

Quality assurance measures are continually being reassessed to ensure that standards in the language teaching industry keep improving. There have been many developments in this area, with international dialogue on quality standards high on the agenda, while the focus of quality assurance schemes is moving towards the end consumer. GILLIAN POOLE reports.

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When a school representative or advertisement makes claims about the quality of the [language centre] that it represents, how can you be assured that the claims have integrity and that the school has high standards of educational competence?" says Paul Maher, Director of Global Village Vancouver in Canada. "You can't really, unless the claims have been verified by third party, non-partisan, professionals who have inspected the school. This is what accreditation is all about."

The way in which quality is assured in the language teaching sector varies widely from country to country. In a minority of cases, governments have made it mandatory for language schools to be registered or accredited by a body they endorse, while others endorse the voluntary accreditation schemes run by other organisations.

In most countries, associations of language schools produce codes of practice and guidelines that they expect their members to follow. Some organisations also have their own inspection schemes for members, often conducted by independent inspectors. And in some countries, there is more than one scheme. For example, in the USA, Accet accredits post-secondary education and training institutions, including English language centres. In 1999, an alternative accreditation scheme, CEA, was launched specifically for English language providers. In the UK, there is the English in Britain Accreditation (EiBA) scheme, which is jointly run by the British



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Council, the private schools' association, Arels, and the state-sector group, Baselt. The Association of British Language Schools (ABLS) runs an alternative accreditation scheme which includes inspection by independent inspectors and is recognised by the British Home Office. And then there is Baleap, a national association for university-based language centres in the UK that teach English for academic purposes, which also has its own inspection scheme.

As if all that were not confusing enough, there are also international associations, such as the International Association of Language Centres (Ialc) and the European group, Eaquals, that run inspection schemes for members, and the Association of Language Travel Organisations (Alto), which has gone some way to ensuring the quality of the language travel package, mainly through its aim of promoting fair business between schools and agents.

What is clear, however, is that there is a groundswell across the industry towards ever-increasing quality standards that are transparent to agents and students alike, and, as more countries adopt such standards others will be forced to follow. "I am convinced that standards will soon be increasing everywhere," asserts Paul Menniss, Chief Executive of the British Association of State English Language Teaching (Baselt) in the UK, "as with information access and the ability to compare experience becoming easier, demand for higher quality will be the key driving force in international recruitment."

Many language school associations have introduced measures to ensure their members keep pushing standards ever higher. In Malta, for example, all schools must be registered by the Ministry of Education's EFL Monitoring Board. But the Maltese English language school group, Feltom, goes further to ensure the quality of its members. "Feltom professes a self-regulation policy and [regular] meetings serve as reminders of the members' higher obligations towards their students," explains Francis Stivala, Feltom's President. Arels in the UK also enhances the quality standards of its members above and beyond what is required in EiBA, through a code of practice and training events for school staff members.

In Spain, the Ceele scheme inspects schools and, in the inspection report, provides guidelines on how to improve quality. "The University of Alcala [which conducts the Ceele inspections] sends the certificate to every school with... a list with advice and suggestions of what they think the school should do to improve the weak points," explains Oscar Berdugo, Director of Español Recurso Económico (E/RE), which helps administer Ceele.

Frank Heyworth of Eaquals, which also provides advice on improvement for members, adds, "Our schools are asked to report on how far they have implemented [previous] recommendations, and on improvements made since the last inspection. The Eaquals view is that quality can only be maintained by continuous improvement." ▶

How important is accreditation to agents?

As most agents represent a whole range of language schools in different countries, they may be unable to visit them all or as often as they would like. "It is difficult to assess the quality of the school even if you visit it since, as an agent, I cannot afford to spend a week or two as a student in each school," says Karel Klusak of Intact agency in the Czech Republic.

He believes that association membership is a guarantee of a certain quality, which is a view shared by Elizabeth Walmsley, Director of AECC International in Taiwan. "[Accreditation is] very important [to us]," she says. "We want some security for our students." For Angel Juanpere of Easy Languages Abroad in Spain, there is an added benefit of quality

assurance. "[Accreditation] is one more selling point but it is not the most important," he says. "Normally, all schools we represent are recognised or are part of certain associations. However, [an added benefit is that these schools] do more marketing and match better the standard we want to offer our clients."

