

# Good teamwork

Language schools are working together with other local education institutions to form strong regional associations that speak for a particular city or area and put cooperation ahead of competition. BETHAN NORRIS reports.

## Local exposure

Almost all regional school associations are heavily involved in the organisation of familiarisation (fam) trips for agents to visit local schools and get a feel for an area of the country that they may not be familiar with.

Sue Johns from the Heart of England Language Schools Association (Helsa) in the UK says that, to a large extent, fam trips get around the difficulty of marketing a group of schools that are essentially competitors. "Our members are promoted through regular in-bound fam trips – normally about four per year," she says.

"We have tried many different marketing/promotion ideas over the years and found that these trips are the one thing that brings us together. Outbound activities can be very divisive."

Fam trips also have the added advantage that associations are able to choose the agents that they particularly want to target, either from specific student markets or else those that have good reputations. Helsa aims to further refine their agent marketing strategies by working more closely with British Council offices in a range of new markets, including Slovenia in 2006.

"We are aiming to link up a lot more with British Council offices abroad to improve the quality of agents coming to visit the region [using] local knowledge in their countries," she says.

Being a member of a regional schools' association can have many advantages for language schools and other institutions involved in education provision for international students. The role of these associations can include providing a forum for the exchange of ideas; enhancing individual promotional efforts; providing a unified voice when dealing with local or national government; and providing a ready network of education link-up options (language school twinned with local college, for example), which add value to individual programmes on offer. No two associations are exactly the same and the value gained through membership of a particular association can differ depending on individual needs.

The main advantage of regional school associations is that they can address issues experienced by operators from a distinctly local standpoint. When looking at the reasons behind the creation of such associations, it is interesting to note two distinct trends. On the one hand, many were originally formed by schools located in a less well known region of a study destination – for example the Galician Association of Spanish Schools for Foreigners (AGAES) in Spain – while others were established in areas where the international student industry was already well-established – such as English in London in the UK and New York English Schools (NYESA) Association in the USA.

In some cases, these contrasting foundations reveal distinct differences in the current activities and direction of the associations themselves. Richard Day from English in the North says that the association was originally set up to raise the profile of the north of England as a destination for English language learners. "We are able to develop and promote strong regional identity and luckily do not have too many members in any one location," he says. "As a group, we are able to promote more effectively the selling points of the region, which we all do independently in our own promotion." The association has been active in its promotional efforts in the first half of 2006, already taking part in a workshop with French agents, attending education fairs in Warsaw and Seoul and hosting an inward mission for selected agents from around the world.

Meanwhile, in the USA, Wrenford Johnson at NYESA says that while the association attends fairs and workshops to promote its members overseas, its principal role is to "keep members informed of regulations from the New York State Education Department under whose supervision all the proprietary schools are, and to inform schools about local and international events". The association is also highly active in representing its members to the local and national government and was successful at persuading the local state government to reclassify language schools within the education system. "The New York State Education Department tried

to make changes and impose regulations on us which were meant for vocational schools. It was important to highlight the fact that we are non-vocational and accept no public funds, unlike other schools in the proprietary sector," says Johnson.

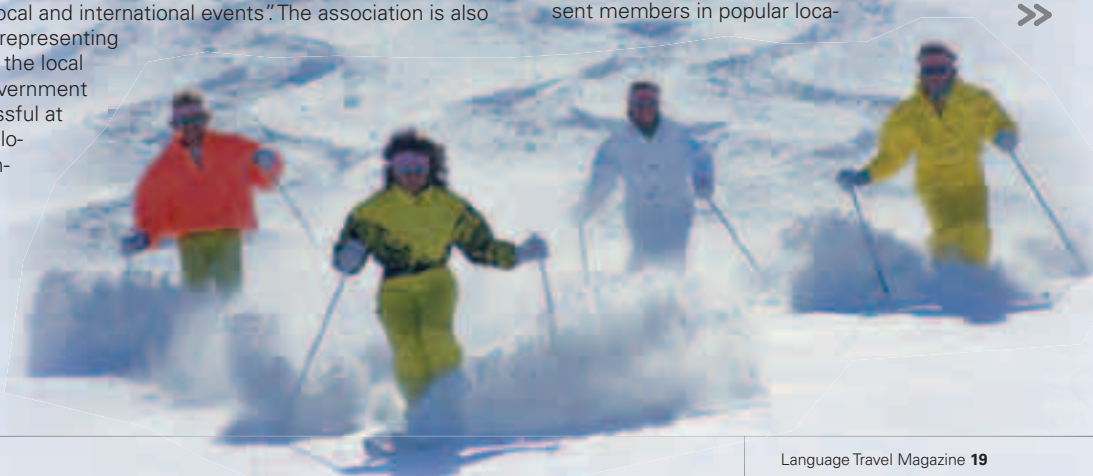
In associations located in areas where international education has always been big business, lobbying and other non-marketing activities can take on a greater importance. Margaret Davis from the International Public School Education Association of British Columbia (Ipsea) in Canada says that the associ-

