

Top schools have top teachers

Melanie Butler looks at why student satisfaction starts in the classroom

What makes an excellent school? The answer depends on who you ask. If you ask language school inspectors, you will get a set of answers normally covering areas including management, teaching, welfare, training and facilities.

As far as we know, the only national language school inspection scheme that publishes its results is the one run by the British Council for the UK. By benchmarking the results of that scheme for UK Ialc members we have shown previously that, on average, they are in the top 20 per cent of private language schools in a country.

Just as Michelin inspectors rank restaurants, so language school inspectors rank language schools – based on a wealth of experience, an ability to compare one to another and, dare we say it, an eye to the trends in cooking or teaching. In the case of restaurants, the inspectors' opinions may not be shared by diners. Just think of TripAdvisor.

So what do students think? One of the best student satisfaction rankings we know is found on Unispain, a website that helps students choose language centres in Spain and surveys them after they leave. It's the one site we know where schools can't pick their favourite student to write reports – or write them themselves. And where students' comments, not only positive ones, are there for everyone to read.

So how do Ialc member schools do in the eyes of the Unispain students? Pretty well is the answer. Three of the top five language centres listed on the site are members. CLIC Seville is in first position, Sampere Salamanca in second, with Instituto Malaca in fourth, just ahead of the University of Barcelona, one of the country's two world-ranking universities. Overall, the nine Ialc schools on the site have a satisfaction score of 8.9, putting them in the top 20 per cent.

These results closely mirror those of Ialc schools covered by the British Council inspection scheme. The top schools in the country based on the old British Council system, English in Chester and the English



Courtesy CLIC Seville

PASSION FOR LEARNING Ialc member CLIC Seville is the most popular language school in Spain among Unispain students

Language Centre Bristol, are members, as is the top school under the new system, Wimbledon School of English – the first school ever to get a perfect score (fifteen out of fifteen) in any British Council inspection. Just behind, with fourteen points out of fifteen, is another member, Beet in Bournemouth.

What is striking about the Ialc schools' performance in both the British and Spanish league tables is not that they do so well, it is that they do so well when judged by two completely different groups: the British results are based on inspection by language teaching professionals, while the Spanish scores are based on the opinions of students. What is particularly important about the feedback scores from Unispain, and what differentiates them from any number of other student satisfaction websites, is that the site contacts every student who has booked through them directly within one week from the end of the course, so there is no chance of schools planting the kind of glowing reference written in perfect L2 that you see on other student satisfaction websites.

The Unispain results must be approached with caution, however. It admits that only 5 to 10 per cent of students actually respond and, in any event, the site only covers around forty language centres in the country, whereas the Instituto Cervantes accredits 150. In addition, the students are very

different from those who come to schools through agents. They are likely to be over 22 years old, probably paying for themselves (rather than relying on their parents or their employers) and are either English speakers (possibly the worst linguists in the world) or northern Europeans (certainly the best, to judge by international exam results).

However, if we are going to look at judging excellence in language schools we need to know what the students judge excellence by. And the results from Unispain are unequivocal – the most important thing for students are teachers. An analysis of the student comments published on the website showed that 65 per cent of all positive comments praised the teachers, while 30 per cent of negative comments cited teachers. Nothing else comes close. Around 25 per cent of positive comments mentioned activity programmes, 20 per cent mentioned teaching methods and around 15 per cent commented on the professionalism of the staff in general, good organisation and other areas, which in school inspections would come under the heading of management. The biggest number of negative comments involved class size, though bad teaching, especially in conversation rather than grammar classes, also came up.

The scores on Unispain are based on a much broader set of responses than the published comments. Staff however agree that the broader data showed

that the quality of a school was largely correlated with the quality of its teachers. 'Teacher motivation seems to be the most important factor: private language schools often do better here than universities, where the teachers are highly qualified and very experienced but often don't come over as motivated,' a Unispain spokesperson told the *Gazette*. 'They also have bigger classes, which isn't popular.'

Back-up for the student view that teachers are the most important element comes from educational research. Years ago academics from the University of Oxford gave me a list of the main variables which are associated with excellence in international educational outcomes. The most important factor was time on task – how long does the student actually spend learning. After that, teachers and teaching topped the table. Teacher knowledge qualification and experience, teacher turnover (negatively correlated with test results, particularly in maths and language), teacher workload (all of it, not just contact hours), teachers terms and conditions and team teaching (also preferred by students) all came ahead of methodology, resources and (at the bottom of the list) class size.

It is perhaps ironic then that teaching is not given a higher priority in accreditation schemes – it is just one of the fifteen criteria in the British Council scheme, and one out of fourteen in Ialc's quality assurance. However both also inspect the related areas of academic management, and in the British Council's case academic staff profiles and in Ialc's recruitment and training, but not specifically teachers. Is that enough emphasis on teaching?

Not according to Sir Michael Wilshaw, head of Ofsted, the state school inspection body in England. He recently announced that no school would be rated outstanding unless the rating for teaching and learning was outstanding. As he told the BBC, his new inspection framework would 'focus on what really matters – the quality of teaching'.

The students surveyed by Unispain would surely agree. ■

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