

Stepping up standards

Efforts are being made to maintain and improve the quality standards of language teaching centres, as a combination of concerns about security and satisfaction from clients, a watchful eye from national governments keen to protect the reputation of their industry, and competition from other countries all exert an influence on the continuing drive for quality. JANE VERNON SMITH reports on the latest developments in the accreditation sector.



The issue of quality standards in language schools has never been as important as it is today. According to Laura Muresan, Secretary General of the Europe-wide school association, Eaquals, "It is a reality that more and more [language schools] are preoccupied to enhance the quality of their services and to be able to prove that they offer a quality guarantee."

In English-speaking destinations in particular – although far from exclusively – growing competition, not only from rival schools but also rival markets, means that to be in possession of quality accreditation from a respected body is an invaluable selling point. Not only does this help individual schools to be more competitive, but it also benefits the national industry as a whole.

There are also more specific reasons for becoming quality accredited. According to Muresan, "There are countries where [accreditation] has already become a requirement imposed by companies as corporate clients of language schools." Because of this, she adds, "Some schools even get several accreditations, for a number of reasons, often connected with eligibility criteria for different contracts or projects."

Standardisation of quality

While a number of accreditation schemes are run at a national level – Australia's Neas, NZQA in New Zealand and the Maltese Ministry of Education scheme, for example – most countries presently lack a unilateral government-enforced quality accreditation scheme for language schools. Instead, many language school associations in different countries have their own quality criteria, forming part of their membership requirements, while Ialc and Eaquals fulfil a similar role on the international stage.

Naturally, the criteria set out by these schemes tend to differ in the details. However, work currently being carried out at European level may eventually iron out some of these differences. The Comité Européenne de Normalisation (CEN) has been working on the production of a voluntary standard for European language schools, which it hopes will be adopted by all 28 European Union countries.

According to Holger Muelhbauer of CEN, the idea is that, if there are existing national standards, then these will be withdrawn once the new European standard is published, and it is hoped that the CEN model will be used as a reference for public or company-funded language courses. The draft version is detailed in its coverage. Not surprisingly, there have been a number of difficult areas to be resolved, including teaching staff qualifications, consideration of immersion programmes, the number of students per group leader and group leader qualifications. However, work is now well advanced, and – if adopted and barring further obstacles – the standard should be available by the end of 2005.

Back in the present, many of the current accreditation schemes have attracted new members over the past year. Eaquals has seen its membership grow by 16 to more than 100; Ialc has expanded its numbers by seven schools; and Italy's Asils has admitted another two schools to membership.

Meanwhile, in the UK, since the government announced its intention to pursue the idea of enforcing accreditation nationally for schools, there has been rising interest noted in both the

ABLS scheme and the English in Britain Accreditation scheme, both of which are currently recognised by the government.

New and updated schemes

Given the level of interest in quality certification, it is not surprising that new accreditation schemes have been launched over the past year, with others in active development. Following the launch of the South African language school association, Eltasa, in 2002, an inspection-based quality accreditation scheme was introduced in March 2004. This covers all aspects of language school performance, from teaching resources to host family guidelines and financial management. "Before finalising our accreditation scheme," says the association's Meryl van der Merwe, "we looked at every other major scheme worldwide to ensure our scheme was up there with the best."

In Canada there has been significant activity. The Council for Second Language Programs in Canada (CSLPC) spent around three-and-a-half years reviewing other accreditation models and working on the development of a new, more rigorous, quality assurance scheme that could cover state and private language schools. It then opened up membership to private sector schools, welcomed the entire membership of the Private English Language Schools Association (Pelsa), and then changed its name to Canada Language Council (CLC).

CLC Executive Director, Jay Jamieson, claims it is not possible to make accreditation decisions based on an inventory or checklist monitored by one individual. The new scheme adopted by CLC relies on inspections by a team of "third-party, non-partisan professionals", since, he says, experience has shown that this is the only way that impartial accreditations can be validated.

English language teaching institutions in Canada are also represented by the Canadian Association of Private Language Schools (Capls), and this association too has been working on an updated accreditation scheme, which was due to come into operation by the end of 2004. At the core of this scheme also, says Linda Auzins at Capls, are independent site inspections.



Telling the world

Membership of a respected accreditation scheme is an undisputed benefit to language schools when marketing their programmes to students around the world. What is important is that the quality conferred by membership of a scheme should be, first, understood, and second, remembered. So how do organisations convey

their advantage to agents and potential students?

At Eaquals, Laura Muresan is careful to emphasise that the primary role of her organisation is in "the definition of standards and quality control and communicating these", rather than in communicating directly with agents for marketing purposes. In this, Eaquals is not alone.

