



## Amid a crowd of stars

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Celestine Rowland, Ialc president and owner of Galway Cultural Institute and Galway Business School, tells **Melanie Butler** about Irish ELT reform



*STAR TREATMENT* Celestine Rowland (centre) and Ialc's Jan Kapper (left) accept the STM Star Award for best school association (Courtesy Hothouse Media)

**Last month you appeared on the front page of the *Gazette* alongside Irish prime minister Enda Kelly. How did you first get involved in the language school business?**

About 25 years ago a Spanish friend wanted to bring a group of juniors to Ireland. My background was in teaching – colleges, schools – and I think my husband thought it would be a good way to keep me busy. It just seemed to grow organically from there – groups seemed to find us rather than us having any great initial marketing or sales plans. We also received some great advice at the beginning, which was to get accredited by the Irish Department of Education, which we did in our first year. That was in 1985, and a quarter of a century later we are visited by the prime minister!

Having the taoiseach visit GCI and GBS – our business school – was a great coup for us and shows we are highly regarded nationally. It was a huge boost for the regulated English language industry, coming after all the negative publicity over private further education colleges closing. It gave out the message that there are good providers in the international education sector and that the government recognises that.

**What do you think about the Irish government's plan to reform the international education business?**

I think it's very positive. The Irish government is tightening up the regulations – many that were already there – that govern further education and English language colleges in Ireland. What I welcome is the renewed commitment to value institutions like ours who have national accreditation schemes in place, such as QQI, and who are members of organisations like Marketing English in Ireland (MEI), which provide protection for learners – if an MEI school closes, other member school will take their students.

One of the best things about the reforms is the emphasis on learner protection. Schools and colleges which are not members of an association which offers learner protection will not be allowed to recruit international students. The difficulty for some students is that they choose schools based on price alone and issues of quality are not considered by them in advance. If they choose an MEI member school, they cannot lose their tuition and other fees.

We owe a huge amount of gratitude to David O'Grady of MEI. He has spent years building links with the Justice Department and with Education. It proved really very valuable in the crisis – the government recognised that they were dealing with an organisation that was worthy and robust. And by working with the regulated sector it was able to sort it out very fast, to really reduce the reputational damage.

**How important has Galway been to your success?**

When we first started out we met agents and students who hadn't heard of Ireland, they thought it was Iceland or Holland for some reason. As for Galway, it was a completely unknown destination. But when students and agents visit us they are captivated – we're on the Atlantic coast, there is easy access to Irish culture, and as a university city it is great value for money – there are lots of free things to do.

At our college we are lucky in that we offer lots of courses to Irish students throughout the day and evening, so we are always open, which gives our students space to meet and study outside of school. And we involve our students in the local community. We invite local people in for cultural evenings at the schools; our students volunteer for the arts festival, the oyster festival – we're famous for festivals here in Galway.

The other thing about the city is that families here have been hosting students, Irish students, since the 1840s, and then visitors in the summer. It is part of the DNA of the town.

**You are also president of IALC (the International Association of Language Centres), which was recently voted association of the year at the STM Star Awards. Why did you personally choose to join IALC and what do you think it offers students and agents?**

It was such a delight for me to collect the STM Star Award on behalf of all our 120 members. It is the fourth time we have won it as an association, and 24 IALC schools were actually nominated for awards this year, a brilliant achievement. We are very grateful to all our agents for voting for us.

We were invited to join IALC in 2002, and when you look at the calibre of the other members – all three of the top-ranking UK schools, for example – you definitely want to be in that organisation. There are two things about IALC members I think are important. First, we are really focused on education, we all have that ethos. Second, agents always have an owner or a manager they can talk to directly.

I have found it the most open association I have ever been a member of – people sharing tips, ideas, everybody wanting to increase quality. And it is important that, as the IALC workshop is hosted by a different member in a different location every year, it gives our partner agents the opportunity not only to meet all the schools but to get to know a different destination. The workshop was in Brisbane this year, and it will be in Rouen next April.

**If you had three wishes – one for your school, one for IALC and one for the Irish industry – what would they be?**

For the schools, both Galway Cultural Institute and Galway Business School, it is to continue to grow and attract the excellent calibre of students. I would particularly like to grow the degree and postgraduate business programmes. For IALC, in 2015 we will welcome new members into our association, have our workshop in Rouen and work strategically on increasing membership, cutting-edge marketing initiatives and deliver excellent quality assurance for our students. For Ireland, I would like that the value of private providers of international education be further recognised and be a more fundamental component of government strategy.

I guess all of my wishes are about managed organic growth in Ireland. We have been through a boom, we have been through a bust, and we have learned, at least I have, that the secret is managed regulated growth.

## Enquiries

**Tel:** +44 (0)20 7481 6700

**Fax:** +44 (0)20 7488 1077

**E-mail:**

[sales@elgazette.com](mailto:sales@elgazette.com)

## Editorial

**Tel:** +44 (0)20 7481 6706

**Fax:** +44 (0)20 7488 1077

**E-mail:**

[editorial@elgazette.com](mailto:editorial@elgazette.com)

## Sales & Marketing

**Tel:** +44 (0)20 7481 6711

+44 (0)20 7481 6712

**Fax:** +44 (0)20 7488 1077

**E-mail:**

[sales@elgazette.com](mailto:sales@elgazette.com)

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