

Quality living

The arrival of specialist accommodation agencies into the marketplace has shaken up accommodation provision, as schools and language travel agencies both have another option to turn to when trying to ensure a range of quality living choices for students. AMY BAKER reports.

As the types of language learning programmes on offer to students improve and become more focused, one would expect that accommodation standards at language schools and colleges have similarly followed suit. Claudio Chalom, of BEX Brazilian Exchange in Brazil, says that, in some cases, they have. “Some schools are offering very good choices of dormitory with en-suite rooms, computer and kitchen facilities. Others are offering host family options with laundry and transportation to and from the school included in the price,” he says.

But he warns that not all schools are keeping up with the cutting edge of the market. “Some schools are only offering homestay as an accommodation option and they are surely losing many clients interested in other types of accommodation,” he says, adding that Brazilian students are very demanding about their requirements. He goes on, “Other schools also state they have ‘alternative accommodation’ but the details of these options are not clear to agents and students.”

While host families remain popular with students, other options are increasingly being requested. In addition, agents and students are examining standards of host families more closely. At Cesa Languages Abroad agency in the UK, Katherine Brand estimates that 45 per cent of their clientele now ask for shared student apartments or residential accommodation.

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“The number requiring shared apartments or residential accommodation is definitely on the increase,” she relates. “The most striking example we’ve found is the popularity of the new residence at Escuela de Idiomas de Nerja [in Spain], which has been open for a few years now and has been a great success with clients from the word go.”

Brand ventures that those schools investing time and money into their accommodation structure reap the benefits immediately. “The better the range of accommodation the college offers, the busier and more popular the college, so simple economics dictate that colleges have worked hard to improve accommodation choice to increase and maintain market share,” she explains.



PHOTOGRAPH: HAMPSHIRE SCHOOL OF ENGLISH

Accommodation agencies

“More English language schools are turning to accommodation agencies in order to have access to a larger database of accommodation and give their clients a wider choice,” says Michele Da Silva of Britannia Student Services in London, UK. “We work with some of the top language schools in London.”

Da Silva adds that they also work with agents from a range of

countries worldwide. “Agents who work with a variety of London schools often prefer to use an agency in order to standardise their accommodation offer, as opposed to working with individual schools’ accommodation offices where standards and prices can vary considerably from school to school,” she says.

There is another advantage for agents in using accommodation agencies – more potential for making money, if their partner schools offer no commission on accommodation

Evolving expectations

There are many reasons given by agents to explain a trend towards residential and independent accommodation. One clear factor is the cultural emboldening of today’s student population – many of whom are confident travelling overseas and want to maximise their free time.

them the freedom they are used to, having generally been to university or used to living away from parents. Teenagers prefer residences wherever possible – they like the community spirit.” Helena Van Staveren of Adelante Taalreizen in the Netherlands agrees and adds, “Most Dutch students live independently and therefore want to live the same way when they go abroad.”

Rosella Semprini of English Language Advisory Service (Elas) in Italy has also seen a rise in demand for residential accommodation. She feels most schools do not have a good range of accommodation options on offer, stating, “I believe many [schools need] to consider the [independent] status of people travelling to learn English in the Internet age.”

Brand says, “Younger clients in their 20s love the independence of shared apartments as it gives

Catherine Van Dale of Centre EasyLangues in France points out that price can be a reason for her clients opting for host family accommodation over flatshares. “Flat/house sharing with international students – when it is cheap – is very much appreciated by students because they live on their own and make international friends more easily.”

Agnes Vinkler of Inside Word in Hungary concurs. “I do not see a growing demand for independent flats or flatshare accommodation,” she says. “Host family accommodation is still popular, being cheaper in most cases than residential accommodation. However, more and more clients book accommodation [in] apartments, thus they do not have to pay for food in advance and they can... spend on food once they are there.”

Old favourite

Despite rising demand for “independent” accommodation options, host family accommodation – often referred to as homestay – remains the most popular choice at many schools around the world, according

"More students are requesting accommodation where they can live independently, which includes having their own bathroom and self-catering facilities"

to school representatives. Gaby Billing of Eurocentres sums up the experiences of many when she says, "Demand for residences and apartments is growing but homestay is still the best [value] accommodation option."

Many agents agree with this prognosis and testify that there are benefits associated with a homestay option. "We advise students to [stay] with families, because it is the best way to integrate and socialise with British families," says Susana Visendaz of Centro de Enseñanza Británica in Argentina.

At Akralingua in Alicante in Spain, Patricia Marti-Fleury estimates that two-thirds of their clients request host family accommo-

leading separate lives from their hosts. Mary McKay Vilén of Canada Live in Switzerland says that she is receiving more requests for flatshares from her clients because "students have heard that families tend to live in the suburbs and want to be closer to downtown".

A small but emerging trend seems to be students choosing host family accommodation for an initial "settling in" period. Helen Cox at South Australian College of English in Australia says, "A small percentage of students request short-term homestay, ie four weeks, with the option to review their accommodation arrangements after that date."

