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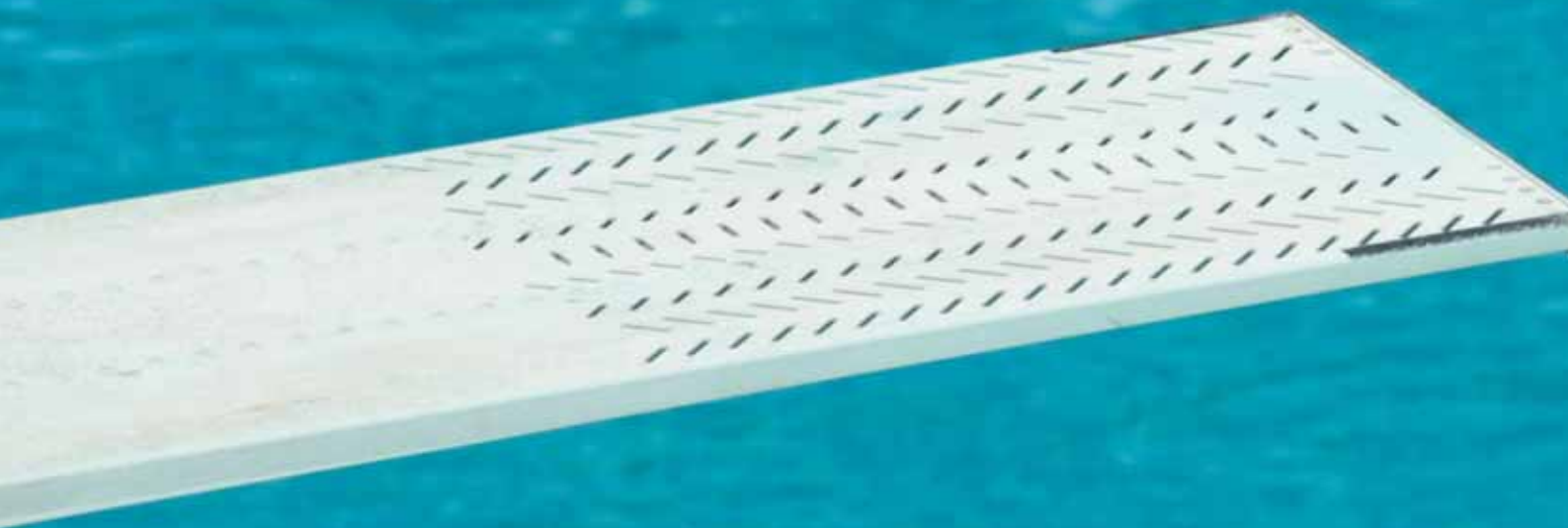
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The need for regulation and quality certification within the language travel industry has long been recognised and more and more language teaching centres are seeking recognition from accreditation bodies that exist around the world, be that in their own country or overseas. BETHAN NORRIS reports.

Quality springboard



Accreditation schemes have an extremely powerful role within the language travel industry. In many countries, language schools remain largely unregulated by the government and for some, a mark of recognition from a respected accreditation agency is the only way schools can differentiate the quality of their services to students and agents. And the role of accreditation agencies is gaining an even greater significance as many schemes expand their remit to include more members, and more governments consider linking accreditation to student visa issuance. External validation for accreditation agencies themselves is therefore becoming an important part of the quality certification process and it is likely that governments will have an increasing interest in accreditation processes in the future.

In the meantime, the number of institutions seeking out accreditation is on the rise, according to relevant regulating bodies around the world.

Scope of accreditation

According to the accreditation agencies that took part in this feature, there are around 2,000 language schools around the world that have had their services assessed by the independent bodies listed, and this figure is increasing year on year.

Most accreditation agencies report a healthy influx of new members. "In 2005, 21 new members joined the network of associate centres [accredited by Instituto Cervantes], a 38 per cent increase over the previous year," says Anne Muñoz at Instituto Cervantes in Spain – one of the two accrediting organisations in the country. She adds, "The annual growth rate of the network has remained at a steady 35 to 40 per cent."

In some countries, a move towards compulsory accreditation for schools enrolling student visa holders has also increased the uptake of accreditation schemes. In the UK, the introduction of a government register of education providers that are allowed to accept student visa

automatic entry onto the register and managers of both schemes report a rise in accreditation applications. ABLS welcomed seven new members last year, according to Joanne Adcock. "Many people are waiting to see if accreditation becomes compulsory and will look at accreditation only if forced to do so," she adds.