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ation was formed after provincial government funding for international education initiatives among public secondary schools in British Columbia was revoked in the 1990s. "After a few years, people working in international education in their school districts felt the need to meet with each other to network, share market information and develop some common policies and practices," she recounts.

Recent initiatives carried out by Ipsea include producing a 200-page international education guide for members and undertaking a major marketing study for the secondary school sector. "Recently, we have started looking at marketing again," says Davis. "In 2005 we hired a contractor to do an economic impact study for our organisation and we are now looking at ways to work together to market British Columbia as a destination."

Even for associations that represent members in popular loca-



Judy Loren from English in London says that their association organises fam trips to tie in with the annual English UK fair in Brighton, thereby targeting a wide mix of nationalities, as well as separate trips that are "country specific, for example, [for agents from] Thailand, Germany [or] Spain".

In New Zealand, agent fam trips also have a role to play in the highly targeted marketing programme initiated by Education Wellington International. The association has recently launched the Vietnam Education Export Network as well as a similar initiative supported by New Zealand Trade & Enterprise to encourage more Indonesian students to come to study in the city. "We hope to bring a small group of the hardest working agents here [this year] to get really up close and personal with the network member institutions," relates Marilyn Davies at the association.

tions, marketing still has an important role to play, as Judy Loren from English in London explains. "The main advantage of belonging to a regional marketing group is that the members are able to make agents and students aware of the particular pluses to studying in London," she says. "These days, with competition so fierce in the UK and other EFL destinations, we cannot assume that London will be the first choice for students."

The twin aims of overseas promotion combined with looking after members' interests in a more local sphere have now become so defined that in one destination at least, two separate organisations have been established to better fulfil each purpose. In Western Australia, John Paxton from the West Australian Private Education and Training Industry Association (Wapetia) explains that representing private educators in state education and business forums is their main aim, while Perth Education City (PEC) takes care of marketing. "As a regional association, Wapetia has close links with local government rather than federal bureaucrats and can pursue local interests and issues," he says. "As a representative body of quality providers, marketing is not one of our prime functions – PEC has that portfolio in this state."

Like many other regional associations, PEC is principally involved in creating and enhancing brand awareness overseas for its members and region. Mark Barrett from the association highlights how they are constantly on the lookout for new and imaginative marketing opportunities. "PEC, in conjunction with the State Government of Western Australia, organised an English language competition in China," he elaborates. "This competition received an enormous amount of media and political exposure for Perth and the education industry. The 25 winners, city officials and media were awarded a one-week trip to Perth. While in Perth they took part in study sessions, met other Australian schoolchildren and were hosted by Perth families."

Professional development is a relatively new direction for regional associations, although this is something that may become more common in the future. Day says that one of English in the North's activities in 2006 has been the establishment of a Staff Development Group "to provide a much-needed service to all staff members within our member institutions." Erela Dreksler from Andalusian industry group, the Asociación de Escuelas de Español para Extranjeros de Andalucía

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(AEEA) in Spain, says that they also plan to "continue organising different courses for our professors in order to maintain their quality, as well as organising a special seminar for the directors of our schools".

With the adoption of a more holistic approach to promoting the interests of association members and developing their business quality and knowledge, it seems likely that the advantages of collective action on a local scale will become increasingly important to schools in the future. ●