




# tried and tested

Quality is at the forefront of a... and this is, of course, true in... reputations ride on the quality... must be sure of the standard... quality measures are being c... constantly being tweaked to... language travel experience... developments in the quality a...



## Focusing on the consumer

In recent years, quality assurance organisations have made more effort to ensure their schemes focus on the quality of the student's experience during their language travel stay. "The EiBA scheme has as its fundamental aim the protection of international students and the inspection process is based on an evaluation of an organisation's provision in relation to student experience," explains John

Shackleton at the British Council. "Organisations must demonstrate not only that they have systems in place but that these systems are demonstrably working for the benefit of the students."

Recent changes to the EiBA scheme have redirected the emphasis to "the induction, support, monitoring, observation and training provided for teachers and the effect this has on classroom performance". Shackleton

continues, "We are also now evaluating the appropriate deployment of teachers – assessing how organisations match the qualifications and experience of the teachers against the needs and expectations of the students they are teaching."

Another example of how some organisations are honing their quality schemes to ensure the best quality and protection for students is through fee protection schemes. In Australia, the government's Esos Act 2000 stipulated that all colleges

(except those receiving government funding), offering programmes to international student visa holders must be a member of the Tuition Assurance Scheme, which places students in a similar course at another member institution free of charge if an institution ceases trading. If nothing suitable can be found for the students they receive their remaining fees from the Tuition Assurance Fund. Similar to Australia, New Zealand has now introduced a fee protection requirement. ▶

any purchase by a discerning consumer, the language travel market. As agents' quality of the products they represent, they focus at their partner schools. As a result, developed and existing schemes are guaranteed to guarantee students the best possible experience. GILLIAN EVANS reports on the latest developments in the assurance sector.

As the language travel market has matured and student expectations have risen, the quality guarantees offered by agents of the schools they represent have become increasingly important. As Jan Capper of the International Association of Language Centres (Ialc) says, "Language training abroad cannot be checked out before you buy it so quality schemes, together with agent recommendation, play a vital role in reassuring customers that they are making the right choice."

The assurance of the quality of language schools is undertaken by either national or international associations of language schools, national government-endorsed organisations or, in some cases, governments themselves. Quality assurance is not only good for agents and students; it is also an important marketing tool for schools to differentiate themselves from other players in their highly competitive markets. This means that even where compulsory schemes are in place, many schools join national associations – such as the schools' associations Feltom in Malta, English Australia and FielsNZ or Crels in New Zealand – that offer further quality measures often through additional codes of practice.

Quality is assured by a variety of means, including the licensing and registration of language schools or regular inspection and monitoring schemes. With a few exceptions, most schemes are voluntary, and although they all claim to assure high standards, the details of what they cover and how vary widely. Over the years, however, there has been some convergence in the quality assurance arena, with more and more schemes including inspections and the focus being placed firmly on ensuring the best possible experience for students.

### Compulsory registration

It is perhaps surprising that in a multi-billion dollar industry such as language travel – in the main English-speaking markets alone the industry is estimated to generate over US\$7.2 billion (see *Language Travel Magazine*, August 2003, pages 26-30) – the industry remains relatively unregulated. Only in Malta, Australia and New Zealand is compulsory registration of language schools required by the government or government agencies.

Sue Blundell of English Australia (EA) believes this has helped Australia's competitiveness in the global marketplace. "I am surprised that no other countries have followed the Australian [quality assurance] model," says Blundell. "It certainly provides Australia with a strong competitive advantage in terms of quality and can only attract students with the assurances [that] are provided."

She adds, "Industry and government have worked together to provide international students with clear advice as to what they can expect from their study experience."

Francis Stivali of the language school federation, Feltom, in Malta, echoes this view. "People want reassurances when they are out to purchase something, particularly if it is as costly as language stays [can be]. We believe that the compulsory accreditation scheme [in Malta] has prevented cowboy schools from springing up and has provided Malta with quality teaching."

### Voluntary schemes

In other countries, where there is no compulsory quality scheme, language school associations or groups have been largely responsible for setting up their own quality monitoring strategies. In some cases, this has led to more than one organisation running a quality programme for language schools in one country. For example, in the UK, there is the English in Britain Accreditation scheme (EiBA), which is run by the British Council, the Association of Recognised English Language Services (Arels) and the British Association of State English Language Teaching (Baselt), while there is another independent inspection scheme run by the Association of British Language Schools (ABLS) for its members.

