with special needs and learning disabilities including those diagnosed with autism) and any new citizens wishing to integrate into the cultural environment of their new homeland (migrants). These end users will benefit beyond the life of the project from a larger supply of high quality ADs in different fields and will be included more effectively in the cultural life of their own (or acquired) county, being no longer marginalized and at risk of social exclusion.

## 2. PROJECT'S PRIORITIES

Within EU legislation, the EU directive 2010/13/EU in Article 46<sup>4</sup> claims that “[t]he right of persons with a disability and of the elderly to participate and be integrated in the social and cultural life of the Union is inextricably linked to the provision of accessible audiovisual media services”, such as, but not limited to, the provision of sign language, subtitling and AD.

In spite of EU legislation, in Europe the provision of AD is inconsistent and not necessarily provided by trained experts (ADLAB, 2012). ADLAB PRO's priority is therefore to make up for this, as well as to sustain and complement the work initiated by other related projects. ADLAB PRO will carry forward the successful work of ADLAB and it will complement both the current work of ACT (2015-2018, see Orero, this issue), focusing on the broader issue of access management for live events, and of HBB4ALL (2013-2016), addressing media accessibility for all citizens in the connected TV environment.

With a strong focus on training, ADLAB PRO features an innovative approach, prioritizing the flexibility and modularity of the course content that it will create as a concrete outcome of the project (cf. the project Intellectual Outputs IO3 and IO4, cf. § 4.3 and 4.4). Instead of offering a fixed curriculum and rigid training material, it will provide open-access high-quality modular units to be used in a variety of contexts, allowing for tailor-made applications by both HEIs and companies/broadcasters (offering AD) with specific training needs. The training material produced by ADLAB PRO is therefore meant to be fully customizable, enabling prospective trainers and trainees to use the modules all together as a comprehensive course, or separately in different combinations. This will offer them a unique learning opportunity in the AVT and AD sectors, and the versatility of the course content will secure the project resilience as well. Furthermore,

4 Retrieved at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A32010L0013>

through the transfer of best practices from the academia to the industry, and because the project will also offer accreditation of the training materials (cf. IO6, § 4.6), the social and professional status of the AD expert will be recognized and stabilized, and its profile will be widened to cater for more text specific needs and offer creative solutions. Therefore, ADLAB PRO's priority will be given to actions that will contribute to delineating and strengthening the status and the formation of this new professional profile working in the field of accessible AVT. As a long-term result, more quality AD will be produced and qualified experts will be inserted on the market with the desirable consequence of equipping service providers with trained audio describers both in countries where AD is established, and in countries where it is unknown or has recently been introduced.

Making the material easy to reach is a further priority of the project, and of current EU programmes. ADLAB PRO's training materials is meant to be disseminated resorting to open and innovative education and the digitization of its educational components, and promoting the use of ICT as a driver to increase the spread, quality and relevance of education in the field of AVT and AD.<sup>5</sup> Exploiting the tools offered by the digital era (Open Educational Resources, webinars, e-documents, recorded showcases, online tutorials, etc.), the project's training materials extend the offer of high quality learning opportunities in the sector of accessible AVT to improve the current training options.

As mentioned earlier, ADLAB PRO will secure transparency and recognition of skills and qualifications to facilitate learning, employability and labour mobility. A project's top priority is in fact the production of recognizable components for teaching/learning purposes. A specific IO (IO6) will be in fact entirely devoted to content evaluation, recognition and accreditation. The learning outcomes will be accredited and officially recognized, defining skills and competences for each educational component that is produced, and attributing ECTS/ECVETS credits<sup>6</sup> to express the volume of learning associated to each outcome. In this way, learners and workers will see their knowledge, skills, competence and qualifications quickly and easily recognised. This will be essential to raise their skill levels and increase their employability.

5 In fact, the training materials developed as a tangible output of IO4 (see § 4.4) will be uploaded and made available on the project's website, following the open access approach promoted by the EC (cf. COM 2007/56; C 2012/4890).

6 The acronyms refer respectively to the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System and to the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training. ECTS and ECVET are key instruments for the transfer and accumulation of knowledge, skills and competences expressed and measured in terms of credits.

### 3. THE CONSORTIUM AND THE SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

To reach its wide scope, ADLAB PRO relies on a trans-national cooperation and networking of diverse European realities. This to assure that the wealth of languages, language situations (bilingual, monolingual, multilingual) and AVT traditions (subtitling, dubbing and voice-over) characterizing European countries are taken into account in the development of the curriculum and material. The balanced mix of educational and non-educational partners in the consortium is in fact crucial to assure exchange of expertise coming from different sectors (academia/industry/stakeholders) and operating in countries with different local or national AD traditions, and to produce training grounded in real needs and aiming to meet end user expectations also beyond the lifespan of the project.