Claudio Tyszler of Canada-Brasil Exchange Programs in Brazil also notes a similar trend. "Many long-term students are starting to book only the first four weeks in a homestay and leave the rest open to choose once they get to the destination," he says. "We actually encourage this idea."

More is required

Agents point out that there is room for improvement concerning the level of detail about host family accommodation passed on to agents. Semprini in Italy says that schools

could improve their service by "supplying us with detailed brochures or CD-Roms and by devoting to the idea that having good accommodation is most of the job – obviously taking for granted a good teaching product".

Working with third parties

One way in which some providers have made an effort to improve their accommodation provision is by working with specialist accommodation agencies (see box below). Some agencies also relate that they work with accommodation specialists.

Visendaz in Argentina, for example, says, "I work with an agency which provides our students with very good families", although she adds that with group bookings, she leaves it to the school to arrange accommodation. McKay Vilén in Switzerland relates a similar business practice. "If I find that a number of clients have been dissatisfied with the homestay experience organised by one school, but are happy with the school otherwise, we will ask an [accommodation] provider to take over finding accommodation for the clients going to that school. This enables us to keep sending students to the school," she says.

Some schools already work with third parties for accommodation provision. Wolfgang

provision. "We offer special agent net rates, which are lower than the rates we apply to the general public, for agents to mark up," relates Da Silva. "This is equivalent to paying a commission but provides greater flexibility for the agent and less administration for us."

Other accommodation agencies also pay commission to agents using their services. Lou Orlando of New York Accommodations Centre in the USA says, "We do offer commissions depending upon activity and volume of bookings", while Bonita Douglas at

Vancouver ESL Homestay in Canada confirms that they offer agents "commission and special group pricing".

A number of accommodation agencies exist in cities throughout the world, and they all assert that there are good reasons for using them. "We stand or fall by the quality of our accommodation, as we have no revenue from language courses," says Tamara Pollock of London Host Families in the UK.

Some agencies offer more than straightforward accommodation

options. "Secondary services" offered by London Host Families include airport transfers and placement into language schools.

Meanwhile, New York Accommodations Centre, which works with language schools and universities in the New York area, gives its clients a free one-hour international phone card, orientation upon arrival and access to a native speaker from the student's country. "This all minimises the student's culture shock," explains Orlando. "We also accompany the student on

a tour of the local neighbourhood and assist them to acquire a discount metro card."

Vancouver ESL Homestay offers homestay as well as shared accommodation, which has become very popular, according to Douglas. This service incorporates furnished suites and roommate match – introducing students to fellow students with whom they might like to share a two- or three-bed apartment. It also guarantees criminal record checks on all accommodation suppliers.

dition. "They usually prefer the host family because it is a better way to improve the language and to get to know the way people live here in Spain," she asserts. "We usually try to offer [students] the host family as we think it is the best option. But the client is the one who finally decides."

Family support and encouragement in language learning is the host family's secret weapon. Marilisa Fiorani de Almeida, of True Way – Cursos no Exterior in Brazil, recounts one very successful host family story. "I had a 15 year old student who loved skiing. His Canadian hostfather was a skiing teacher, it was great!" she relates. "As I tell the schools my clients' expectations, I have luck with all my accommodation placements."

Blending options

However, evidently, not all students are as keen to stay with a family. Aside from the other reasons given, this can be because of concern about living some distance away from a school or because, as António Valadas of Multiway in Portugal relates, of complaints by students

could improve their service by "supplying us with detailed brochures or CD-Roms and by devoting to the idea that having good accommodation is most of the job – obviously taking for granted a good teaching product".

Brand in the UK similarly recommends that schools pass on more than just a name, address and telephone number. "Some colleges send fabulous details automatically, with commuting information, details about members of the household, details about the building they live in, etc, which provides a full picture for the student," she says. "Others literally send the bare minimum, which does nothing to inspire student confidence as they literally launch themselves into the unknown."

Tyszler in Brazil goes further and says he believes more attention should be paid to assuring the standards of host families – suggesting a model similar to that in place in Malta, whereby a government department takes responsibility for assuring standards of families. "I believe that schools and governments should be very active in the inspection [process]," he ventures. "If we don't see a con-

Graser of Good Hope Studies in South Africa reports that they use the YMCA in Cape Town as their student residence. In the UK, Hampstead School of English decided to follow another route and set up a new accommodation option for students itself. Now, as well as host families, international hostels and a student residence (in the summer only), the school can offer their students the option of self-catering studios.

Jill Sieff at the school says, "More students are requesting accommodation where they can live independently, which includes having their own bathroom and self-catering [facilities]. Our studios are extremely popular for this reason and offer exceptional value for money."

Both agencies and schools should take note that nothing less than excellent accommodation provision can ensure repeat business and positive word-of-mouth recommendation. Brand sums up, "A brilliant language programme can be completely ruined by a bad accommodation experience. We can succeed in every other department and fail in this area and, overall, we will have failed." □