

# BC overhauls agent approach

## Next issue

In our February issue, **Special Report** looks at the ever-popular language and activities market, while **Feedback** finds out how students evaluate their experience at English language schools in Australia. **Destination Reports** from Japan and **City Focus** provides an insight into Boston in the USA. Agency websites come under the spotlight in **Direction**, and **Market Report** looks at how the Spanish language teaching market fared in 2001.

The British Council, working with the associations, Arels and Baselt in the UK, is conducting research into how agents are incorporated into the distribution chain, and how the British Council could better serve agents' needs. It has been organising meetings and focus groups to find out "what agents want".

Richard Law, Manager of ELT Export Services at the British Council, explained that "the research will help us all develop effective and user-friendly materials", adding, "the Arels fair gave us an opportunity to discuss this [approach] with agents – who are naturally one of our key user groups". A meeting with representatives of Felca, the federation of global agency associations, was also organised last year prior to the Alphe workshop. Avenues for collaboration were explored, and Law reported that the meeting was cordial and productive.

A focus group was convened in late August comprising agents from eight different countries: France, Poland, Brazil, Japan, Croatia, Russia, Spain and Colombia. During the meeting, there were a number of interesting areas of agreement, said Law. "For example, agents still want print material in addition to electronic resources, though they use the web, and they would like more systematic links from the Council's sites to their own and course providers' sites."

Junko Sakamoto, Manager of the education exchange service at the London branch of JTB agency – based in Japan – attended the focus group meeting, which she said were useful. "I could get to know other agents' ideas and situations in different countries more clearly," she said, adding, "I believed [the meeting] helped the British Council a lot too." Sakamoto, whose suggestions in-

cluded a more specialised course index (Christmas courses, for example) in the *English in Britain* guide, said she hoped the relationship between the British Council and agents would develop further in the future. "We should get to know each other better in order to have a bright business future together," she commented.

Organised as part of the Prime Minister's initiative to bring more international students to the UK, the results of the Council's efforts are likely to include practical measures such as listings of agents in print and on the Council's website, provision of Education UK brand materials for agents and possibly a dedicated agent website. The new agent strategy is expected to be completed by early 2002.

All these efforts underline the continuing change of attitude towards agents at the British Council, which has cultivated an

## Agent questionnaire



Name of Agent: Peter Kovacs  
Position: General Manager  
Age: 35  
Name of Company: Study Tours  
Location: Budapest, Hungary  
Other branches: none  
No. of full-time and part-time staff: 6/3  
Average no. of students per year: 550

Would you like to participate in our Agent questionnaire? If so, please send us your responses to these questions, accompanied by your photograph. Please contact us if you have any further questions.

### 1. When and how did you become a language travel agent?

A friend of mine and I decided to try to send some Hungarian clients to England to study in 1992. We chose eight schools in different locations, produced a flyer (a very simple one) and put some advertisements in magazines. The revenue was unexpected, and in the first year, we sent 138 students.

### 2. What has been the most challenging enquiry you have received from a student?

We had a client who was 73 years old and who wanted to study three languages within six weeks (spending two weeks in each location) and she wanted to have a similar age group [as herself] in the language classes. It was a real challenge to organise the [selection of] schools, but finally we had to convince our client that it was better to learn in a class with younger students, or we wouldn't be able to place her and meet her requirements.

### 3. Please tell us about your client profile.

The most popular language in Hungary is still English. German and Spanish share second place [followed by] Italian and French. The Russian language is [being requested] more and more. We mainly deal with adult programmes, which means short- and long-term courses for students aged 16 years and older; international student year programmes; academic year programmes; and in the summer, some individual and group programmes for juniors (from 10 to 17 years old).

### 4. How many institutions do you represent and in how many countries?

Our brochure includes over 46 schools or school chain members in over 19 countries [with centres] in at least 52 different locations.

### 5. How have the events of September 11 impacted on your business?

We were very shocked after the September 11 terrorist attacks in

New York City and elsewhere. Unfortunately, we experienced quite a high number of cancellations in the following month. I think the war between the United States [and its allies] and the terrorists will not help the development of our industry.

### 6. What percentage of Hungarians, in your opinion, are interested in language study abroad, and how will this change over time?

This type of travelling is very popular among young people, but it does not belong to the cheap last-minute [holiday] sector. So generally, our clients come from high society families with a higher living standard than average. Translating this into numbers, this means that about 0.06 per cent to 0.08 per cent of the population is interested in or has already taken part in a language study programme abroad.

### 7. What is the most successful business decision you have made?

In the past two years, the

attitude of understanding and co-operation recently. Some years ago, there had been controversy in various countries as the Council tried to introduce student placement schemes in countries where there was a significant agent market (see *Language Travel Magazine*, May 1998, pages 12-13 and March 1999, pages 12-13 as examples).