To this end, the project has brought together a blend of complementary organizations, all pioneers in the media accessibility field with an inter-sectorial approach and a strong interest in AD. The consortium, which capitalizes on the success of the ADLAB partnership and expands it to those sectors that best serve the new objectives, has been chosen on the basis of a diversification principle to include both widely spoken and lesser-used languages but also all forms of AVT represented in all the partner countries, and to take into account diverse perspectives. By drawing on a highly diversified combination of expertise, both within and beyond the consortium, the project provides an example of real cooperation between academia and enterprise.

As far as the composition of the consortium is concerned, there are four HEIs based in Italy, Spain, Belgium and Poland and four non-educational partners based in the UK, the Netherlands and Slovenia:

- University of Trieste (Italy) (UNITS)
- Autonomous University of Barcelona (Spain) (UAB)
- University of Antwerp (Belgium) (UA)
- Adam Mickiewicz University (Poland) (UAM)
  
- Utopian Voices Ltd. (UK) (UV)
- Soundfocus (The Netherlands) (SF)
- RTV Slovenija (Slovenia) (RTV SLO)
- Royal National Institute for the Blind (UK) (RNIB)

The HEIs have worked in the area of AD for many years and have been active in researching and disseminating their findings, as well as in teaching AVT and AD both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. HEI partners have an important research-oriented and content-management role in the project. All lead specific project activities (Intellectual Outputs, see § 4 for an overview) based on their most traditional area of specialization. The University of Trieste, already leader of ADLAB, acts as project leader, and is responsible of IO2 (focusing on

the profile definition of the AD expert) and IO6 (focusing on the accreditation of the training material) given the work done by its representatives in profiling translation professionals, their experience in survey work and experimentation, and work in the field of validation. The Adam Mickiewicz University will lead IO1 (focusing on the assessment of current AD training practices in EU) given the long-term experience of its representatives in translator training, and their tradition in AD teaching. The University of Antwerp will lead IO3 (focusing on course design) given its extensive experience in research into accessible media, competence identification, workflow procedures, and for its practical experience in curriculum design, organization of extracurricular courses and collaboration in training and research with broadcasters, user associations and organizations promoting accessible culture. The Autonomous University of Barcelona will lead IO4 (focusing on the creation of the training material) given its strong focus on optimizing professional ICT accessibility to cultural events, training and accessibility standardization.

Non-academic partners will have an equally crucial role on all phases of the project, contributing to the implementation of the objectives, completion of the deliverables, and establishment of user and business needs. Soundfocus is an audio post-production studio responsible for all major AD projects in the Netherlands, and specialized in sound design, subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing, media accessibility, live sound, audio recording. Its technical expertise will be invaluable for the creation of audiovisual training materials. Utopian Voices is a private company that supplies AD, training, research and data analysis with the aim of advancing access to live and recorded media for blind or visually impaired people. Its creative director is one of UK's most experienced describers. This partner will be in charge of the evaluation of the project advances and deliverables, with a direct impact on their quality and success. RTV Slovenija is the national public radio and TV house. It recently incorporated AD in its programming and now strives to implement it (Rot, Šumej & Vodeb, 2017). This partner will be an important showcase of the project and a strong connection with the Balkan Region, disseminating the work of ADLAB PRO where AD is still unknown. The Royal National Institute for the Blind is a renowned association supporting almost two million people in the UK with sight loss. RNIB will raise project awareness in a country where AD is long established amongst sophisticated AD users and providers.

A further asset of ADLAB PRO is the support of a number of local, regional, national and international organizations. These organizations include user associations, cultural bodies, museums, AD associations, public and private service providers, all playing a major role in dissemination, awareness rising and further networking. The collaboration with user associations will be essential for reaching out to blind end-users who will give us feedback on their demands, main (dis)satisfactions, needs and expectations in relation to audiovisual accessibility in general and AD in particular. The link with service providers will ensure proper con-

nection and dissemination in the professional world and a most effective channel to reach out to audiovisual translation professionals who will benefit from the course materials and collaborate during the evaluation and testing phase.<sup>7</sup>

#### 4. THE PROJECT ACTIVITIES: “INTELLECTUAL OUTPUTS”

Partners will work together on all phases of the project to deliver successfully and according to the plans. The working activities of the project, called Intellectual Outputs (IOs), are meant to lead gradually to the creation of the training materials following progressive research and testing work over a precise timeframe, starting in September 2016. ADLAB PRO hinges around six IOs, each coordinated by a partner (cf. § 3):

- IO1: Assessment of current AD training practices in Europe (UAM)
- IO2: Profile definition of the AD expert (UNITS)
- IO3: Creation of course content for AD experts (UA)
- IO4: Development of training material (UAB)
- IO5: Testing and evaluation of project outcomes (UV)
- IO6: Accreditation of training material (UNITS)

During the first six months, ADLAB PRO’s work will produce a comprehensive overview of the current AD training practices in Europe (IO1). It will then outline the AD professional profile, its required skills and its competencies (IO2). Starting in July 2017, right after the completion of IO2, partners will work for 9 months on the delineation of concrete training proposals based on different types of AD (IO3). IO3 will end in March 2018. Half of the overall project life (starting from January 2018) will be devoted to the creation of the training materials (IO4) and to its evaluation and testing (IO5), along with the accreditation of the educational components through the attribution of ECTS/ECVETS (see note 6) to each (IO6).