While some agents stress the accreditation of partner

schools, others mention it only if the client asks. And, by all accounts, students are not generally that interested in the quality assurances offered by associations and other industry bodies. Far more important is the recommendation of the agents themselves, as Walmsley points out. "Students [trust] your recommendation if they are comfortable with you."

But quality schemes generally give agents more confidence in a school. New quality schemes, such as CEA in the USA, have, says Juanpere, resulted in "no real improvement" in standards but "it gives a feeling of safety". Paolo Barilari of I Centri in Italy adds that most schools that he represents in Spain have acquired Ceele recognition since the scheme began.

In Australia, Neas, which inspects English language schools there, is currently developing a set of best practice guidelines. "Neas certainly encourages higher standards through assessment visits and by offering advice to colleges requesting it," explains Neas National Manager, Glenys Merrifield.

The organisation also organises workshops for directors of studies, which, according to Merrifield, "allow us to focus on best practice issues". Institutions that have Neas accreditation can also choose to become members of English Australia (EA), which has additional entry criteria, best practice guidelines of its own and training seminars, organised for the staff of member schools.

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Transparent Schemes

Although such measures, together with the knowledge that an institution has passed an inspection, can give agents confidence that a school offers a certain standard of provision, many believe that full details of the inspection report should be made available. "Having access to the full [inspector's] report could give agents a better knowledge of the 'product' they are promoting," says Paolo Barilari of I Centri agency in Italy.

The British Council, Arels and Baselt have recently taken steps to make the EiBA scheme more transparent. From March, statements about accredited institutions, based on the inspection report, have been published on the British Council's website. Although these are only brief statements based on the full report, they include a summary of what the inspectors look at, type and size of the language provider, nature of the courses on offer, points of excellence and areas for improvement. Schools can use these statements in their marketing materials but they must be used in their entirety and the wording cannot be changed.

Further revisions to the EiBA scheme are on the horizon, according to John Shackleton, Manager of

Accreditation Services at the ELT Group of the British Council, to enable the scheme to "better fulfil its mission of protecting overseas students, focusing more on the student experience and less on the input side of an organisation's provision".

The accreditation body in Ireland, Acels – which works closely with other industry bodies in Ireland including the schools' marketing group, MEI~Relsa – has gone a step further in ensuring student views count. In 2000, it introduced student focus groups to its inspection scheme. "Students, their agents and group leaders are assured that [student] views and comments are valued and given consideration," says Jim Ferguson of Acels. "The information [from these groups] has been useful and often gives additional information to that gleaned from [the schools'] own student feedback forms."

Another association to have revised its quality control measures is the international schools' organisation, Ialc. All members are now re-inspected every three years. In addition, says Jan Capper, Ialc Secretariat Manager, "We require all Ialc members to produce a quality plan, which is an individual statement of how it defines and ensures the quality of its services. The quality plan forms the basis of the re-inspection." This quality plan provides Ialc with a "culturally sensitive basis for evaluating the school".

Capper continues, "We require our members to complete an annual self-assessment. It enables us to note significant changes from one year to the next, and obliges the school to submit up-to-date documentation such as their complaints procedure, publicity materials and key staff qualifications. Because it is a signed statement by the school owner-director, it could prove vital in the event of a serious complaint."

Collaboration with outside organisations

A number of language school associations have turned to specific quality assurance organisations in their own countries to give their efforts added kudos. Asils in Italy is working with Uniter, the Italian standards agency that administers the Iso quality certificate. "In cooperation with Uniter, we are preparing a Charter of Service," reports Alessandro Adorno, Asils President. "At the end of this work we will also ask the govern-

Quality weak spot - host family accommodation?

One area where agents are unanimous in the need for improved standards is accommodation. "Host families are becoming a critical issue," says Karel Klusak of Intact in the Czech Republic. "If we get negative reports, it is usually related to host families."

A number of quality schemes do not look at this important aspect of the language travel experience

at all, or just stipulate that the schools must have an accommodation officer responsible for standards. Among the schemes that do monitor accommodation, many only inspect a sample of host families.

