

CASE STUDY

The Associate Centers Network of the Instituto Cervantes: the benefits of the quality certification in Spanish language teaching centres.

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DESCRIPTION OF CONTEXT

The Associate Centers Network of the Instituto Cervantes is an institutional project that is part of the primary objectives of the Instituto, a public non-for-profit institution created by the Government of Spain in 1991 for the universal promotion of the teaching and learning of Spanish and for the endorsement of instruments and actions that may contribute to the dissemination and the enhancement of the quality of these activities. Thus, as well as being engaged in the teaching of Spanish throughout the world, the training of teachers of Spanish as a foreign language or the evaluation and certification of competence in the language through the Diplomas in Spanish as a Foreign Language (DELE), issued by the Instituto Cervantes on behalf of the Ministry for Education of Spain.

In the 90's, on the other hand, the number of Spanish language tuition providers rose quite sharply; they all showed a wide range of standards in terms of teacher qualifications, teaching methodologies and resources.

Also, over the last few years, a number of agents in the European context (CEFR, PEL, EAQUALS, ALTE, EN Standards...) have contributed a great deal to disseminate and raise awareness of the importance of a quality-based certification culture in the language teaching sector.

WHAT WE NEEDED TO DO AND WHY WE DID IT

The Associate Centres Network of the Instituto Cervantes was created in 2000 to promote quality and efficiency in the provision of Spanish language teaching services.

The Instituto Cervantes established a set of minimum requirements before teaching centres could apply to become members of the network: In order to apply for *Associate* or *Accredited Centre* status, centres must have at least two years' experience in the teaching of Spanish as a foreign language and meet the minimum academic and administrative requirements, as well as those pertaining to facilities and publicity, established by the Instituto Cervantes).

Also, the Instituto Cervantes established a procedure for joining the network whereby prospective members had to obtain a positive evaluation report from a set of Assessment Organizations (the Instituto Cervantes being one of them), which would certify compliance with a specific set of quality standards that relate to all aspects of their activity: legal status, academic performance, equipment and resources, administrative infrastructure and publicity. This evaluation report must include a chapter dedicated to recommendations for improvement, which is one of the pillars of the system.

Finally, the system relies on collaboration agreements that facilitate communication, not only bilaterally (between the Instituto Cervantes and individual members of the network), but also multilaterally, such as the general agreement undersigned by the Instituto Cervantes and FEDELE (Federation of Spanish Language Schools), whose membership includes the majority of Instituto Cervantes Associate Centres.

MAIN PURPOSE (WHAT WE WANTED TO ACHIEVE)

The main objectives of the *Associate Centres Network of the Instituto Cervantes* are to promote good professional practices and the provision of quality services in Spanish language teaching among specialist educational institutions worldwide, to warrant Spanish language students the quality of the education and the services provided by schools and to further develop a Spanish language teaching and cultural promotion system that is standardized, applicable worldwide and whose principal basis is the commitment to excellence.

ACTION TAKEN (STAGES AND PROCEDURES)

▪ **2000**

The system created by the Instituto Cervantes is based upon the following principles:

1. There is a compulsory first inspection which constitutes the cornerstone of the accreditation system. A thorough inspection visit is carried out and an assessor issues a quality report; if this is positive (a score of 80 points or over, out of 100, is required) the Instituto Cervantes will consider signing a collaboration agreement for a period of two years. If the centre wishes to extend the agreement, it will need to obtain a new positive quality report and, if applicable, membership will be extended for a further period of three years.
2. The second inspection visit is carried out by the Instituto Cervantes, at no cost to the centres, and it takes place in the course of the period of validity of the collaboration agreement. This is done in order to ensure that the conditions assessed at the time of issue of the quality report remain the same.
3. Members are legally obliged, in the context of the Network of Associated Centres scheme, to inform the Instituto Cervantes in writing of any substantial change in the circumstances that were assessed in the process of inspection and issue of the quality report, as well as of any other legal changes that may affect the validity of the agreement. As soon as such communication is received, the Instituto Cervantes requests official documents and legal accreditations and, if applicable, organises a fresh inspection visit in order to verify the new conditions at the centre, as explained above.

▪ **2001-2002**

The first evaluations take place and members start to join the Network, essentially from Spain, although some applicants are also from overseas.

▪ **2003**

The Instituto Cervantes becomes an Assessment Organization, in response to the demands of centres. The Instituto Cervantes also signs an agreement with the Federation of Spanish Language Schools (FEDELE), as joining most of the Accredited Centers or new potential members, as a EFQM alliances orientation.

▪ **2005**

The assessment instruments are reviewed and upgraded and new procedures are implemented for the issue of quality reports. Extensions after the initial two-year membership period have increased from two to three years, as a result of the experience gained since the creation of the network.

▪ **2006**

A new European norm (*UNE-EN 14804*) appeared in 2005 and it has implemented the system. The Instituto Cervantes is reviewing the accreditation system in order to be used in 2007, in the renewal evaluations.

MAIN OUTCOMES

1. Centers and teachers in the network are becoming further involved in the culture of quality, assessment and evaluation and continuous improvement.
2. The network has improved substantially since its inception. Some improvements include:
 - a) *Academic activity and teaching quality*
 - Teaching programmes and the quality of tuition have improved substantially at centres and in most cases they are undertaking plans to adapt their curricula to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).
 - Some centres have been recommended to implement specialised teacher training courses, and as a result, over 1,000 hours of training have been imparted. This has contributed to the improvement of quality among the teaching staff.
 - The use of classroom observation and self-assessment techniques has been promoted, as a basis for improving the quality of teaching.
 - Teachers' autonomy has been encouraged in the teaching-learning process in the light of the CEFR and the ELP.
 - The educational component of extra-curricular activities has been enhanced.

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Case studies contributed by workshop participants

- b) *Infrastructures and equipment*
 - A substantial amount of work has taken place to remove physical barriers at teaching centres.
 - A considerable investment has been made to increase the number and range of technological resources at teaching centres, both for the use of students and teachers: libraries, DVDs, computers with Internet access, etc.
 - c) *Administrative organization*
 - The systematic organization of documents and their review has improved considerably.
 - Significant improvements have been made in the certification systems used by teaching centres, with an emphasis on truthfulness and accuracy.
 - d) *Communication with stakeholders*
 - The information provided to the public at large is more detailed, is offered in an increasing number of other languages and complies with the principles of transparency and truthfulness.
3. The experience of quality certification in Spanish language teaching centres has attracted interest from other centres from overseas: most of the members of the Network are located in Spain (85%), but there are now accredited centres in China, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Germany, India, Italy, Korea, Mexico, Norway and Switzerland.
4. The Associate Centres Network of the *Instituto Cervantes* is an internationally recognised quality assurance scheme for providers of Spanish language services, which enables members to have access to funding from official institutions, such as the Government of Castile and Leon or Spain’s Institute of Tourism (TURESPAÑA), as well as other benefits derived from partnerships with private organizations.

MAIN CONCLUSIONS

- Top-down strategies in quality management in Modern Language Teaching can be a success and they can contribute to the dissemination of good practice.
- Several benefits are derived from enhancing quality culture in language teaching centres: for students (better learning experiences, increased international mobility and better qualifications for life), for teachers (improved professional opportunities based on quality) and for society at large (transparency criteria as a basis for quality). These benefits also translate into economic success and greater prestige.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

For further information on the Network of Associate Centers or to browse through the current membership, please visit the Network webpage at:

<http://www.centrosociados.cervantes.es>

E-mail: centros.asociados@cervantes.es

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