The British Council announced last year that in markets where there is a significant agent base, it would consider introducing a consultancy scheme, which would see the local British Council office referring students to local agents once they have selected an institution. This model has operated in Italy successfully since 1995, according to Law, and a similar scheme was introduced in Spain last year.

If there is no significant local agent base, a direct placement service will be considered. □

## The new euro currency arrives

FROM 1 January, the new common European currency, the euro, will be in operation in 11 of the member countries of the European Union (EU). Belgium, Germany, Spain, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Austria, Portugal and Finland will all be using the new currency with a dual circulation period, scheduled to end by February 28. After this date, only the euro currency will be in operation.

The transition will evidently impact on agency business both within and outside of the EU, as prices will be directly comparable between France, Spain and Portugal, for example. Students will need to be informed about the new currency they will require when studying in Europe.

Magdalena Jugovic, Director of Kub Travel Enterprises in Yu-

goslavia, said that most of her clients were aware of the currency changeover. "We have been advising them that prices will be mostly in euros, with the exception of the UK and Switzerland," she said, adding, "So far, [students] haven't expressed any worries about the change, although we think that after so many years of dealing with different European currencies, it will be a problem for some to convert to this completely new currency."

In Colombia, Claudia Constanza Rozo Lopez, Director of Go Estudios en el Exterior, said she had received price lists in euros last year from schools in France, Ireland and Germany, "but the first thing we do is change these to US\$ equivalent. [However], we will have to get used to the euro [prices]."

Both Lopez and Jugovic do not expect any great change in business operations, although Jugovic questioned if some schools would raise their prices when converting to euros. "I say this because we noticed this tendency from some schools [in 2001] when the prices were expressed in both domestic currencies and euros," she explained. "The prices in euros were higher than in local currencies."

Nevertheless, Jugovic commented that the euro, "as far as we are concerned, should only make life easier". Alexandra Borges de Sousa of CIAL Centro de Linguas in Portugal agreed. "Since we have clients coming from many countries, and most of our clients are in Europe, we won't have to [give prices] in different currencies now," she said, pointing out that this would eliminate the need for many bank transfers. □

### Status: Ireland

Please note that the Bluefeather School of English in Dublin provided us with information that contributed to our Status survey of Ireland (see *Language Travel Magazine*, November 2001, page 52). The school's name was omitted from our list of contributors. We would like to apologise for any inconvenience caused.

numbers of language travel agents has expanded very quickly in our country. To keep our market share and the value of our service, we decided to form a Hungarian language travel agency association (see page 14), which will help us not to lose our position in the market and to better serve our clients based upon a [European] standard.

### 8. Do you organise visas for your clients and if so, do you receive any sort of help from local embassies?

For those [bookings] where clients need a visa, we include into our service organising the documents for the clients. In some cases, we are faced with difficulties at the embassies, but generally this is not every day. I do feel that in some cases the embassies could work with language travel agents with more flexibility, but this needs a close cooperation on the agent side as well.

### 9. How do you market your services and how have

### you adapted your marketing technique in the past five years?

First of all, we produce our brochures in the Hungarian language, and we distribute these at different times throughout the year, at travel fairs, road shows or via direct mail campaigns. [At the] fairs and road shows, we not only promote our product, but [discuss study abroad] possibilities with the client according to his or her individual needs. [Also], advertisements and press releases are a strong marketing tool for us, as well as this direct marketing of the product, where face-to-face sales are possible.

### 10. What are your forecasts for your business and for the language travel industry in 2002?

That the international political situation will not lead to a breakdown in the language travel market in Hungary and we [will] keep our promises to continue to build a successful business.

Each month, we profile the people from language schools who deal directly with agents, in order to give you the chance to get to know some of the people you work with.



**Who are you?**  
Bonnie Cothren, Director.

### Where do you work?

The Intensive English Language Institute of Flinders University in Adelaide, South Australia.

### Why and how did you start in the industry?

By accident, really. I graduated in the USA with a degree in Russian at the height of the Cold War, and entered an MA Tesol programme to help my job prospects.

### Why should agents choose to represent your school?

The students who come here make excellent progress in English and have a great experience living in Adelaide. This reflects well on the agent who suggested us.

### What do you believe are the challenges facing your school in the future?

To continue to keep our small friendly community atmosphere as we grow into a larger school.

### How does your school promote itself to agents?

First contact is usually through the Internet.

### What percentage of your annual student intake comes through agents?

From 65 to 75 per cent.

### Please give an example of a student success story at your school.

Every student who manages to live and study in a foreign culture is a success story. My favourite is Kou, who arrived from Japan with very little English or confidence. One of his first English sentences was, "I am a bad boy". Four years later, he left Flinders University with excellent English, a degree in psychology and a plan to help other Japanese young people as a school counsellor.

### How do you believe the industry will evolve in the future?

Distance education will have an impact, but I think there will always be interest in the cultural experience that comes with face-to-face learning.