7 The organizations involved (which I would like to thank) include: European Disability Forum; Italian Blind Union; Slovenian Blind Union; Croatian Blind Union; Association of the Blind and Partially Sighted in Belgium; Regional council of FVG associations of persons with disabilities and their families (Italy); Rittmeyer Regional Institute for The Blind in Trieste; Belgian Department of Culture; Slovenian Ministry of labour, family, social affairs and equal opportunities (Disability, veterans and victims of war directorate); Slovenian film producer’s association; Slovenian film centre; Italian Science Centre “Immaginario Scientifico” (Trieste); Jasenovac Memorial Site (Croatia); Flemish Audiovisual Fund; Polish Audio Description Foundation; “Katarynka” Foundation for the Development of Audio Description in Poland; Seventh Sense Foundation; Flemish Agency for accessibility and universal design. The supporting service providers, all offering high quality accessibility services such as AD, respawning and subtitling for the deaf, or striving to introduce AD in their programming include the following: Sub-Ti (UK); ArtisProject (Italy); Bayerische Rundfunk Fernsehen (Germany); Croatian RTV.

#### 4.1. IO1 – ASSESSMENT OF CURRENT AD TRAINING PRACTICES

IO1, led by the Adam Mickiewicz University, assessed current AD training practices in Europe covering university and vocational training and focusing on various forms of recorded and live AD. This output contributed to create a picture of the current EU training situation, and it will serve as a starting point for the identification of what is common to all training programmes and what is still required in the provision of a professional curriculum for an AD expert. This IO included a quantitative and a qualitative phase. The quantitative survey was prepared as an online form distributed among teachers of AD in HEIs and AD providers across Europe in order to collect information about the type, quantity and length of training, group sizes, teaching modes, amount of theory and practice in the course and assessment techniques. The qualitative overview included an in-depth analysis of existing curricula and course materials provided by AD trainers from partner organisations, as well as in-depth interviews with selected teachers to gain more insight into their teaching approach. Details are available on the project website ([www.adlabproject.eu/](http://www.adlabproject.eu/)). In a nutshell, the (piloted) English version of the questionnaire has been distributed online via Instant.ly. We obtained responses from 86 respondents - mainly university teachers and audiodescribers. The core results show that teachers are typically practitioners who cooperate with VIPs, and that film AD is taught most often. Furthermore, academic courses and non-academic courses do not differ greatly, both being practice-oriented. In this respect, however, non-academic courses show a stronger focus on vocal skills (ADLAB PRO, 2017; Chmiel and Mazur, 2017).

#### 4.2. IO2 – AUDIO DESCRIPTION PROFESSIONAL: PROFILE DEFINITION

IO2, conducted by the University of Trieste, aims to set out the profile, skills and competences of the AD professional. It is the backbone to the project and it will act as a logical extension of IO1 as well as a key to the definition of the course content (IO3). Work on the profile of the AD professional will start from a study of the existing literature, including present guidelines, and by consulting working audio describers and AD end users through online surveys and a series of semi-structured interviews. In particular, we wish to gain insight into the gaps and the most emphasized aspects of current training to understand what competences have to be developed further. The findings will enable us to determine whether there are any competences that have not shown up in the survey of what present courses offer (IO1) or in the literature analyzed. The final IO2 document will offer a comprehensive professional profile that will serve as a starting point for the development of the course curriculum (IO3).

Up to the time of writing this article, the work on IO2 has involved the creation of a multilingual questionnaire (English matrix and translation in the proj-



ect languages) that will be administered online via Web Survey Creator, a flexible tool enabling us to export data, analyze the responses and deliver accessible questionnaires for the visually impaired persons. Our target respondents will be threefold, including AD writers, AD providers and AD users. The questionnaire, customized based on the target respondent group, will hinge around some core sections assessing e.g. details about the audio describer activity, their educational background and training, their opinion and views on the type of skills, competences and activities they consider needed by professionals in this area. Users are asked to express their opinions and preferences on the ADs they use and to give us their perspective on the work of the audio describer, as well as to express their specific (dis)satisfactions.

