

An agents' association's primary concern is to establish quality ideals in an otherwise unregulated marketplace. But it seems they need to work harder to get

moving in the right

their message across to schools and institutions. JANE VERNON SMITH reports.



nt direction

From the point of view of many language schools, there are still too many geographical areas where there are no agency associations established to impose professional standards. However, agency associations continue to grow in number and size. Four new agents' associations have been founded in the last 18 months.

The South Asian International Educational and Language Travel Association (Saielta) was established in November 2003, drawing membership from national groups of agencies, according to Mohammed

Zakir Hossain at the association, with 10 members from Bangladesh, Nepal and the UK. In Pakistan, Pakistan Education Abroad Consultants (Peaco) celebrated its first birthday this March. "Currently, we have 29 members from all the main cities of Pakistan," reports Mumtaz Malik, Peaco's President.

In Belgium, the Belgian Association of Education and Language Travel Consultants (Baelc) was inaugurated in April. And with encouragement from the Australian government's international education network, AEI, a new agency association was founded in Indonesia in February 2004. Known as IKPII (Ikatan Konsultan Pendidikan Internasional Indonesia), the new association has 10 founder members, based in Surabaya and Jakarta. Another two or three agencies are expected to join soon (see page 11).

The first task of these newly formed national associations is to apply self-regulation in their regions and increase customer confidence and protection. "Many unethical and non-professionals are working in our market," laments Malik of Peaco. "They cheat the student just for the sake of money." Peaco will increase the public profile of agents who practise "fair dealings with students... These [companies] are actually the assets of the Pakistani market," says Malik.

For the Indonesian market, the foundation of the new agents' association represents "a maturing of the market, where education agents are able to compete with each other rather than against each other," according to the AEI website. The establishment of quality criteria for association members should improve the professional image of a market that has previously seen "disparate and conflicting marketing efforts by some agents".

Mature players

Countries where agents' associations have been established for some time are reaping the benefits of an established quality presence. In these markets, the associations can devote more time to activities such as analysing and stimulating the market, or promoting training courses for their members. Even so, associations in these mature markets still have to devote a certain amount of time and effort to ensuring quality and fighting against less scrupulous operators.

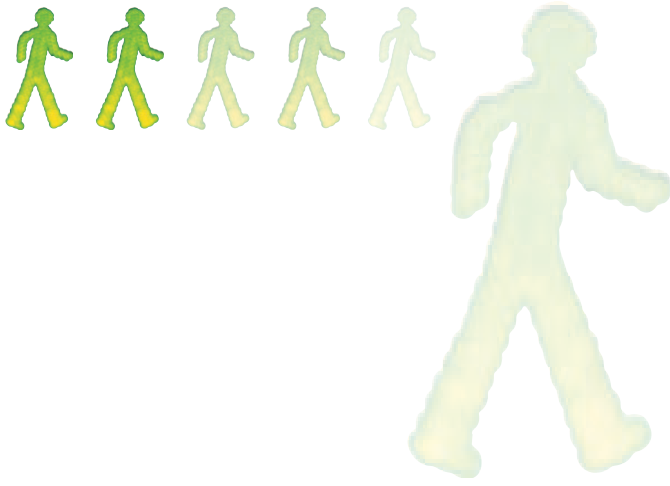
In Taiwan, the Taiwan Overseas Study Association (Tosa) has spent years calling for fair business and action against unscrupulous agents. "We have worked with the government and expect to have national legislation in this field in the near future," reports Julia Lin, Tosa's President.

Tongchit Lawvinitnun, President of the Thai International Education Consultants Association (Tieca) in Thailand, adds that the problem of dodgy operators has increased in recent years in Thailand. "This prompts us to try harder to position ourselves [as a professional group] among bad companies," she says.

In Brazil, prospective students are proactive when it comes to seeking out a recognised agency; they often contact the Brazilian Education and Language Travel Association (Belta) to check that an agent is a member, according to Belta's president, Eduardo Camargo. He says Belta is a well known and respected brand with 56 members – and membership is restricted to agents demonstrating "high quality".

In France, Unosel, which represents agents and language schools, states that the number of operators





in the market has reduced from around 350 in 1978 to 150 in 2003. Unosel's Sylvie Halphen believes that the quality factor has driven out most of the "black sheep" during those 25 years. If the association continues to apply quality pressures on the market, the last few will eventually disappear, she says. However, as one problem recedes, another rises – in the shape of the Internet. "Now the French authorities that have been pressuring only French operators must control the operators that have entered the French market from abroad through Internet sites," says Halphen. "Clients don't realise that there's no security with them."