## On the move



Richard Young has taken up the post of Marketing Director for UAB Barcelona, the modern language

school of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. Mr Young said, "Barcelona has been voted one of the best cities in the world for quality of life, and students who come to study with us, in our superb Unesco World Heritage Site building, will soon understand why."



Christiane Kroll, who has worked at Hothouse Media for four years as

Organiser of the Alphe UK Workshop, is leaving the company. She will be missed by colleagues in London and around the world. "I would like to thank all the agents and educators with whom it has been my pleasure to work over these last few years," said Ms Kroll, "and I wish everyone the best of luck for the future."



Abby Penlington has been promoted to the position of Marketing and Public Affairs

Officer at Arels in the UK. The role will involve supporting and implementing Arels' public affairs programmes and working with Sue Coulthard promoting the association. Ms Penlington aims to continue the work of Arels promoting the UK's English language teaching industry in Parliament and among relevant government departments.



Stephan Cocron has joined Distance Learning (DLI) in New York, USA, as a Sales and

Marketing Manager. Mr Cocron has worked as Head Teacher and Manager of Curriculum Development at New York language school, Rennert Bilingual and was most recently in charge of language curriculum at Parlo in New York. At DLI, Mr Cocron sells online learning solutions to colleges and universities worldwide.



Ivo Haeffliger has joined Eurocentres as Head of Sales. He has gained worldwide

experience in international companies in Switzerland, and he has also lived and worked in several countries in Europe, North America and Latin America. With his appointment, Eurocentres hopes to develop its market position and enhance services to its agent network.

## Hungarian association plans progress

LANGUAGE travel agents in Hungary are forming a national agency association in order to distinguish between licensed travel agencies and those operating outside of the law.

Robert Goldmann, Director of Lingvisit Educational and Language Travel Ltd in Budapest, told *Language Travel Magazine* that legislation for travel agents became stricter last year, "and those of us who are licensed and make considerable efforts to run [our businesses] according to legal restrictions [find it hard] under the new bonding system".

Subsequent research by the three founding members of the new Hungarian association, known as the Hungarian Association of Language Travel Agents (Halta), discovered that only eight language travel agencies in Hungary were in fact licensed.

"The [government] has never done anything to force the non-licensed retailers to meet [their] regulations," said Goldmann. Approximately 60 other firms, including local language schools, offer agency services to students, he estimated.

"Our initial goals," he said, "are to regulate the market and raise public awareness of our professional language travel agents." The three founding members, Lingvisit, Study Tours and IH Travel Agency, are collaborating with other licensed travel agencies about the development of the association. Another key goal of Halta is to establish different taxation rules and a separate legal status for language travel agencies in Hungary. "We are trying to establish links with associations [in other countries] who faced similar challenges," said Goldmann.

He added, "It is always easy to act against something. The new government regulations made us get together sooner than we [would have] thought. Otherwise, it [would have] taken many meetings to think about the common issues in an unpredictable [market] like ours in Hungary." □

## Association corner

**Albert Lee**, President of Tosa in Taiwan, tells us about the business trends experienced by members during 2001, and relates Tosa's success to date in being recognised as the premier education consultant industry association in Taiwan.



Tosa's main achievements over the past year have included, firstly, educating agents in Taiwan and making them realise that the practitioners of the education consulting business have to work together to raise the profile of our industry among the stakeholders – students, parents, teachers and education institutions in Taiwan.

Secondly, we have informed the service providers – [that is] the education institutions overseas – that Tosa has already established itself as the window of dialogue between the marketeers and [schools]. Also, we have been convincing the education authorities, both here and abroad, that Tosa can be used as a contact point if they are to interact with the industry. Tosa should be seen as a quality assurance body in Taiwan and we [have managed] to strike a balance between the quality and quantity of the membership by raising our entry level. Tosa members' market share will have significantly increased as our standard of service [has] improved.

Last year, the autumn was the low season for our industry in Taiwan, and we had not really [felt any] impact from the events of September 11 [at the time of going to press]. However, the whole industry is anticipating an extremely severe winter this year. Even before the US attack, bookings for study tours from Taiwan had dropped by 50 per cent, as it is not considered an immediate necessity, as long-term study [is].

[Nevertheless], the nature of the market in Taiwan has gradually shifted from postgraduate study in the USA to short-term language courses in other English-speaking countries such as the UK, Australia, New Zealand and Canada, [as well as] study options in [other] European countries.

As for the British Council situation in Taipei, the British Council in Taiwan is moving towards working with agents in Taiwan in a more constructive manner. It recently held a training session for professional student advisers in Taipei. Agents were allowed into the British Education Exhibition last October. However, [only when] they give up their agent's role in Taiwan can local agents work with the British Council in complete harmony.

In 2002, the obstacle which Tosa has yet to overcome is to win the endorsement of the local education authority, as the Chinese [do not] consider that education should be run as a business. It will take some time before the civil servants can adjust their mindset and award Tosa with funding and authority to guide the industry in the right direction.