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Monika Piechota
Poland, January 2010

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Centres of excellence

The British Council inspectors' top institutions revealed

MELANIE BUTLER writes

Are the institutions listed here the best in Britain? They are certainly all excellent – as the publishable statements of the British Council inspectors reveal. This is not to be, however, a definitive league table of every language school in Britain.

For a start, the table is based on British Council inspectors' points of excellence reports, so it can only list British Council accredited centres – thus excluding, for example, language centres at some hundred British universities.

We also decided to split the lists into specialist areas. Year-round general courses for adults and young adults are listed on this page, while three kinds of specialist providers – summer school specialists, professional/business English centres and international study centres at British boarding schools – are on page 9. As well as lack of space, we felt that the areas of most concern for those looking for a junior summer school might be very different from those looking for an IELTS course.

Lack of space meant we had to make some other harsh decisions: limiting entry arbitrarily to those centres with five points of excellence and above, and excluding those whose publishable statements date from before 2005.

We also had to decide how to count the points. The phrase 'aspects of', for example, denotes that more than one area under a main heading – such as 'general management' – was awarded a 'good' or 'very good' mark. Since the published statements do not break down the number of 'goods' or 'very goods', we gave the same weight to points of excellence for aspects of a particular area as to other points in the statement.

None of the centres listed here included any areas where the inspectors noted a 'need for improvement' – for which we would have deducted a mark – emphasising, yet again, that they are all truly excellent.

Finally, of course, these are listings based only on the elements looked at by the inspectors and not other factors such as exam results or even educational criteria, although the results of the survey of the listed centres published on page 9 suggest a high correlation with the latter.

So, should we rely on the information in the inspectors' publishable statements when choosing a school? Many agents and even many schools would say no. However, such reports provide a valuable resource in other areas of education. Reports must by law be published on every school in the British state system, and few British parents would think of choosing a school for their child without reading the inspectors' report.

For more information, visit www.britishcouncil.org/accreditation-more-about-your-accredited-centre.htm

WHERE THEY PLACED and what the British Council inspectors had to say about them

Full-time schools

9 points

Wimbledon School of English *General management, premises, academic resources, academic management, teachers' qualifications, teaching, pastoral care, accommodation and leisure programme*

8 points

University College Plymouth St Mark and St John *Aspects of general management, premises and learning resources, teachers' qualifications, teaching, course design and learner training, and aspects of welfare*

7 points

Filton College *Publicity, self-access facilities, teachers' qualifications, course design, teaching, pastoral care and leisure programme*

St Clare's *Care of juniors, premises, self-access facilities, teachers' qualifications, teaching, pastoral care and leisure programme*

Sussex Downs *Administration of students, premises, academic resources and IT facilities, teachers' qualifications, aspects of academic management and pastoral care*

University of Leeds *Publicity, academic resources, teachers' qualifications, teaching, course design and welfare*

6 points

D'Overbroecks College International Study Centre *Aspects of administration of students and course design, and learner training, teaching, pastoral care and leisure programme*

English in London (Skola) *Aspects of management, academic management, teachers' qualifications, teaching, learning training and welfare*

The English Language Centre, Bristol *General management, aspects of academic management, teaching, pastoral care, accommodation and leisure programme*

Hampstead Garden Suburb Institute *Administration of students, premises, teachers' qualifications, course design, aspects of academic management and welfare*

Hilderstone College *Aspects of general management, premises, academic resources, academic management, teaching and aspects of welfare*

International House London *General management, academic management, academic resources, teachers' qualifications, learner training and teaching*

Lake School of English *Aspects of general management, premises, academic resources, academic management, teachers' qualifications and welfare*

University of Chichester *Aspects of general management, premises, academic resources, academic management, teaching and pastoral care*

University of Edinburgh *Administration of students, self-access facilities, teachers' qualifications, course design, teaching and leisure programme*

5 points

Chichester College *Aspects of general management, IT and self-access facilities, pastoral care and leisure programme*

Colchester English Study Centre *Aspects of general management, academic resources, academic management and pastoral care and leisure programme*

Ealing, Hammersmith & West London College *Aspects of general management and academic management, IT facilities, teachers' qualifications and teaching*

English in Chester *Aspects of management, academic management, teachers' qualifications, teaching, learner training and welfare*

The English Language Centre, Hove *Self-access facilities and teachers' qualifications, aspects of general and academic management, and premises*

Hastings College of Arts and Technology *Aspects of premises, teachers' qualifications and teaching, pastoral care and the leisure programme*

Hastings English Language Centre *Aspects of general management and premises, teachers' qualifications, teaching and welfare*

Oxford Brookes University *Aspects of general management; teachers' qualifications, course design, aspects of teaching, and welfare*

St Giles International, Brighton *Aspects of general management, self-access facilities, academic management, teaching and welfare*

St Giles International, Eastbourne *Aspects of general management, premises, self-access facilities, teachers' qualifications and academic management*

Sherborne International College *Aspects of general management, academic resources, academic management and welfare, and advice to students on their further education*

University of Central Lancashire *General management, academic resources, pastoral care, accommodation and aspects of academic management*

University of Manchester *General management, academic resources, teachers' qualifications, course design and welfare*

York St John *Premises, teachers' qualifications and aspects of general management, teaching and welfare*

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... as you would expect

What has the biggest effect on students? Qualified teachers...

What makes them tick?