All associations have minimum standards of entry and, in most cases, new applicants require a recommendation from at least one existing member. For this reason, membership of national associations usually grows steadily rather than spectacularly. FDSV, the German association that has been operating since 1990, reports only one new member in the last six months, for example.

Quality and improvement

Maintaining quality within the membership is a core concern. In France, Unosel was the principal instigator of an independent standard for language tour organisers, administered by Afnor, the French standards body. Since December 1999, all of Unosel's members have been in compliance with the standard.

In Japan, Ryuki Hayashi of the Japan Association for Overseas Studies (Jaos) relates that the association is embarking on a project to "develop and prepare a Jaos-certified test for recognised international education consultants". Until now, he reports, the association has relied on individual members to ensure quality counselling.

Another method that industry associations employ to maintain quality is to offer training to members. "To enhance the skills of our members was part of our strategy," asserts Camargo of Belta. The

Brazilian organisation has provided seminars with international organisations such as the British Council for its members, along with other forms of staff training.

The Association of Language Travel Organisations (Alto), the worldwide body that represents both agents and language schools, also holds regular seminars aimed at "increasing professionalism in the industry", according to Bradley Allen at the association. For example, at the next World Youth and Student Travel Conference in Madrid this autumn, the association is holding a seminar on branding in the global travel industry.

Unosel in France maintains a checklist of major issues in which its members express an interest, such as new laws being introduced or tax rule disparities. "We regularly meet the relevant trading au-

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thorities and organise technical seminars on these issues," says Halphen. "The last was on the responsibilities of French organisers for young people's study trips."

In Thailand, Tiece also organises various training sessions and asks organisations such as the British Council and AEI to meet members and provide updates on visa procedures and other relevant country-specific information, says Lawvinitnun.

Benefits by association

Agency associations also provide a united front when dealing directly with students. In France, where Unosel represents both sides of the market, the association offers advice directly to the public and is also happy to act as an intermediary in disputes. According to Unosel's figures, the year 2003 saw 50,000 individual trips organised from France, 152,000 people travelling in groups, and 10,000 on language courses in France. The number of disputes was just 42.

In Brazil, Belta takes a direct market approach. It has been busy upgrading its website and increasing its exposure to the student market through its Belta newsletter, which now reaches some 22,000 readers. But Camargo believes the association's most effective contribution in the last six months has been the transformation of its annual ExpoBelta fair. "The students did not believe in traditional fairs anymore. Thanks to partnerships with international organisations, our event brought a new concept to the public," he enthuses.

Agency associations around the world*

Colombia 1. Anex	Italy 8. Ialca	Taiwan 15. Tosa
Belgium 2. Baelc	Spain 9. Aseproce	Korea 16. Kosa
Brazil 3. Belta	Hungary 10. Halta	Japan 17. Jaos
Argentina 4. AAEAC	Turkey 11. UED	Pakistan 18. Peaco
France 5. Unosel 6. L'Office	Yugoslavia 12. Yuta	Vietnam 19. Vieca
Germany 7. FDSV	Indonesia 13. IKPII	International Alto Saielta Ialta ESS
	Thailand 14. Tiece	

*Active associations listed to best of knowledge in 2004



Good intra-industry links

There are good examples of agency and educator associations working closely together. A number of schools' associations have organised inbound familiarisation trips (fam trips) for members of agency associations in the past, enabling them to tour the country and get to see member institutions first-hand. "Our members went on a fam trip to visit Australia in September 2003 and were received

with a warm welcome by English Australia (EA)," recounts Tongchit Lawvinitnun of Tieca in Thailand.

In the UK, the British Association of State English Language Training (Baselt) – prior to its amalgamation into English UK along with Arels – also organised fam trips into the UK for agents and, on some occasions, worked with associations. "We arrange regular inward missions of agents and British Council

counsellors to members and might work with an agent association to arrange this," says Richard Truscott at Baselt. "A successful example was with UED in Turkey last year."

In New Zealand, Education New Zealand (EdNZ) has a good working relationship with Belta in Brazil. "The joint EdNZ/NZTE marketing programme participates in the Belta Fairs, and there are close links in other areas, such as fam visits," reports Stuart Boag. "The success of this linkage certainly means that we

are keen to explore more active linkages with other associations, particularly in the area of familiarisation visits to New Zealand, and also in helping to better match agents with the types of institutions that would fit their client profile."