In Canada, too, there is an initiative by the recently amalgamated Private English Language Schools Association (Pelsa) and the Council of Second Language Programs Canada (CSLPC), and another run by the Canadian Association of Private Language Schools (Capls). ▶

While most associations in other countries do not have a fee protection strategy as such, many, such as Capls, do have a school closure plan in place. This means that if a member school closes, another institution will take in the students for the balance of the programme they have paid for.

Organisations are also increasingly developing measures to enhance the transparency of their quality schemes. In a bid to ensure all students know what they can expect from Ialc

members, all Ialc schools must now display the Ialc code of ethics in their buildings. "We produced the code of ethics poster in 12 languages to ensure that students studying at Ialc schools are aware of the schools' quality obligations as a member of Ialc," reports Jan Capper.

The international quality group, Eaquals, has also been making changes to ensure agents and students can identify their quality standards. "We are in the process of producing a

revised version of the inspection guide with increased clarity and specificity of the criteria and fuller details of the evidence required to verify that the standards are being met," explains Frank Heyworth from Eaquals.

In the UK, the British Council is currently considering making the EIBA inspection reports available to agents and students. Since last year, publishable statements for each accredited school can be viewed on the British Council

website. "The feedback we have received [for making the statements available] has been positive in the sense that students and agents welcome the move to place more information from inspection reports into the public domain," explains Shackleton. "They would like us to go further, publishing the whole report and we are currently discussing what the implications of this would be and how the process might be managed."

The British Council is the first organisation to favour

this, while others maintain that the seal of approval awarded by being an association member should be proof enough of the quality of the school. "Our aim is for agents and students to trust the quality of every Ialc school because they trust Ialc," explains Capper. She continues, "We do not make our inspection reports available to the public because they are confidential and detailed assessments of our members' business operations."

Many non-English speaking language travel destinations have some sort of quality schemes, although they are not always very well developed or widespread, and attempts at improving them have not been successful. Souffle in France has been around since 1990. Last year, it began talks with L'Association Française de Normalisation (Afnor) to examine the possibility of developing a quality scheme for its members but nothing came of the discussions. Instead, says Jean Petrisson at Souffle, "I think we have to look at things on a European level rather than a [national] level."

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Germany, which has neither a quality scheme for language schools nor any specific language school

associations, has also pinned its hopes on European standards. When IQ Deutsch, an association of language schools in Germany, disbanded in 2000 due to lack of majority support, members instead joined Eaquals. They are also awaiting the development of the European-wide norme (quality standard). As Joachim Graff at Language Institut Treffpunkt says, "This will set up an adequate European framework for language schools [and] the students will have more transparency and comparable criteria to help them select the best school for their individual needs."

The Comité European de Normalisation (CEN) has been creating European standards that will cover tour operators and providers of language teaching and related services including accommodation. Draft standards are currently being reviewed by all national members of CEN (see *Language Travel Magazine*, September 2003, page 8). This is one of the most ambitious and expansive quality systems yet to have been attempted, but its success, to a large extent, lies in its enforcement, which will be the responsibility of the national quality regulations organisations in each country.

In South Africa, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) is responsible for recognising all education providers, but has a long way to go before it gets round to English language teaching institutions. As a result, a number of schools have formed the English Language Travel Association of South Africa (Eltasa), which is currently in discussions with SAQA. One of Eltasa's goals is to endorse quality tuition for language travellers. "This is a positive step in ensuring that South Africa is able to become more competitive with other global destinations," says Mark van Niekerk from One World Language School, which is a member of Eltasa.

### Re-assessing standards

However old or new a quality scheme may be, it is important that they are constantly reviewed and updated. In a bid to plug any quality gaps, since July this year, all language schools in New Zealand that teach international students have been required to register with the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA), including those with courses of less than three months, which have previously been exempt from the scheme. This move has been welcomed by the language teaching industry. "It's only right that all the regulations that registered providers must comply with are also applied to competing schools that have avoided these requirements in the past," states William Neale, Chairperson of FielsNZ.

In Australia, the National ELT Accreditation Service (Neas) is in a similar position in that it currently only accredits institutions that offer courses of three months or more, but Glenys Merrifield, National Director of Neas, says, "We would like to see a broadening of the role of Neas to cover accreditation of the study tourism sector, which is currently unregulated."