MELANIE BUTLER reports

The information in the publishable statements from the British Council inspectors can provide valuable information about a range of aspects of a language school. What can they tell you, though, about a student's rate of progress?

Nothing, directly. The British Council's inspectors do not measure student outcomes; indeed, there is little quantitative research in this area of English-language teaching. General educational research, on the other hand, has produced an increasing body of evidence that a number of key factors involving teachers correlate with student achievement. To find out how our centres measured up on these factors we sent out a survey, to which roughly half of all the centres listed on these pages replied.

Of all the factors identified by educationalists as affecting teaching quality, only one, teacher qualifications, is covered in British Council accreditation, though evidence suggests that teacher qualification is the single biggest factor of all. *Teacher Quality and Student Achievement* – a major 1999 study across all fifty US states – found that a 1 per cent increase in teacher qualifications produced a 3–5 per cent increase in student achievement. Progress was most marked among weaker students.

'Quantitative analysis indicates that measures of teacher preparation and certification are by far the strongest correlates of student achievement,' wrote Linda Darling-Hammond in the same review. The study, which focused mainly on maths and reading but included a review of twenty years of other research, found that other factors were significant in improving teacher

quality – including induction periods, continuous professional development and experience, though the study notes that the benefits of experience appear to level off after about five years.

Having fully qualified teachers had a much stronger effect on student outcomes on every single educational factor, including pupil/teacher ratio, class size, money spent per pupil or even, when measured by progress rather than overall attainment, social disadvantage.

So, what is the measure of a fully qualified English language teacher? Under the British Council rules, a 'fully-qualified teacher' is one with a diploma and/or qualified teacher status in another subject and a certificate in EFL. And how do our centres of excellence do on this measure? Excellently!

Two thirds of all the year-round general English centres listed on these pages received a point of excellence for teacher qualifications. Among all year-round centres responding to the survey, the average ratio of fully qualified teachers was an astonishing 80 per cent.

Factoring out state-sector colleges and universities, where fully qualified teachers are the norm, the private language schools in the survey reported that 72 per cent of their teachers hold diplomas. Even in private summer schools, a sector where diploma-qualified teachers are rarer than hen's teeth, the centres of excellence had an average of 57 per cent of teaching staff who are fully qualified.

The summer schools, both those listed separately and those run by year-round centres, also did extraordinarily well in another measure of quality: teacher workload. Unlike most of their competitors in the UK industry, not one of the



EXCELLENT EFFORT: Harrow's BABSSCo summer school received high praise from the British Council's inspectors

Professional English

5 points

Kingsway English Centre for Professionals *General management, premises, academic resources, learner training and welfare*

Linguarama, Bath *Premises, teaching, welfare and aspects of general and academic management*

Summer schools

5 points

BABSSCo *General management, premises and leisure facilities, academic management and aspects of welfare*

International Summer School *Aspects of general management, premises, academic resources, academic management and welfare*

LAL Summer Schools *Aspects of general management, premises, academic management, pastoral care and leisure programme*

MM Oxford Study Services *Aspects of general and academic management, academic resources, pastoral care and leisure programme*

International study centres

6 points

D'Overbroeck's College *Aspects of the administration of students and course design, and learner training, teaching, pastoral care and leisure programme*

6 points

Sherborne International College *General management, academic resources, academic management and welfare, and advice to students on their further education*

dozen or so centres that filled in a special summer survey asked their teachers to sign a waiver of the 48-hour rule, which allows British employees to agree to work more than the EU maximum 48-hour week. The average number of contracted hours in these summer schools was 27.9, of which an average of 15 were spent teaching.

Teachers' workloads across the whole group of centres of excellence were also below industry average, with an average of 21 teaching hours and 27 total contracted time. Teacher contact hours and teacher workload are not covered under British Council accreditation and a few accredited schools have 45 teaching contact hours a week.

Another factor, teacher turnover, shown to correlate highly with student achievement in high-stakes courses, is also remarkably low among all centres of excellence across the sectors – 92 per cent of full-time teaching staff have been at the centre for more than a year, and 66 per cent of all summer school staff had worked the previous summer.

A related statistic, the percentage of hourly paid staff – shown in research on Ecol teachers to lead to higher turnover, lower teacher commitment and worse outcomes – is also very low at just 20 per cent, though it is higher in the better-paid sectors of further education (23 per cent) and in the private language schools, where just 19 per cent of teachers were

hourly paid. Again, this isn't covered under British Council accreditation.

Then there are salaries – again, something the Council does not consider. The link between teachers' pay and student progress is not straightforward, though the 1999 US teacher quality survey found that raising pay without raising minimum qualifications has no significant effect, while raising pay alongside the level of qualifications required 'could offer particularly high leverage on teaching quality'.

Other educationalists argue that, while teachers don't expect high salaries, they perform badly if they earn significantly below the median wage. The median wage in the UK in 2009 was £25,400 a year before tax. The average teachers' salary in our centres of excellence was £25,300, although there was a big difference between the state sector average of £28,600 and the private sector average of £22,000 – in line, interestingly, with the UK median for women.

The final factor, emphasised by the OECD in its biannual report *Education at a Glance*, is the importance, at least in all English-speaking countries, of the character of the principal. The British Council scheme does not insist on the appointment of a principal, and many chains go for the cheaper option of academic directors. All the centres of excellence, however, have either principals – or heads of department in the state sector. From these results we can surmise that they too are excellent!



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