Such a development is imminent, notes Elizabeth McLaren from the British Council. "We anticipate... a rise in applications following the Home Office announcement of compulsory accreditation for entry on the register, expected sometime soon." A government mandate to link accreditation to visa issuance has already been announced (see *Language Travel Magazine*, May 2006, page 6).

In Australia, language schools accredited by the National ELT Accrediation Scheme (Neas) are automatically allowed to enrol student visa holders, and this has been seen as the inspiration for the UK's latest plans. In Ireland too, Jim Ferguson from accrediting body, Acels, says that new government regulations have recently been introduced with regard to schools enrolling student visa holders. "[In the last 12 months] recognised schools offering academic year courses, giving non-EU students the right to work in Ireland, must apply for inclusion on the Department of Education and Science Register of Approved Courses," he relates.

Increased accreditation opportunities

In the last few decades, the number of accreditation opportunities available for language schools has multiplied. The UK was the first country to offer an accreditation scheme for language schools in the 1950s, followed closely by Ireland, Canada and the USA in the 60s and 70s, but accreditation schemes now exist for schools in most of the major language teaching destinations worldwide.

South Africa was one of the most recent destinations to gain a country-specific accreditation scheme with the introduction of two schemes in 2004, administered by the English Language Teaching Association of South Africa (Eltasa) and English South Africa.

Meryl van der Merwe from Eltasa says that the high standards required from schools have so far meant that membership has been slow in a country where accreditation is a relatively new concept. "We are planning to make [the scheme] more inclusive so as to bring in more members," she says. "To do this we are looking at different types of membership, e.g. associate membership. Some eligible schools that have not joined possibly need more guidance and assistance, or the possibility of not joining as a full member initially."

Malta is another language destination that has seen schools take quality issues into their own hands. The Federation of English Language Teaching Organisations of Malta (Feltom) devised its own accreditation scheme last year which requires schools to adhere to standards above minimum government operating conditions. John Dimech, President of Feltom, says that all Feltom members will have to be accredited under the new regulations by the beginning of 2008. "This is definitely be another feather in Malta's cap," he states.

Internationalisation of quality

As well as countrywide accreditation schemes, there are also a number of schemes in existence that transcend national boundaries. Jan Capper from the International Association of Language Centres (Ialc) explains that Ialc is a selective membership organisation offering unique accreditation that doesn't duplicate any of the national schemes that a school may already be a member of. "As we approach 100 full and associate members, we are focusing on languages, countries and destinations that will enhance our current membership," she says.

"I believe there is growing interest in the Gulf region in adherence to quality standards and accreditation by US accrediting agencies"

holders onto their courses in 2005 has increased interest in national accreditation schemes. Language schools accredited by the British Council or the Association of British Language Schools (ABLS) receive



A new development among some other previously country-specific schemes is to accredit schools in countries where schools might find it hard to otherwise gain accreditation. European organisation, Eequals, and two US-based organisations, CEA and Accet, have recently started accrediting schools in the Middle East, while Accet also lists an accredited school in Latin America.

Terry O'Donnell, Executive Director of CEA, believes that this trend is likely to continue. "In December 2005, the Commission approved an expanded scope, which is to offer international accreditation. To date, in addition to the Petroleum Institute programme in Abu Dhabi, there are two other sites in process – the Language Centre at Kuwait University and the Foundation English Program at the University of Qatar," she says. "I believe there is growing interest in the Gulf region in adherence to quality standards and accreditation by US accrediting agencies. [And] I have a large file showing interest in accreditation from many parts of the world."

It is not just language teaching institutions in the Middle East that are looking to be accredited and an increasing trend towards cross-boundary accreditation looks likely. Instituto Cervantes, based in Spain, currently accredits schools in China, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Germany, India, Italy, Korea, Mexico, Norway and Switzerland, while the Chief Executive of Eequals, Richard Rossner, says that other schools based outside Europe may soon join its current single Middle Eastern member. "We get quite a few enquiries from outside Europe and are planning to expand our inspection services and membership to other regions when the time is right and our research is complete," he confirms.

A new private company is also attempting to join the sector; a UK-based company, Qisan, offering self-designated services for a fee (see page 7).

Assuring integrity

Language schools are often keen to join a reputable accreditation scheme despite the costs and time that are involved, due to the fact that agents and students tend to look more favourably on schools that have been independently assessed by an accrediting agency whose name they can trust.

