

# Special interests

There are many specialised groups of schools that are keen to work with agents to promote their common interest or region – and these groups represent potential new business avenues for agents around the world, reveals AMY BAKER.

When agents require information or assistance about language learning options within a particular country, their first port of call is likely to be the national language learning association. All the main English language teaching markets have at least one national body representing school members from across the country, and many other countries, such as France and Italy, also have country-wide associations of like-minded quality schools.

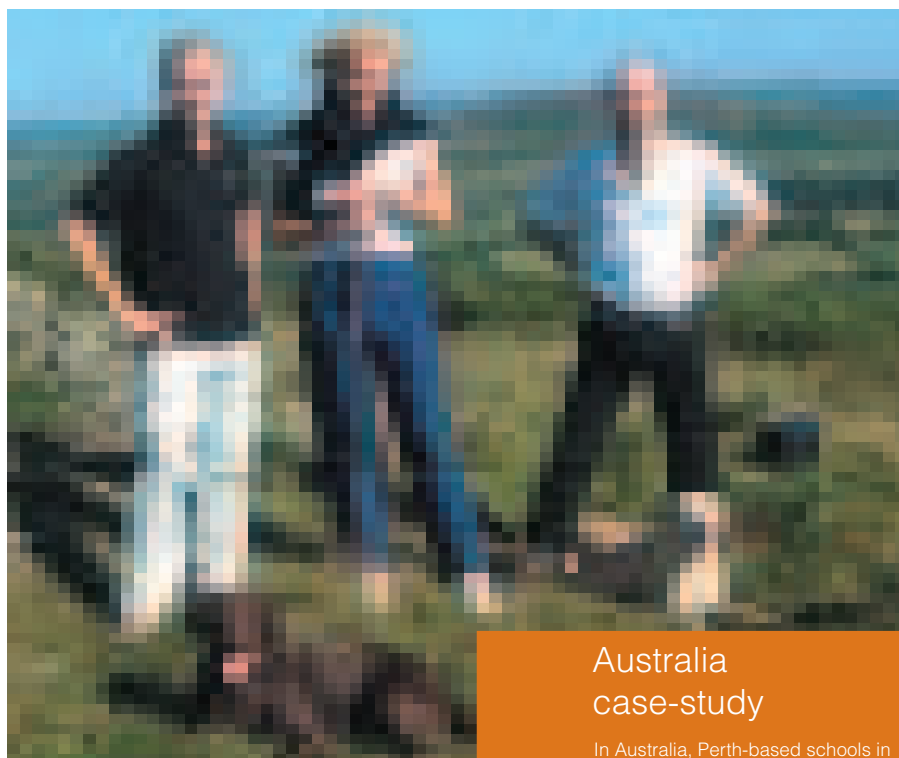
However, in the last few years, a number of other schools' associations have sprung up, which are just as keen to work with agents to promote their unique selling point. This may be that they come from the same region of a country, or that their member schools are all similar types of operation. By joining forces in this way they can pool their marketing resources and make a greater impact on the market. And as Judy Loren, of regional group English in London in the UK, points out, a specific-interest group of schools can provide added advantages for agencies, over and above the services offered by the national association. "In my experience, agents are always grateful for extra information on what [courses and services are] on offer," she says.

Loren underlines that English in London members are all members of the national association, English UK. "The English in London group is simply taking [the concept] further by encouraging agents and students to choose London first," she says. "As a regional group, we can identify the specific benefits of our area and highlight these in more detail."

Getting the message out to agents and stu-

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dents about the advantages of a particular destination is a key concern of such regional associations. In the USA, the New York English Schools' Association (NYESA) was re-established in 2002 so that schools in the region could work towards common goals, including lobbying for consideration of the industry and specific New York-focused promotion. Wrenford Johnson at NYESA explains that the decision was taken to revamp the association, partly because of the adverse effects that September 11, 2001, had on lan-



PHOTOGRAPH: PARK-HOUSE TRAINING, WALES

*Wales's attractions are little known overseas*

guage schools in the state. "New York suffered more than any other state after 9/11," he recounts. "People were afraid to come to New York after that."

Johnson adds that NYESA is not only about highlighting what New York state has to offer, but how it differs from other states in the USA. "New York is almost as different from Michigan as France is from Spain," he says.

"Thus, because of the size and different aspects across the USA, we need to focus on the state's character.

We show agents what the benefits are of coming to New York to study. People come here because of the mix of different cultures. In New York, the minority is majority – everyone is accepted as equal."

As well as highlighting the distinct character of an area, regional associations also often offer familiarisation trips for agents to get to know their area first-hand. English in London coordinates a post-Arels workshop fam trip to London for agents, while in Wales, Learn English in Wales (LEW) also organises

## Australia case-study

In Australia, Perth-based schools in Western Australia have joined together for marketing purposes, and this could be because they are largely isolated from other language schools in the rest of the country. Tom Grace, Executive Director of Perth Education City, explains that this group was formed back in 1987

an annual fam trip for agents after the Arels workshop. "In 2003, we deliberately aimed to balance the time spent visiting schools with the time spent seeing Wales, and this strategy has proved successful with our agents," says Chairperson, Tony Deyes, of the British Council in Wales. He relates that one Slovenian agent told LEW, "We are all interested in the schools but we prefer to see something more.... [such as] why our students would want to go to Wales".