Aware that students and agents expect schools to be independently inspected, many language school associations are introducing on-site inspections. In Canada, Pelsa was the first to do so, and with the creation of the first language school association in Canada for both state and private schools, CSLPC has recently revised its standards and is planning to introduce an inspection scheme based on the Pelsa model.

"[CSLPC] spent over two years working on the development of a more comprehensive set of standards," explains Jay Jamieson, Executive Director of CSLPC. "This was done by research and consultation with other international accrediting agencies. We now have an enhanced model of standards that covers quality assurance, teacher qualifications, curriculum, student admissions, student services, marketing and recruiting as well as programme administration."

Similarly, Capls has recently announced the introduction of inspections for new members, to be introduced by the end of the year. Existing members will "be asked to sign a declaration that they meet the criteria outlined in the site visit document", according to Capls President, Valerie Richmond.

Also looking to add inspections to their quality schemes are Feltom, in Malta, and Italian in Italy. Giuseppina Fotti of Italian in Italy explains, "We have been in contact with Uniter, in order for school members to be inspected by an outside organisation. Uniter is recognised by Sincert, a national association which has the aim of improving the quality of products and services in the industry."

Italian in Italy is not the only association to look towards working with other organisations to gain recognition. Pelsa in Canada has been working with Tesl Canada. “The goal to have minimum standards recognised outside of Pelsa has been achieved with the Pelsa minimum teacher qualifications now matching the Tesl Canada level one minimum standard,” explains Craig Stusiak of Pelsa.

Meanwhile, FielsNZ – whose members are subject to an audit by SGS International Certification Services as well as mandatory registration by NZQA – introduced a new standard of practice last year. “Although our members are independently audited by SGS, the [new standard] is not an ISO standard as such but an industry-specific standard developed by FielsNZ to ensure our members are maintaining the quality expected of member schools,” relates Neale.

The Commission on English Language Program Accreditation (CEA) in the USA has also received a resounding endorsement, having obtained recognition as an accrediting agency for US English language teaching programmes by the US Department of Education’s National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity. This means CEA can now accredit English language providers in both the state and private sectors (see *Language Travel Magazine*, September 2003, page 19).

#### **Self regulation**

Although independent inspections are playing a greater role in the market, self-regulation by schools is also an important feature of



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quality schemes, particularly when it comes to accommodation. Although some inspectors do include on-site accommodation facilities in their site visits, only a selection, if any at all, of schools’ host family provision is reviewed by inspectors.

CEA in the USA does not usually inspect student accommodation. However, Terry O’Donnell, CEA Executive Director, says, “When [inspection teams] interview students, they always ask about homestays if the programme has such an [option]. They have also called host families on occasion. This depends on the particular site under review, whether host families are offered and whether complaints are found.”

Language school associations generally stipulate that members must have certain procedures in place for the monitoring of host families. According to Neale, FielsNZ requires members to inspect and interview host families to ensure students have their own room

with study facilities; maintain updated host family profiles; have signed agreements with host families outlining obligations and responsibilities; supply relevant information to host families; and have a designated person available for homestay and student support.

In Malta, the Malta Tourism Authority (MTA) took over the monitoring of accommodation in the language teaching sector last year. All host family providers must now obtain a licence from MTA. While each school inspects the host family premises and certifies that the family has a good command of English, the MTA also inspects a random sample of host families each year and deals with any complaints and dubious applications.

Stiff fines are imposed for non-compliance including exceeding the maximum of four students in one host family. In such cases, the language school, travel agent and host family may all be subject to the fine. The move was greeted favourably by the industry, although Stivala emphasises the importance of monitoring so that standards are maintained. "We would like to witness a more dynamic effort on the part of MTA in ensuring that the standards already provided for in the legal regulations are being observed," he says.

#### Market demand

In many countries, quality schemes are subject to development according to market demand. For example, one of the main areas to have received attention in recent years is the young learner sector. "Market forces will continue to impact on the quality assurance process, [for example], recently there have been moves by some providers to accept young learners (primary school age)," reports Merrifield in Australia. "Demand is coming from parents of students in countries that are making English compulsory in their primary education system. The standards for such courses and the learning environment need special consideration."

