

Living arrangements

Are schools keeping up with the accommodation requirements of clients? While academic programmes are regularly reassessed and improved, agents claim that some schools are neglecting to provide accommodation that suits the needs of their students. AMY BAKER reports.

Is it [sensible] that while a student will be in a foreign family's home for more than 60 per cent of his stay, the schools provide less than five per cent of space [in a brochure or website] for marketing and informing clients about how life will be in a host family?' asks Dag Gårdeman, Managing Director of Pro Linguis agency in Sweden. Gårdeman is of the opinion that not enough care and attention is paid to informing clients about accommodation choices, and furthermore, that schools, especially in the UK, fail to provide alternative options to the host family.

And, as he points out, market demand is evolving. '[Many Swedish] students cancel their plans for study in the UK because they cannot even think about living with another family,' he claims. 'Of all the language students studying in the UK between September and June, I believe not more than five per cent are offered any alternative housing besides the host family.'

Alain Bertholet, of Langues Vivantes in Belgium, agrees that different forms of accommodation are not readily available. 'We offer [international flat shares] but not enough,' he says. While host families are the most popular choice at his agency, Bertholet says that a growing number of students are requesting residential accommodation, flat shares and private apartments. 'Spain is excellent [for such accommodation], the USA is OK, [but] most other countries are a joke,' he claims.

In the event of a client's accommodation request not being available, Bertholet says 'we explain all options and prices to a client and sometimes they change their mind about [the] destination, for example, going to Malta instead of the UK.'

Lucy Quagiotto, of Globorama agency in Venezuela, offers a reason for the burgeoning demand for flat shares, although host families also remain the most popular accommodation option at her agency. 'Some host families have become excessively commercialised, so that all the promised benefits derived from interacting with the host family are not really present,' she says. Hans Seelhorst, of Luis de Góngora Sprachschulen in Germany, agrees with Quagiotto. 'My experience is that students who have studied as juniors in the UK often tend to go for student flats, as many of them had bad experiences in bad neighbourhoods caused by careless organisations,' he com-

ments, adding, 'I try to send most of my customers into family accommodation.'

Accommodation demand also depends on the nature of the agency market, which varies worldwide. Some nationalities remain content with host family accommodation, as Elizabeth Castro, of Mundo Unido in Mexico, and Tusnebul Sukriket, of World Splendour Holidays in Thailand, underline. But independent options are being increasingly requested, especially from students who are used to independent living.

'Here in Denmark, young people are moving away from their parents at a relatively young age, compared with southern Europe,' says Karin Demuth of Eurostudy International. 'They're used to living on their own and do not want to be dependent [on a host] family. They want to do their own cooking and stay out late at night without disturbing members of a family.' Tadashi Nozawa, of CapStudies in Japan, concurs. 'Family accommodation is still number-one, but more and more students are choosing [other] accommodation these days.'

Representing just one language teaching company in the UK, Silve Amgren, of Oy Wintz Ab agency in Finland, has significant problems when helping students find flat shares or private apartments. As a result, she says she can lose out on bookings. '[Meeting specific requests] is very difficult for us. If the language schools don't have the accommodation that people want, it is difficult for us to find other accommodation, and for this reason we have no orders for tuition,' she says. '[Students] have to try the Internet [and look for] homepages with links to good accommodation [options] in all countries.'

Amgren makes a further point. 'It is such a job selling accommodation today for no payment. Schools must give us the same commission [that we receive] for tuition and secondly, they have to listen to agents and customers [and offer] the alternative accommodation we want.'

While some schools do try and accommodate an agent's wishes, others are inflexible in their approach, according to Tinke Lamers-



Visman of Interschool Information Service in the Netherlands. 'I think people want to be more independent,' she says. '[Older students] prefer individual apartments. Some schools deal with their [accommodation] system that functions and don't want to change to other systems, because they already have facilities [in place].'

When it comes to accommodation, it appears to be a clear case of schools having to play catch up with market demand, although this evidently raises logistical problems (see below). As Sukriket in Thailand points out, demand for different types of accommodation provision does exist, even in those countries where host family accommodation presently dominates client choice. 'For parents who accompany their children for a long [period], we find it difficult to get short-term flat lets [for them] at a reasonable price,' he explains. 'We have to put them in nearby hotels which are more expensive.'

Schools and agencies alike need to take student preferences into consideration because

they both risk losing customers unless they can accommodate demand. Quagiotto in Venezuela underlines that if an accommodation option is not available at a client's chosen school, 'We try to change his or her mind, but if we don't succeed, we lose the customer.' Schools in particular are at risk of losing business, as agencies may be able to place a student elsewhere. Lamers-Visman says that if a school can't meet a client's request, 'I'll inform [them] about another school that has the options they want.'