There is ample opportunity here for agency associations interested in striking up productive relationships with their association counterparts on the educator side. In Australia, schools' association, EA is keen to encourage good working

The ExpoBelta fairs provided culturally targeted entertainment, such as tango dancers from Argentina and a DJ from the UK, alongside booths with education institutions promoting their courses. Over 12,000 students attended the fairs held in three different cities (see *Language Travel Magazine*, June 2004, page 10).

Associations also sometimes produce industry information by canvassing members for opinions, predictions and statistics. Global association Alto is currently concentrating on collating accurate industry data from and for its members. "The focus of this survey is on trends and developments in the language travel industry," explains Allen. "[It] will act as a starting point to showcase Alto's role as a reliable source of industry intelligence."

Views of schools

Given the many efforts made by agency associations towards improving industry integrity and progress, their standing among education providers might be expected to be high, but this is not,

however, always the case. When asked if schools are more likely to work with agents who belong to a recognised association, William Neale, Chairperson of the Federation of Independent English Language Schools of New Zealand (FielsNZ), replies, "Not necessarily". He continues, "Individual agreements between schools and agents tend to carry more weight than the issue of whether a partner belongs to a particular association or not."

"English Australia asks that agent associations encourage their members to work with EA member colleges," notes Sue Blundell, Director of the English Australia schools' association. "In return we encourage EA member colleges to look for agent association membership... for evaluating agents' suitability as partners. Association membership is one criteria among others."

The attitude of schools to agents' associations deeply depends on how effectively the associations have communicated their quality message and backed it up with clear examples of good practice. Linda Auzins, of the Canadian Association of Private Language



relationships with agency associations and it invited association representatives to participate in the EA Agents Workshop 2004 and subsidised their airfares so that they could attend a roundtable meeting with EA and Australian government representatives.

On a macro-level, the Global Alliance of Education and Language Associations (Gaela), representing all the major schools' associations, collaborates with the Federation of

Education and Language Consulting Associations (Felca), which represents agency association concerns on a global level. But Robyn Inman, Chairperson for Gaela and member of Canadian school associations, Capls and Pelsa, warns that there is a lot of work to be done. "One of our first efforts was to see if we (schools) all spoke the same language. Guess what – we don't: literally and figuratively," says Inman. "We want to do more comparisons to find out better how to describe

language travel even to ourselves. Then we will be in a better position to offer dialogue... with the agent associations."

Once the two global groups are in a position to implement or suggest clear changes to industry practice, the opportunities for change and progress are not to be underestimated. Issues likely to be under the spotlight include improving student mobility, cutting costs of student exchanges, collecting and sharing market statistics and better

exploitation of the Internet to make bookings. "There is a lot of repetition. Commonalities are not sufficiently exploited," observes Inman.

She points out that agents' associations are moving in the right direction, but says they should become more proactive and nurture strong working groups. "I think we all have to do more promotion of our school or agent associations. There is not enough awareness of the avenues of networking that we have."

Schools (Capls), underlines, "In situations in which the association has not made its standards and guarantees well known to schools, it is unlikely that a school would choose to work with one agent versus another solely on [that] basis. More likely the school, if it has to choose to work with just one agent, will choose the agent that can guarantee the greatest sales. They will also choose the agent with whom they feel the greatest degree of trust and comfort."

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It seems that if agents' associations can create the required trust and comfort, then its members will capture increased business. "Schools may favour agents who are members of a national association if they feel that the association is able to provide some level of guarantee for payments by their members or if the association has

proven that it has raised the standards in that country among its members in terms of advertising, staff training, student counselling, and booking procedures," continues Auzins.

There is little doubt that schools are keen to find reliable agents in their source markets – witness Australian industry involvement in the creation of IKPII, the Indonesian agents' association. "For institutions, agency reliability and credibility are very important," agrees Stuart Boag of Education New Zealand (EdNZ). "When you are quite distant from some markets, as New Zealand is, it is helpful to have references beyond the agents themselves."

Boag is clear about his requirements, and agents' associations are well placed to deliver. "For institutions," he says, "the major benefit of agents' associations would be their ability to provide quality assurance and endorsement for their members, and [show evidence of] the codes of conduct that they have. The stronger these are, the more value there will be for institutions in dealing with agents who belong to agents' associations." □