A credit to Italian schools

The Italian Association of Language Schools runs an accreditation scheme with a difference – it looks at teachers' terms and conditions

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Writes

With teachers having the whole world to choose from in terms of destinations, why should they decide to teach and live in Italy? Paul Rogerson, who runs a school in Sassari, Sardinia and is on the council of the Italian Association of Language Schools (Aisli), has some good advice.

Italy is still a great place to live and work, he argues, and the old stereotypes still hold true: the food and culture are fantastic, the lifestyle is relaxed and the Italians are still great to teach. But there is one major caveat. With Italy no longer a cheap place to live, it's simply not viable to take casual work, which is not just unreliable but also poorly paid. Teachers should make sure they have a guaranteed full-time contract, which means, at least in term of Aisli members, 22–25 five contact hours a week.

Competition for jobs in the main cities such as Milan and Rome is intense, and most Aisli members there recruit teachers from the local population of expatriates (although non-native speakers and non-EU citizens will find it extremely hard to get work visas). If you're heading to Italy for the first time, Rogerson's advice is to stick to the smaller cities, which are cheaper and where it is often much easier to form local friendships. Among the 44 Aisli members are schools in some lovely and lesser-known places, such as the upmarket seaside resort of La Spezia and the baroque city of Lecce in the south.

> Regulating teaching quality means regulating terms and conditions. If only every other school association knew that too

'Another advantage of working for an Aisli school,' Iverson says, 'is that there is a good informal recruitment network from school to school. It's common for teachers to work in one place for a while and then say, "This is not really the Italy I was looking for," or, "I'd like to move from the sea to the mountains," and get work in another member school.'

The same informal network also offers the potential for some career development – being able to move, say, from a job as a classroom teacher in one city to take on a senior teacher or assistant director of studies position in another. There is a lively director of studies intranet site and an annual conference for senior staff. Several Aisli schools fund diploma courses for staff. They are even looking at devising a Cambridge Celta add-on module to orientate teachers to working in Italy, especially working with children, who now make up a majority of students.

All this is not unusual for a large language school chain. But Aisli is not a chain; it is an association that runs its own tough accreditation scheme, which has been developed over fifteen years in collaboration with the British Council and Eaquals, the Europe-wide accrediting body. Accreditation ensures schools are inspected, resources are checked and there is proper academic direction and in-service training, not just the odd staff meeting in lunch hours.

At this point many teachers' eyes will glaze over. Far too many accreditation schemes, the British Council's UK scheme included, look at everything in the minutest detail except when it comes to teachers' terms and conditions.

Not so the Aisli scheme. Aisli has minimum terms and conditions for teachers in all its schools based on the Italian national contract. The deal includes sick pay, holiday pay and health insurance, and the monthly salary works out, according to qualifications and experience, in the €1,000–1,500 range, net of tax.

And this contract is strictly enforced, as Rogerson explains. 'A really nice little school applied for membership but they were based in an economically disadvantaged area and they paid their teachers less than our minimum rate. We put their application on hold and told them to bring their pay scales in line. They did that and now they are members.'

Even the smallest infringement can lead to accreditation problems. One applicant school did not pay for teachers' meetings. They were not accredited until they agreed to do so.

This would be extraordinary enough in a country with a national accreditation scheme for language schools. In the UK, for example, the British Council simply refuses to take terms and conditions into consideration. But in a country where terms and conditions in some cowboy language schools are the talk of ELT internet chatrooms and have led to shock horror stories in the British press, this is little short of miraculous.

Most extraordinary of all, the inspection itself includes not only classroom observations but also spot check chats with teachers, either individually or in groups, on their experience teaching in the school. Rogerson, himself an Aisli inspector, says, 'I will go into a classroom and watch a lesson. Then I'll start by asking the teacher questions about the lesson and gradually – you have to build up their confidence – move on to what it is like to work in the school. You find out a lot of information that way.'

Rogerson is frank on what he believes accreditation should mean: 'I signed up to a charter. That charter is inspected. It includes teachers terms and conditions. I have to meet them.'

Teaching English in Italy, as in much of the rest of western Europe, is not a way to make a quick fortune. Even in the regulated Aisli schools, rates of pay are low compared to those in, say, Japan or Korea or even Poland, though they are enough to live on if – as Aisli advises – you make sure you have a full-time paid contract.

The reason to look for an Aisli school if you opt for Italy is clear, however. When Aisli say they care about teaching quality, they don't only mean interactive whiteboards or in-sessional training. They know that regulating teaching quality means regulating terms and conditions. If only every other school association knew that too.

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