Quagiotto is sure that eventually schools will have to change. 'I understand of course that schools shy away from involvement [with rental agencies] because they don't want the additional headache of being the intermediary with flat renting agencies, but I think sooner or later they will have to [do so],' she says. It is certainly high time that schools took a closer look at the living arrangements they offer. As Seelhorst puts it, 'good accommodation is at least half the story' of a successful language travel programme. □

occasionally Japanese. [However], we recommend to [Japanese students] that they stay in our residence or a host family first if it is their first visit to Europe.'

One problem that Malaca Instituto had experienced when organising flat shares is that of students wanting to move out of apartments because they find 'cheaper' alternatives with friends. '[Students] were, of course, failing to take into account the extra costs of servicing the apartments, high charges in the high season, and so on,' says Burger. 'We have substantially overcome this problem by allowing students to book only for eight weeks in advance. Now they can choose for themselves whether they continue in our apartments and the majority choose to do so.'

Schools situated in key holiday destinations, such as Cape Town or Malaga, obviously have the advantage of being able to source more easily short-term rental accommodation for clients. For schools located in other cities, an answer to finding short-term rental properties - especially some time in advance - can be found by working with accommodation agencies.

'Recently, we have been approached by two parties that are interested in setting up and running furnished rooms with shared cooking, lounge and bathroom facilities for students near our school,' says Grant in Napier, New Zealand. 'This would be our choice, we would then know the premises and be able to recommend them to students. We could book students into those apartments and charge a small fee for doing so.'

There are a number of accommodation agencies based in cities around the world that operate on such a basis. At Roomies in Canada, demand has doubled in a year for flat-shares or house-shares in Vancouver. Roomies places students either in a home, but with access to cooking facilities and more independence as a result, or in a shared apartment with other flatmates. 'Most students are not aware [that our service] exists,' relates Susan Hunt at the agency, which is paid a placement fee from a school for placing one of their students into a 'roomstay' host home or flat. Roomies works with local language schools in the area and also approaches international students at local technical schools to offer its services.

What the schools say

Some schools report that they have not experienced much demand for independent accommodation options. Debbie Hughes, Registrar at Abbey College in the UK, reports that no nationalities at their school have requested a flat share service and they therefore have no plans to offer this in the future. A number of schools around the world do offer alternative accommodation choices for international students, although some institutions point out that as host family and residential options represent the bulk of client demand, other arrangements have to be made on an ad hoc basis.

'Because of the high maintenance of [flat letting], we don't have a flat-sharing placement as such, but local people are able to advertise on our noticeboard if they have [flats] available,' explains Janey Grant, Homestay Director at New Horizon College of English in New Zealand. '[Accommodation] is then a private arrangement between the student and advertiser.'

Grant says that the school provides an information sheet regarding the relative costs of each type of accommodation, including the

setting-up costs for flat sharing. 'There seem to be more students from Japan, Korea and the Czech Republic who want to share a flat,' she says, 'although they are a tiny percentage of the total students.'

Grant underlines some of the problems that can face schools if they endeavour to organise flat rental options for students themselves. 'This area can involve huge amounts of staff time in finding flat placements which are available at a given time - often two to three months in advance.' At Cape Studies in South Africa, the school does try to organise flat rental for students if requested, but Jenny McSweeney points out other complications. 'We will sometimes have to pay the deposit ourselves to secure a booking [in a self-catering flat],' she says. 'If a client then cancels it is then a struggle to get the client to reimburse us for the deposit.'

McSweeney adds, 'It is [also] important to have a closed group staying at flats so that they can be held accountable for any damage done to the apartment.'

Some schools have managed to provide flat sharing options for

students by cutting out the third party from whom the flat is rented. Guy Hughes, Director of Language Schools New Zealand (LSNZ), which has branches in Queenstown and Christchurch, explains that he resolved to offer apartment-style accommodation as an alternative to host family accommodation, along with Worldwide School of English in Auckland. 'To this end, LSNZ set up a building that it owned in Queenstown and Worldwide School bought a block of motels last year. LSNZ in Christchurch has just completed negotiations to offer this [service] to our students within 10 minutes of our new school.'

Bob Burger of Malaca Instituto in Spain says his school owns some apartments which are offered to students, while it rents others on a short or long-term basis. '[Flat rental] is especially appropriate for long-stay students as they are able to cook for themselves and it is considerably cheaper than other forms of accommodation,' he says. 'The nationalities that choose this type of accommodation tend to be Scandinavians, Dutch, some Americans, Swiss, some British and