Reading between the lines, it seems there is an element of concern that marketing is an unsuitably commercial activity to be seen to be linked with the task of upholding quality standards.

Having said this, associations do promote their quality standards in a number of different ways. At EduEspaña, Oscar Berdugo says that the

Ceele accreditation mark is promoted "with the collaboration of the Spanish Foreign Trade Office, via distribution of brochures and informative material that is sent to agents and distributed at fairs all over the world".

At Eaquals, the accreditation system is regularly explained in the course of presentations and keynote

speeches given by its personnel, and a new poster gives details of member schools alongside a presentation of the Eaquals charters and code of practice.

Italian in Italy also uses events such as workshops, fam trips and industry meetings to explain and publicise its standards, while the message is reinforced through

Focus on detail

Inspections documentation has also been the focus of recent changes at Ialc. "We have tightened our requirements for documentation from our member schools before they undergo their audit every four years", says the association's Jan Capper. "Essentially, we require more detail for the inspector, so that they can verify that statements are a true and accurate reflection in reality."

Meanwhile, at French school association, Souffle, Jean Petrissans reports that the audit questionnaire has been updated, while the accompanying dossier is more consistent, with a list of all teaching staff and precise statistics on courses and exams.

Changes have also been brought about in Italy, where, since 2001, members of Asils and Italian in Italy submitted to inspections by the Italian Organisation for the Regulation and Certification of Management Systems in Commerce, Tourism and Services (Uniter). Giuseppina Foti of Italian in Italy advises that her association now looks to the new ISO 9001 for quality accreditation. "As a national accreditation, the ISO 9001 language teaching schemes are run by an agency approved by the government," she observes.

At present, around a third of the association's 23 members have been accredited under this scheme – it is, as Foti points out, a long process. However, "We do not need to convince our schools to gain accreditation, as they are all aware of the great importance [it] has for them," she says.

Because of the constant need to improve and develop in order to maintain the value of accreditation, many schemes have further changes either in the pipeline or under discussion. In January 2005, CLC's membership will consider the inclusion of classroom

observations in its inspection process, while at Neas in Australia, new standards relating to programmes for young learners are currently being developed, and, according to Acting National Manager, Stefan Boffa, it is hoped these will be finalised in the

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coming months. A change in the governance structure of Neas is also underway (see page 6).

In Spain, national school association, Fedele, now recognises not only Ceele accreditation, but schools can be accredited by Instituto Cervantes too. Astrid Verlot at Fedele relates that Fedele considers both schemes to offer a similar quality assurance.

Many schemes have a built-in requirement for criteria of a quality scheme to be reviewed within a specified timeframe. According to Roger Williams of the Accrediting Council for Continuing Education and Training (Accet) in the USA, which has specific standards for English language training as a sub-division within its remit, the standards for accreditation are reviewed on a formal basis every five years – the next

National and international quality schemes for language schools

Country	Name	National accreditation/registration is	No. accredited institutions/members	Quality assured by				Inspection/guidelines includes										
				Inspections	Code of practice	Self-assessment	Student interviews	Private sector	State sector	Home tuition	Seasonal centres	Junior centres	Residential accom.	Host family accom.	Min. teachers qualifications	Publicity checked	Student protection plan	Spot checks
Australia	Neas	compulsory ¹	225	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	1-1.5
Canada	Capls	voluntary	n/a ²	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	n/a	3
Canada	CLC	voluntary	87	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	3
Europe	Eaquals	n/a	over 100	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	3
France	Souffle	voluntary	18	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	5
International	Ialc	n/a	86	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	4
Ireland	Acels	voluntary	105	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	3
Italy	Asils ³	voluntary	36	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	3
Italy	Italian in Italy	voluntary	22	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	1
Malta	EFL Monitoring Board	compulsory	38	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	1
New Zealand	NZQA*	compulsory	166+	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	1
South Africa	Eltasa	voluntary	4 (+ 4 pending)	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	n/a	n/a	●	●	●	●	●	2
Spain	Ceele	voluntary	63	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	2
UK	ABLS	voluntary	33	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	2
UK	EiBA	voluntary	384	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	4
USA	Accet	voluntary	225	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	3-5
USA	CEA	voluntary	48	y	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	n/a	5

- 1: for schools offering courses lasting 3 months or more
 2: new scheme from November 2004
 3: quality assured by Uniter
 *: according to previous response in issue 108, no recent data available

NB: The main quality schemes are detailed (right), but the list is not exhaustive. In countries where a national scheme is enforced, no other is included.

displaying the ISO 9001 mark on brochures and other information documents.

