

Professional virtues

The range of activities undertaken by agency associations around the world has varied widely this year. But all associations maintain professional integrity as their core value. AMY BAKER reports.

Some agency associations acknowledge that 2003 was a difficult year for their members, and as a result, they gave this as a reason for keeping their activities to a minimum this year.

For example, in Italy, Paolo Barilari, President of the Italian Association of Language Consultants and Agents (Ialca), says, "All the agent [members of Ialca] are suffering from a bad year, especially the agents working with a lot of groups." He explains that it was difficult to find the time to organise a regular meeting for Ialca this year, which maintains its membership of 12.

"We did not increase the number of members," he adds, "because we want to be sure that every single agent is following the rules before getting bigger." Barilari underlines a shift in his ethos towards improving professional and business values in the association, rather than marketing and increasing members. He says he wants to see Ialca holding seminars, in cooperation with the British Council, for example, or workshops about marketing techniques.

"I think this is the right way now," he comments. "Lowering competition, and [creating] some extra services targeted at [helping agencies] become more professional."

Pascal Carré is President of European Schools Service (ESS), which has a membership of seven agencies across Europe. He also points out that bad business for members meant minimal action on an association level this year. Like Barilari, he would welcome more progress on a global level through the Federation of Education and Language Consultant Associations (Felca). He also says that he is keen to see the creation of Felca Europe, a regional division of the federation.

However, he acknowledges that this initiative will take time to achieve. "It needs a lot of energy on a volunteer basis and our day-to-day activities already require much attention. There are things to do within the European Union... I have personally attended, as President of ESS, as many Felca meetings as possible," he says.

While Felca can offer global perspectives on business ideas and lobbying initiatives, and has itself been pursuing an agenda for global cooperation (see right), other agency associations around the world have kept themselves busy this year by promoting their associations



to student clients and the general public in their own countries, as well as enhancing their quality credentials.

Notably, this occurred in Argentina, with the launch of the Argentine Association of Education Agents and Consultants (AAEAC) this year. Veronica Cartagenova, a member of the executive committee, comments, "This year, we have worked hard to achieve international and national recognition."

Activities undertaken by AAEAC include organising seminars for foreign institutions visiting the country, designing promotional material, opening an office, negotiating deals with insurance providers and travelling overseas to attend workshops and Felca meetings. Indeed, AAEAC received a bursary from Felca this year to help the fledgling association pay for the travel expenses involved in attending its AGM in London.

Cartagenova says that agency members have been recruited via a media campaign that involved radio, TV and press. AAEAC has made good progress already with a membership of nine agencies. Its quality assurance is maintained through a designated committee, which also provides guidelines for members. The association has also established dialogue with embassies in Argentina.

In other countries – such as Germany, where FDSV has been in existence for a number of years – activities have taken on a

more in-depth professional slant. Joachim Pitsch, Chairperson of FDSV, explains, "We are scanning the grey virtual market where consumers are not entitled to insurance against [language school] insolvency." He adds that FDSV is also looking into the expansion of school chains. "The FDSV Code of Conduct suggests a maximum of 15 schools in groups," he says. "FDSV is concerned that some school chains go beyond [this] size."

In Japan, efforts have also been made towards clarifying some professional procedures. In April, the Guidelines Committee of the Japan Association for Overseas Study (Jaos) met with the National Consumer Affairs Center of Japan, to get advice about establishing standardised agreements, reports Jaos President, Takaho Hayashi.

Jaos has also established a good working relationship with the US Embassy, and, says Hayashi, "Jaos was informed [in July] that the Embassy will be pleased to cooperate with Jaos by having closer communication links to smooth out various visa procedures. In the long-term, this will be of benefit to both Jaos and the US Embassy." Rules concerning interviews for all visa candidates came into effect for US-bound students in August.

In Thailand, the Thai International Education Consultants Association (Tieca) has tended to focus its efforts on promoting itself in the country. Udom Ditsamroeng, President

of the association, explains that Tieca is organising a branding campaign that will run from August until March next year. It also continues to produce 15,000 copies of its *Thai Guide* and organises two international education fairs each year.