The Wales Tourist Board (WTB) is also involved in the activities of LEW, and Deyes comments, "The involvement of the WTB in the partnership indicates another reason for forming a group – that there is an implicit agenda of promoting Wales as a country and holiday venue, with the assumption that students of English will spend some time visiting tourist attractions, or even extend their stay to do some tourism [activities] around Wales."

Although fam trips are seen as one of the best ways to market a region or group of schools, there are other ways of promoting strategically to agents. The regional language school association, Olé, representing education providers in Andalucia, Spain, attends the French trade fair, Expolangues, as a group to enhance its profile, and it also insists that members display Olé branding on all their promotional materials. Bob Burger at Olé adds that there have been plans to organise inbound fam trips into Andalucia, although none have yet taken place.

Johnson at NYESA in the USA says that their association wants to take promotional activities one stage further. “Eventually, we want to host our own fair,” he says. “We are becoming members of the New York City & Company Convention & Visitors Bureau – an organisation highly geared towards tourism, networking and promoting the city.”

One of Quality English’s unique selling points is that all schools are independently operated and locally managed. Agents already working with one of the QE members might well be persuaded to represent like-minded schools in different locations around the UK,

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and in effect, “sign up” with the entire marketing group. Blackmore hopes this philosophy takes off and can be extended to schools in other countries. “We aim to recruit more schools in other English-speaking countries as well as in the UK to create a broad portfolio of schools that meet demand,” she explains.

QE was initially formed by a number of schools that got together to market more effectively to the Chinese market and in New

Jim Sutton,” says Kensington. “The mission will visit Moscow, St Petersburg, Nihzni Novrogod and Vladivostock.”

In March, the association launched a website targeted at Russian agents where all NZREN member schools can display their

promotional materials. “New Zealand offers a British-based educational system at a lesser cost than many other English-speaking countries,” observes Kensington. “For many Russians, [New Zealand is] closer than Europe but within a similar time zone.”

All of the specialised groups of schools that exist believe that they have real marketable points of difference that agents and students might not be aware of, and, in spreading the message to potential partners, they enable agents to build up their knowledge

so that the Minister of Education could establish dialogue with the region’s international education industry. “By 1991, the group had a formal structure, and while supported by government, was essentially independent,” says Grace. “Its focus was in three major areas – promoting Perth as an education destination; contributing to the development of policy at both national and state levels; and lobbying governments on a wide range of issues.”

Since its early days, the group has grown and adopted the name of Perth Education City (PEC) – it was previously known as WAIEMG. Grace estimates that all the major providers of international education in Perth are members, and their total combined enrolments make up 95 per cent of all overseas students in the region.

PEC provides generic marketing materials and helps members when facilitating agent visits, but Grace says that the group’s interaction with

agents is mainly via branding initiatives. “PEC usually receives favourable responses from agents when conducting marketing events overseas,” says Grace. “PEC is an umbrella organisation and it is the individual members who have the closer relationship with agents.”

As well as PEC, there is also another industry association in Perth that is made up of only private education providers – the West Australian Private Education and

Training Industry Association (Wapetia). Chairperson, John Paxton, says that this industry group was never intended to be a marketing body, although some marketing to local agents has become part of the association’s agenda in the last few years. “We now have a brochure, a logo, a website and a profile with local agents,” says Paxton. “We have as yet no overt profile with overseas agency networks but this could develop [in the future].”

At Quality English (QE), which was launched last year and currently groups together “14 of the UK’s finest schools”, a new initiative has been designed to enhance agent awareness of the marketing group. Carolyn Blackmore, Chief Executive of QE, explains, “Agents are being offered the option to become Quality English Agents. The benefits to agents include a presence on the Quality English website under the ‘find a local agent’ [section] that generates student email enquiries; the use of the QE brand promotion materials and support when agents are on the road.”

She adds that, in return, agents are expected to display the QE logo on their publicity materials, recommend QE schools and enrol an agreed minimum number of student weeks per year. “The early signs are very encouraging,” she comments. “Agents have responded well and are keen to become QE agents.”

Zealand, groups of schools have similarly formed networks to market as a collective to certain student markets. These networks of schools, stemming from initial membership of Education New Zealand, include the Indian Export Education Network (IEEN) and the New Zealand Russian Education Export Network (NZREN).

Richard M Kensington, Chairperson of NZREN, explains that member schools work with a number of agents in Russia “who we believe meet our needs as being quality recruitment agencies that meet the needs of students”. NZREN coordinates its activities with the New Zealand Ambassador in Moscow and relevant trade bodies, with regular visits being organised to Russia. “Members [travelled] through Russia in March and some members are also participating in the government trade mission to Russia in May, led by the Minister of Trade,

about types of schools and particular areas or countries. In Wales, Deyes points out, “One of the things that fascinates international students coming to Wales is that they find themselves in a bilingual country – 600,000 people in Wales are fully bilingual and all children study Welsh at school. These facts are often not appreciated [overseas].”

Tom Grace at Perth Education City in Australia sums up his thoughts on why targeted marketing collaboration can work. “Most importantly, promotion can be targeted and detail the areas of excellence of the individual institutions. With a national group, the promotion is more generic,” he says. “[And] with a regional group, there is real opportunity to work together while still competing with one another. Finally, the promotion of a single destination removes one of the choices from the prospective student.” □