For accreditation bodies that have longevity on their side, a reputation for enforcing high standards is key. Many regulatory bodies also benefit from government recognition. "Accet has been recognised and regularly evaluated by the US Department of Education since 1978 and because it is classified as a 'gatekeeping agency' for the distribution of part of US\$80 billion allocated for student financial aid each year, it is subject to a watchful eye by the government to ensure not only its independence but its reliability in measuring quality," says Roger Williams, Executive Director at Accet.

In Canada too, the CLC Quality Assurance Scheme benefits from recognition by a government agency. "The CLC model [of accreditation] is the only one recognised by the Association of Accrediting Agencies of Canada," says Jay Jamieson, Executive Director of CLC. However, Capls, another accrediting body in Canada that launched its accreditation scheme last year, emphasises its reputation can be assured by the organisation's use of independent third party inspectors. "The independent inspectors request and evaluate information from the school, personally visit each school and go through an extensive interview and document analysis procedure to verify that the school meets Capls current standards," says Linda Auzins from Capls.

For accreditation bodies that are relatively new on the scene, an emphasis on their independent assessment procedures is central to

gaining the trust of potential new members and the wider industry. In South Africa, van der Merwe at Eltasa stresses that the association was formed in order to address the 'critical issue' that is accreditation among South African language schools. "We set up Eltasa to perform that function to the best of our ability through rigorous peer assessment," she says, pointing out that the association's affiliations with other respected organisations, such as Alto, also inspire confidence as to its credentials.

Making accreditation more inclusive

There are many advantages for schools in gaining accreditation from a recognised agency, not least because of the increased marketing opportunities that such a mark might bring. However, some schools continue to remain non-accredited and this does not necessarily infer a low quality on their part. Often, accreditation requires a high financial cost and is time-consuming to undertake and some smaller or newer schools simply don't have the time or resources to undergo such a procedure.

"Because it is classified as a 'gatekeeping agency' for the distribution of student financial aid each year, it is subject to a watchful eye by the government to ensure not only its independence but its reliability in measuring quality"

According to Stefan Boffa from Neas in Australia, some language schools simply decide that the advantages of accreditation do not outweigh the effort involved in being assessed. "Some centres may decide not to enrol overseas student visa holders and therefore forego the marketing advantage provided by Neas accreditation," he says. "Centres may make a business decision not to seek a quality endorsement at various stages of their development."

Similarly, Williams at Accet notes that a rigorous assessment procedure may deter some schools from seeking assessment. "Accreditation typically takes approximately one year of extensive work and resources, at the end of which there is no guarantee of becoming accredited. Properly done, it is a vigorous evaluation process that, on average, one third of the applicants are not successful [with]," he states.

However, in the UK, efforts are being made to remove any barriers that may be preventing schools from taking this step. McLaren at the British Council says that their accreditation scheme has recently been reviewed in order to make it more accessible

* if accepting long-term students – information not supplied

Country	Name of scheme	Administering organisation	No. accredited institutions	Cost	How often members inspected?	Compulsory nationwide	Accommodation accredited?
Australia	National ELT Accreditation Scheme	Neas	233	AUS\$3,450 (US\$2,567)	1 year	yes*	no
Canada	CLC Quality Assurance Scheme	CLC	103	CAN\$1800 (US\$1,580)	3 years	no	yes
Canada	Capls Quality Standards Accreditation Scheme	Capls	86	CAN\$625 (US\$549)	3 years	no	no
Europe/Mid. East	European Association for Quality Lang. Services Scheme	Equals	100	€2,400 - €2,650 (US\$2,963 - US\$3,271)	3 years	no	yes
France	Souffle	Souffle	19	-	5 years	no	-
International	Ialc Quality Assurance Scheme	Ialc	90+	-	4 years	no	yes
Ireland	Dept of Education and Science Recognition Scheme	Acels	110	€410 - €635 (US\$506 - US\$784)	3 years	yes*	yes
Italy	Asils Check List	Asils	31	€500 (US\$617)	4 years	no	no
Italy	Italian in Italy	Uniter	15	€850 (US\$1,050)	3 years	no	no
Malta	Feltom Accreditation Scheme	Feltom	new	€700 - €1,750 (US\$864 - US\$2160)	3 years	no	no
Malta	EFL Schools Monitoring Board	EFL Monitoring Board	46	-	-	yes	-
New Zealand	Quality Assurance Standard for Private Training Establishments	NZQA business unit	~ 270	varies	1-3 years	yes	yes
South Africa	English Language Travel Association of South Africa Scheme	Eltasa	7	R4,400 (US\$739)	2 years	no	no
Spain	CEELE	Eduespaña	55	-	2 years	no	no
International	The Associate Centres Network of the Inst Cervantes	Instituto Cervantes	105	€1,138 (US\$1,405)	2-3 years	no	yes
USA/CS America/Mid East	Accrediting Council for Continuing Edu and Training	Accet	238	US\$6,700	5 years	no	yes
USA/Middle East	Commission on English Lang. Program Accreditation Scheme	CEA	51	US\$5,000-US\$6,000	5 or 10 years	no	yes
UK	Association of British Language Schools Scheme	ABLS	34	UK£1,150 (US\$2,053)	3 years	no	yes
UK	Accreditation UK	British Council/English UK	397	£1,100 - £1,500 (US\$1,964-2,678)	4 years	no	yes