In Malta, until this year, the Ministry of Tourism issued licences to host families and ensured their standard of provision. Even so, the standard was not generally

believed to be high enough, and Feltom has been pushing for changes for some time now. "Steps need to be taken [to establish] set conditions for all [host families]," asserts Francis Stivala, President of Feltom. "Areas [for regulation] include the number of students [per family], the size of bedrooms, the good conduct certificate of each member of the family and

the school's relationship with the family."

From the beginning of this year, the Malta Tourism Authority (MTA) has assumed responsibility for ensuring the standard of host families. The MTA says, "The [new] regulatory framework envisages closer monitoring and screening of applicants."

Another country to be tightening up its regulations

is New Zealand. The Ministry of Education has made it mandatory for language schools to sign its Code of Practice of the Pastoral Care of International Students. According to Anne Butler of Fiels, the most "significant" aspect of the code is the vetting by New Zealand police of all members over the age of 18 of host families that provide accommodation to junior students.

ment to [endorse it]." In New Zealand, in addition to the compulsory NZQA registration for language schools and NZQA accreditation for all courses over three months in duration, Fiels is making it mandatory for its members to achieve Iso through SGS International. This, according to Fiels' Chairperson, Anne Butler, "focuses on the quality of the total student package offered by our schools".

In France, Souffle is working with the government standards body, L'Association Française de Normalisation (Afnor), towards the development of a quality standard for French language schools. (A "norme" has already been developed for the outgoing French language travel market, see *Language Travel Magazine*, May 1999, pages 14-15.) This will replace Souffle's

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current inspection scheme. "[Working with Afnor] will be more expensive for our members," says Jean Pettrissan, Souffle Secretary, "but we think our charter will be stronger."

On a wider scale, language school associations, agents and other industry bodies are currently discussing the establishment of a European norme for the language travel industry, which will define quality guidelines and establish a set of voluntary standards

(see *Language Travel Magazine*, October 2001, pages 12-13). "A clear need for a [European Union]-wide standard emerged that was primarily focused on consumer protection, in much the same way as the Package Travel Directive evolved to protect the consumer of holiday products in the early 1990s," explains Simon Freeman at Arels. The standard is expected to be finalised by the first-half of 2002.

Slow to establish inspections

Meanwhile, Canada has been slow to find a way to ensure the quality of its language teaching sector

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through inspections, having largely been hampered by the fact that education is regulated provincially rather than nationally, and because of dissent over certain issues among individual schools' associations. Currently, the state sector association, CSLP, monitors its members through the adherence of a "strict annual reporting procedure on their observance of council standards and procedures". Private language school organisation, Capls, has a code of ethics and set of standards to which members must adhere. However, Pelsa has been the trailblazer in Canada, introducing an inspection scheme for its members in 2000. It has also been working with Tesl Canada to extend this further. "We are quite far along with this now," reports

Pelsa's President, Virginia Christopher. "By [this] summer, both teacher and institutional standards will be in place with Tesl Canada, as will a list of recognised teacher training programmes. Tesl Canada will also recognise public programmes, which Pelsa does not at this time, due to its membership [which is private schools only]."

A further development in Canada has come from the Private Post-Secondary Education Commission (PPSEC) in British Columbia, which is responsible for registering all institutions in the province that provide training or instruction to over-17 year olds. It has recently introduced a voluntary self-study accreditation scheme. Although supportive of the scheme - at the time of going to press, Global Village Vancouver was going through the PPSEC accreditation process - Stephen Cassells, Global Village President, says, "PPSEC does not go far enough in that it does not regulate teaching qualifications for English schools, thus leaving the door open for less reputable schools to employ unqualified instructors. [We] support the perspective of Pelsa and Tesl Canada in lobbying for teaching standards nationally in our industry."

