
From the field: Commoditisation and differentiation in the language travel industry

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Jean-Marc Alberola is the president of [Bridge](#), a dynamic US-based provider whose six divisions span a wide range of language, teacher training, pathway, exchange, corporate training, and online programmes. Mr Alberola joined a special industry panel last fall at the ICEF Berlin Workshop to look at some of the most significant strategic issues facing schools and agencies today. We are pleased to present three video segments below from a wide-ranging discussion that we had with him during his visit to Berlin.

Mr Alberola is a 25-year veteran of the industry. Now based in Denver, he has extensive experience in Brazil, Chile, and Argentina and an impressive track record of innovation and expansion in international education. We began our conversation by talking about some of the most significant drivers of change in the education sector, including the ever-growing importance of the Internet for both marketing and programme delivery, the regulatory environment (particularly accreditation requirements in the US), and major demographic trends.

Our second interview segment below focuses on the importance of adaptability, diversification, and differentiation as key strategies for managing risk and responding to the sometimes-dramatic shifts in the marketplace.

Mr Alberola highlights, for example, the importance of Bridge's extensive teacher training programmes, both those for individuals as well as courses undertaken as in the context of large-scale professional development programmes offered in

partnership with foreign institutions or governments. [BridgeTEFL](#), the company's teacher training unit, is a leading provider of English language teacher training courses in the US. The division prepares over 4,000 trainees annually to teach English as a second language at home and abroad.

In our third and final interview segment below, the conversation shifts to the question of commoditisation in language travel. In an earlier post on the subject, we introduced commoditisation as “the movement toward undifferentiated competition.” We suggested at the time that commoditisation in the language school sector is occurring as a result of two important market characteristics:

- A large field of undifferentiated competitors;
- The emergence of online booking/rating services that allow customers to very easily compare language schools according to the features they value most, including location, availability, and price.

The issue is a potentially significant one for the industry as it both changes the competitive dynamic in the marketplace and tends to exert a notable downward pressure on price.

Mr Alberola concludes, as do many in the industry, that some level of commoditisation is now underway. However, he adds an important qualifier as well.

“If you look at the spectrum of services in our industry, I think there are certain programmes that lend themselves to commodification and others that don't.” Undifferentiated, general English programmes, for example, might be more easily treated as a commodity. Junior programmes or pathway programmes, on the other hand, are more likely to be resistant to the trend.

Many observers, Mr Alberola included, also see new opportunities in commodification – for example, to the extent that it opens up new options for online booking and global booking systems in particular. Many also see the trend as one that remains a very gradual process and, as such, as a market factor that can be a stimulus for new efforts toward differentiation and innovation.

For additional background on trends in commoditisation, please see [our earlier post](#) on the subject. It reflects on an April 2014 panel discussion from the IALC conference in Brisbane which, coincidentally, was moderated by Mr Alberola.

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