In New Zealand, the Ministry of Education issued a code of practice specifically for young learners, to be signed by all NZQA-registered schools. Industry sources feel that, if effectively enforced,

the code of practice will protect junior students and ensure they receive the pastoral care they require during their stay.

In 2004, the British Council is also intending to change its criteria for young learners coming to study in UK language schools. According to Shackleton, the changes will include "explicit policy statements on how an organisation assumes responsibility for the care of students who are under 18, tightening up, monitoring and briefing of accompanying group leaders, tightening the screening process of staff and homestay providers and extending the extent of policy and practice to students who are under 18 – currently the scheme refers to juniors under 16 in line with UK legislation".

#### Government backing

For many organisations that assure quality standards, compulsory government-endorsed accreditation is the holy grail they seek. In the UK, Shackleton says, "We have been in discussion for some time with a range of government departments and have commissioned a consultant to analyse the risk that the lack of a government recognition scheme presents to the UK [English language teaching] sector as a whole." He says the outcome will include recommendations about how such a scheme might function, although ultimately, it will be up to the UK government to engage with and support the idea. "The British Council is working hard, along with our partners Arels and Baselt, to encourage this engagement."

## National and international quality schemes for language schools

Country	Name	National accreditation/ registration is	No. accredited institutions/ members	Quality assured by				Inspection/guidelines includes												
				Inspections	Code of practice	Self-assessment	Student interviews	Private sector	State sector	Home tuition	Seasonal centres	Junior centres	Residential accom.	Host family accom.	Min. teacher qualifications	Publicity checked	Student protection plan	Spot checks per year	Reinspection	
Australia	Neas	c	200	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	1-1.5
Canada	Capls	v	72		✓	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	n/a	n/a
Canada	CSLPC	v	80		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	n/a	n/a
Canada	Pelsa	v	14	✓	✓			✓	✓								✓			5
Europe	Eaquals	v	84	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	3
France	Souffle	v	20	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		5
International	Ialc	v	81	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		3
Ireland	Acls	v	110	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	3
Italy	Asils	v	33	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		3
Italy	Italian in Italy	v	22	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	3
Malta	EFL Monitoring Board/MTA	v	38	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	1
New Zealand	NZQA	c	166+	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	1
Spain	E/RE	v	56	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	2
UK	EIBA	v	369	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	4
UK	ABLS	v	28	✓	✓			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	2
USA	Accet	v	239	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	3-5
USA	CEA	v	46	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5-10

c compulsory v voluntary

NB: Where there is a compulsory registration or accreditation scheme, no language schools associations have been included although they also may offer additional quality assurance measures such as codes of practice. Where there is no compulsory scheme, associations that have measures to regulate the quality of their members have been included

In some countries such as Canada, however, where there is no national education ministry, sources remain pessimistic that a national, government-backed scheme could be established. However, the formation of the new cross-sector association may become the national quality organisation. "Through [the new group] we finally have a single association representing all sectors of the adult non-credit ESL field, and are in the process of developing an inspection scheme for members. We will be lobbying all levels of government to recognise the new association as the prime voice of the industry," says Stusiak. "Thus we hope a government-endorsed national accreditation scheme is close at hand."

If national standards in some countries are only just being discussed, what are the chances of developing global standards for language schools? Realistically, this is some way off. "It seems unlikely that a set of standards could be agreed and applied globally in the highly competitive climate of international language education, taking into account vastly different political and economic influences from country to country," comments Merrifield. "If a set of standards were to be established, they must be capable of being monitored. Monitoring of standards in-country is an expensive exercise and would be far more costly on a global basis."

Shackleton says cooperation between various quality organisations is the first step towards any global standards. "In the short term, I think we need to be sharing practices with colleagues in other English-speaking countries on methodology and procedure in quality

assurance. The British Council would welcome more

opportunities to collaborate with colleagues in [other countries] but the development of some form of global standard should not be at the expense of locally applicable standards that are student centred and allow for the uniqueness of each accredited institution."

But quality assurance, whether national or international, will continue to play an essential role in the language travel market. "As the competition between language schools intensifies, we expect to see more quality schemes set up," says Capper at Ialc. "Agents and students will want them and need to know what each scheme actually delivers so a growth in the number of schemes will probably be accompanied by a move towards greater transparency, especially by the more rigorous and established schemes." □



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