On the whole, the approach to marketing can be fairly low-key. Many schemes make use of their websites to provide detailed information regarding their criteria and policies. For the Accrediting Council for Continuing Education and Training (Accet) in the

USA, this is the main source of information about its standards, policies and procedures, according to Roger Williams. In addition, he says, "We welcome opportunities presented by articles on this issue in widely-read trade publications, such as *Language Travel Magazine*, to raise public awareness of accreditation."

Jan Capper reports that Ialc outlines its quality scheme both on its website and in its annual printed directory of members. It also keeps agents updated on any changes and improvements via newsletter. Similarly, in Canada, the Canada Language Council (CLC)'s website represents its primary publicity vehicle, according

to Jay Jamieson, while brochures and information packages are also used.

For new schemes, such as those run by Eltasa in South Africa and the Canadian Association of Private Language Schools (Capls), a more proactive approach is appropriate. Capls will launch a media and public relations campaign to potential

students, agents and other interested stakeholders once inspections are under way. Meanwhile, at Eltasa, Meryl van der Merwe reports that a marketing plan is currently being drawn up to publicise Eltasa guidelines. For now, she says, publicity is being achieved via member centres, the Internet and various international publications.

review being due in 2005, while Auzins reports that the Capls criteria will be subject to ongoing reviews every three years.

Security endorsement

Governments around the world have always been supportive of initiatives that will boost their national industries. However, given the security issues now surrounding international students, the question of language school accreditation has aroused a different kind of interest on the part of governments around the world – in its ability to demonstrate legitimacy.

Compulsory accreditation systems already exist for language schools in Australia, New Zealand and Malta. The UK government has decided to follow suit, although no timeframe has yet been agreed, says the British Council's Press Officer, Guy Roberts. Ireland is another country that is weighing up the benefits of introducing a nationally-enforced quality kitemark (see page 6) while there are rumours that a similar initiative is being discussed in France.

In the USA, ventures Williams, "It is very likely that accreditation will be compulsory for language schools within the next five

years." Meanwhile, in Canada, according to Jamieson, "Various government departments and agencies are currently considering how the development of a 'master list' of legitimate [language] schools may be developed."

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While Boffa speaks positively of the benefits of Australia's compulsory system, Williams is in two minds about the likely outcome in the USA. "The result will be a mixed blessing," he says, "raising the overall standards and running off the scoundrels on the one hand, but forcing out many smaller schools and re-engineering accreditation



into a compulsory model, [that is] contrary to the traditional voluntary model that has served... in the US for over 100 years."

In the UK, Roberts, however, is confident that compulsory accreditation in the UK should have a very positive effect on the industry, "not least," he says, "through the impact this will have on the promotion of English language training overseas".

Enforcement for all?

So, what are the chances of compulsory accreditation being adopted more widely? Van der Merwe in South Africa believes that would not only would this be a good thing, but a realistic objective. In Italy, Foti goes further. "There will certainly be a time – I foresee between three to six years – when all language schools will need to have some form of accreditation," she says. This could be facilitated, she believes, by shortening the accreditation process.

In the UK, the British Council has certainly taken steps to shorten the waiting time to be accredited, if not the actual process. It has recently approved a proposal to reduce the qualifying period for year-round providers from two years of operation to just one year and has commissioned a consultant to look into how

to make its accreditation scheme more inclusive for all UK providers. Roberts adds, "We are currently developing a brochure for the non-accredited sector called 'Time to Grow', and organising one-day pre-inspection briefings for schools wishing to apply [for accreditation]."

Enforced accreditation from government would undoubtedly help enhance the reputation of the language teaching industry in a country. However, that would not mean the end of all the schemes currently run by school associations. The Maltese language school association, Feltom, worked closely with government in defining and establishing the Maltese national standards that were launched in 1996. But Feltom is now seeking the additional quality edge that a more rigorous accreditation scheme will give its members, and, according to President, John Dimech, it has recently finished drafting its own accreditation scheme, which it plans to launch next year.

As Ialc's Capper points out, "It is almost inevitable that a general scheme will set the bar lower than many of the existing individual schemes. We anticipate that groups of schools will continue to set up their own, often more stringent schemes."

Quality English, which was launched in 2003, is an example of this motivation. It aims to represent only language schools of the highest quality offering English language training around the world.

Carolyn Blackmore,

Chief Executive, explains that all schools must be accredited by their

national body. On top of this, she says, "The QE philosophy is that customers and buyers are best able to judge quality. Initial research into the delivered quality of an applicant school is carried out by a questionnaire to the school and to the school's agents."

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