#### 4.3. IO3 – COURSE DESIGN

IO3, led by the University of Antwerp, aims to design a course based on the input from IO1 and IO2. The course design will provide a structure that accommodates modular content that can be used as input for courses taught in a variety of contexts, both at universities and in house by companies. The course design will be modular, making it possible to teach the modules all together or separately in different, tailor-made combinations. The design will allow for online teaching and flipped learning situations complementing face-to-face classrooms, and will deal with different AD modalities (including AD for TV, film, theatre and other live events, as well as AD for museums and a wide range of cultural events). It will cover a wide range of topics based on IO2 findings. The outcome of this IO will consist of a graphic representation of the proposed course design, visually representing its modular structure and its flexibility.

#### 4.4. IO4 – DEVELOPMENT OF COURSE CONTENT

IO4 is led by the Autonomous University of Barcelona. After defining the professional profile (IO2) and establishing a modular content design (IO3), course content will be developed as tangible outputs of IO4. Content will be organized in self-contained units that can adopt a myriad of formats (e.g. online videos, electronic documents, recorded webinars, tutorials, recorded showcases or text files, among other training materials). The content will be developed along with IO5 to guarantee its quality and along with IO6 to quantify the credits assigned to each educational component. The content developed within IO4 will be flexible and easily adaptable to various trainee profiles and training situations, proposing various learning paths and hands-on activities. The project will also take stock from Europe's richness in languages, cultures and audiovisual transfer modes, which are well represented in the consortium, providing selected con-

tent in multiple languages. The content will be made available through the AD-LAB PRO website, promoting an open access policy.

#### 4.5. IO5 – EVALUATION AND TESTING

Testing and checking for quality and striving for excellence is one of the driving forces in this project. The project intends to plan a strategic development of course content and design, while checking their efficacy with potential users. The course content will be designed in a progressive form. This will allow for the testing of the content at each stage. Any feedback will be implemented immediately. This sequential development with ad hoc testing will secure content quality, adequacy and progress. The partners recognize the importance of evaluation such that it must be built in from the very beginning of the project. This output will take the form of a series of short reports assessing all IOs, demonstrating their evolution and how they have been refined during the early stages of the project.

#### 4.6. IO6 – COURSE EVALUATION, RECOGNITION AND ACCREDITATION

It is crucial that the course design (IO3) and the educational components produced by ADLAB PRO (IO4) are officially recognized and validated at a European level to guarantee their quality and also the sustainability and resilience of the project. Through IO6, ADLAB PRO will dedicate special efforts to this aim. ADLAB PRO will deliver two different types of assessment and accreditation: ECTS will be used by HEIs and ECVETS by companies interested in vocational education. Attributing ECTS/ECVETS to each of ADLAB PRO's educational components will make it easier to use ADLAB PRO training materials both at HEIs and in vocational (e.g. company in-house) training and will ensure accreditation standards and quality. UNITS will lead IO6, but all partners will take an active part in the accreditation process. The HEI partners will define the learning outcomes and the quantification of the ECTS to assign to each educational component (or unit). Non-educational partners will work alongside HEI partners helping to quantify ECVETS. IO6 will develop along with other IOs so that while the educational components are designed (IO3), created (IO4), tested and evaluated (IO5), they are also be accredited (IO6). Each partner will define the expected learning outcomes (i.e. what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process), skills and competences to be acquired for each educational component, and will calculate its credit value attributing a number of ECTS and ECVETS to each unit.

## CONCLUSIONS

Although ADALB PRO primarily aims to create innovative and customizable learning components to train AD professionals in different contexts, the project's results and impact are expected to go beyond the production of tangible outcomes. Thanks to its composition, the work of the consortium is in fact expected to generate a raised awareness of AD (such that its provision is budgeted for from the start, rather than as a later add-on, in any production and in any EU country), and a new shared vision of AD (as an opportunity rather than a problem) that will be the starting point for a desirable change in society and market, with a wider provision of good quality AD for different products and settings, the consequent enhanced inclusion of disadvantaged communities in cultural life, and the creation of new audiences who can benefit from AD beyond the VIP community.<sup>8</sup>

The results of ADLAB PRO will also have a direct impact on HEIs, where we expect that the course (or parts of it) will be used, enhancing learning opportunities and leading to discussion, experimentation and diffusion of knowledge for the near future and beyond. Furthermore, since the educational components produced by ADLAB PRO will be recognized and validated through an ECTS/ECVETS system, the flexibility and appeal of the course will increase both in countries where AD is already long established as well as those for whom it is an innovation, thus guaranteeing the quality, sustainability and resilience of the project. Not only will the theoretical and practical findings of the project form the basis for curriculum development, teaching practice and practical training of AD professionals, but they will also form the basis for future research, which will engage scholars and guarantee a continued interest in promoting and studying the many possibilities of AD and accessibility.

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8 AD can be useful for elderly, physically or mentally challenged groups, people with special needs and learning disabilities including those diagnosed with autism, but also citizens needing to integrate in a new linguistic and cultural environment (e.g. migrants, asylum seekers).

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