Ditsamroeng adds, "We present seven scholarships for the staff of the Royal King's Projects to participate in intensive language programmes every year. Tieca will sponsor a round-trip air ticket and the institution will provide tuition, accommodation, health cover and airport transfers." Scholarships are presented by the institutions participating to Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn each year.

Tieca has also been looking at enhancing professional values among members. It organised a training programme for members about tax, accounting systems, student databases, office management, marketing and customer relations earlier this year. And, in a bid to encourage more agencies to join, it has eased membership rules. Minimum agent recommendations required have dropped from six to four, for example, while agents can now apply to join Tieca after two years of operation instead of three.

In Taiwan, Amy Yang explains that membership of the Taiwanese Overseas Study Association (Tosa) has now reached 100 members. "It's a discreet process to select agencies that want to be Tosa members," she explains. "Agencies must be legally registered as professional consultants and have [no history of any] conflict."

Elsewhere in the world, efforts to mark out quality providers continue to form an impor-

tant part of associations' work. L'Office in France, which has both schools and agencies as members, is preparing to introduce a new level of accreditation for members: working with a company called SGS that offers a "Qualicert Service Certification".

"SGS is the first certification body [in France] to be accredited to perform service accreditation," explains Olga Gonzalez of L'Office. "Today, customers are more demanding and discerning than ever. They expect more and need more guidance and reassurance when making their choice, especially when it comes to buying an immaterial product."

And in Brazil, the Brazilian Education and Language Travel Association (Belta) has enhanced its membership criteria, according to President, Eduardo Camargo, "to guarantee maintaining high quality for our members".

He adds, "We are enhancing the skills of our members by providing seminars with consulates, the British Council, etc." Camargo underlines that one of Belta's aims is also to improve professional knowledge of members, as well as professional standing in Brazil.

"As part of our strategy to enhance the skills of our members," he says, "we are planning to offer training to the staff of our associates as well as providing seminars. We are also updating our website with full information about visas and the educational system of all countries that our associates work with."

Aseproce in Spain has had a busy year, not only working to-

wards better quality standards in Spain, but in Europe too. Representatives of the association have played in active part in the development of the draft European standards for language study tour operators and providers (see *Language Travel Magazine*, September 2003, page 8).

Meanwhile, the association has maintained dialogue with the Ministry of Education, the autonomous government of Catalunya and two political parties, to continue with its goal of "promoting a national regulation for the Spanish industry". Ana Maria Iglesias, Secretary General of the group, adds, "An improved version of our Code of Practice [for members] was also approved [this year]."

The Spanish agency association now has 63 members, with two more agencies expected to join by the year end. It has new offices and, thanks to investment in a display stand, a higher profile at study abroad fairs, such as Salo de l'Ensayament in Barcelona.

Iglesias adds that the President, Juan Manuel Elizalde, and herself, have been interviewed for television and newspaper articles. They have also strengthened their relationship with foreign embassies in Spain. Aseproce has had a busy year with both promotion and professionalism, epitomising what many associations aim to achieve, given resources and motivation. □

Felca developments

The Federation of Education and Language Consultant Associations (Felca) was officially formed and incorporated in the UK in 2000 after discussion of the idea among peers.

One of the aims of Felca, which currently has 12 member associations representing national agency groups from around the world, is to help new agency associations to form and join in with Felca activities as they are able.

Masaru Yamada (second from right), President of Felca, explains that current members Vieca of Vietnam, Belta of Brazil, Halta of Hungary and AAEAC of Argentina, have all joined since Felca's establishment, in part due to encouragement from the Felca executive board.

Yamada adds, "Russia, Belgium, Portugal and Switzerland have sent their representatives to the AGM."



AAEAC members accept sponsorship from Felca representatives

And he says that other potential members are expected from countries such as Malaysia and India.

Another plan of Felca's is to establish a "cyber-alliance" with the umbrella group for educators'

associations, Gaela. After a meeting with Gaela, Yamada reports that some associations have already agreed to link to the Felca website. "This will allow for free-flow contact and information transfer," he says.