South Africa and Germany lag behind

South Africa and Germany stand out as language travel destinations that are unregulated, owing to the fact that they both have no national accreditation scheme, nor language school associations. However, in South Africa, a long laborious process to accredit all educational institutions is underway by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). Although, according to Karl Rutti of Cape Communication Centre, SAQA registration will be mandatory for English

National and international quality schemes for language schools

Country	Name	No. accredited institutions/members	Quality assured by			Additional	Inspection/guidelines includes										
			Inspections	Code of practice	Self-assessment		Private sector	State sector	Home tuition	Seasonal centres	Junior centres	Residential accom.	Host family accom.	Min. teacher qualifications	Publicity checked	Inspection per no. years	Spot checks?
Australia	Neas	162	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓					✓	✓	✓	1.5	✓
Canada	Pelsa	14	✓	✓	✓		✓						✓	✓	✓	5	
Canada	Capls	50		✓	✓					✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		
Canada	CSLP	62		✓	✓			✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		
Europe	Eaquals	54*	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	3	✓
France	Souffle	17	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓					✓	✓	✓	5	
International	Ialc	59	✓	✓	✓	Nat. accredited.	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	3	
Ireland	Acels	110	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	3	✓
Italy	Asils	35	✓	✓	✓	Iso 9000	✓			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	3	
Italy	Italian in Italy	21	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	3	✓
Malta	EFL Monitoring Board	30+	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	1	✓
Malta	Feltom	16		✓	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
New Zealand	NZQA	100+	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	1	✓
New Zealand	Fiels	20	✓	✓	✓	Iso 9000	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
New Zealand	Creils	18	✓	✓	✓		✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Spain	ERE	40	✓	✓	✓		✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	2	
UK	British Council/Arels/Baselt	369	✓				✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	4	✓
UK	ABLS	27	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	2	
UK	Baleap	26	✓	✓	✓	EIBA		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	4	✓
USA	Accet	239	✓	✓	✓		✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	3-5	✓
USA	CEA	30	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	5	

Global quality standards - reality or a pipe dream?

There has been much discussion between national associations in recent years about harmonising quality standards in the language teaching industry. This has been achieved to some extent on a European basis through Elite, which is a federation of language school associations, including Arels, Asils, Souffle, Fedele in Spain and AEPLE in Portugal.

But to set up worldwide standards will not be easy. "International standards and cultures are too different and [this] would make [such an initiative] too difficult to monitor," says Cleve Brown at Crels in New Zealand.

However, the benefits of such standards for the industry as a whole are obvious, as Jan Capper of IALC stresses. "A credible global standard could help

protect and raise the profile of language programme provision, which is sometimes damaged by the behaviour and practices of non-regulated operators."

Frank Heyworth of Eaquals believes the move towards some sort of worldwide standards is inevitable as the market matures. "In Europe, generally, there is an increasing consumer demand for transparent and

understandable standards," he says.

According to Anne Butler, Chairperson of Fiels in New Zealand, the only way forward would be to appoint an independent international body to administer such a scheme. She says, "A quality scheme would only benefit agents and students if it was broad in its scope and conducted [independently]. If this were the case, it would

enable absolute confidence in a school."

To establish worldwide standards, Capper says it is important that individual countries set up their own monitoring systems. "The more countries and schools that adopt a quality scheme, the better," she says. "Strong national associations are an essential prerequisite to achieving shared global standards in the future."

language centres that accept overseas students in the future, it will be some time before SAQA actually gets round to the private language school sector.

In Germany, moves to set up quality standards for private language schools have ground to a halt. The language school association, IQ Deutsch, disbanded at the end of 2000 after five years in operation as it was unable to gain widespread support for the establishment of national standards (see *Language Travel Magazine*, March 2001, page 7). Instead, IQ Deutsch's six members joined the European quality association, Eaquals, whose standards are widely recognised throughout Europe. For example, Swedish students are eligible for a government grant for language stud-

ies overseas if they take a course at an Eaquals-certified language centre, and Eaquals is recognised in Italy for "credito formativo", credits given to students for language learning outside the state system.

Developments in this arena of language teaching provision are unlikely to slow down. Menniss' vision of the future is one of complete openness. "Transparency is the key [in quality assurance]," he concludes. "The market will demand complete access to inspection reports and help to generate the production of league tables and other independently audited information, so that informed choices can be made. In this, we will be no different to any other sector or service." □