and inclusive. "The changes we have made are aimed at simplifying scheme procedures, reducing the cost of gaining accreditation, making the scheme more accessible to the full range of providers and making the requirements for accreditation even clearer."

The British Council also helps potential candidates by offering pre-inspection briefings, which offer the opportunity for schools to meet with members of the Accreditation Unit and ask questions specific to their centre. In the USA, CEA provides similar help to new applicants. "Sites seeking accreditation attend a workshop where they learn the intent of the standards, and are given guidelines for



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What does accreditation mean to agents?

While many schools expend a great deal of effort in gaining recognition from an accreditation agency and accreditation agencies go out of their way to provide comprehensive information regarding the rigorous nature of the assessment procedures, it is interesting to note that some agents do not favour an accredited school over one that has not been independently assessed in this way. Lore Schmid from Lingua Service in Switzerland says that her clients very rarely ask for accredited schools. "I think there are very good small schools that are not accredited," she says. "If I know a school well – from former cooperation, staff I have known from other schools etc – and have good references, the accreditation does not affect my decision."

It is perhaps a reflection of the personal nature of business operations between schools and agents that many agencies prefer to judge schools on their own personal relationships, rather than marks of accreditation. Jean-Jacques Truchot from AJ-France is another agent who says that demand for accredited programmes among his clients is not large. "I make

[customised] programmes so the most important point for me is how fast the school answers and how detailed the answers are," he says.

However, in other student markets, accreditation is much more of an important issue for agents. Mehmet Catalagac from Yes agency in Turkey says that accreditation is very important for both the agency and clients. "Ninety per cent of our clients always ask for accredited schools, while the other 10 per cent do not know the difference between accredited and non-accredited," he says. "But after our presentations, they always choose the accredited ones. Our agency always prefers to work with accredited schools."

While students and agents might automatically assume an accredited school is better than a non-accredited one, few seem to have a comprehensive idea as to what each mark of quality actually represents. Marta Skalska from Atas – Language Travel Agency in Poland says that the agency knows the general meaning of accreditation offered by various countries but "we don't go into details of how [schemes] are assigned and how they work". She adds, "We can

always, if some clients insist on finding out, get the information about each accreditation through the school's website – normally logos give links to each scheme's description – but we hardly ever use it." Some agencies, however, would welcome more detailed information from accreditation agencies. Toyo Keiyama, from the Britain Reservation Centre in Japan, says that not enough information is provided for agents. "We would like to have as much information as possible – which schools are accredited this month, which schools are being inspected etc," says Keiyama.

While accreditation can provide a useful starting point for agents and students to find out more about a previously unknown school, Karolina Osiecka from AB Centrum in Poland emphasises that accreditation is not the only factor to look at when deciding where to send students. "It really depends on the school, teachers and owners what it will be like," she states. "You can have two schools accredited by the same [body] with similar background, location, courses, prices and the students will be very happy with one but not the other."

carrying out a self-study," says O'Donnell. "The self-study includes a narrative response to each of the 52 standards, documentation to support [this] and an evaluative process. It is reviewed by an outside peer review team and a site visit is conducted."

The future

An increase in opportunities for language schools to receive accreditation by reputable,


trusted and in many cases government-recognised agencies can only be good for the language travel industry as a whole. With an increase in the number of accreditation marks available worldwide, however, there is a danger that students and agents may be confused by what they actually represent (see box above).

However, when bound by a common motivation to improve and enhance quality standards in the institutions they accredit, a prevalence of accreditation agencies worldwide marks a maturation within the industry that is sure to provide good quality benchmarks for students, agents and schools alike.

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