

# The Jagiellonian University welcomes EAQUALS

## Interview with Sarah Aitken, EAQUALS Executive Director, and Peter Brown, EAQUALS Founder Chair and Board Member

This interview is addressed to readers interested in quality teaching and learning, particularly in the quality of the language education services delivered by the Jagiellonian Language Centre of the Jagiellonian University (Jagiellońskie Centrum Językowe – JCJ) to its students.

The Jagiellonian Language Centre is the University unit that holds classes in modern languages and Latin for students from all the University's Faculties as well as for external customers. English dominates for pragmatic reasons, but we also teach German, French, Italian, Spanish, and Russian. Norwegian is gaining popularity and the number of Chinese classes is on the rise. The Centre employs over 120 language teachers who work with about 12,000 students each academic year.

The Jagiellonian University wants to become a member of EAQUALS, an international, non-profit organisation which is recognised by the Council of Europe as an INGO (International Non-Governmental Organisation) having been granted Participatory Status. EAQUALS' main activities concern quality language services as well as accreditation and certification.

□ **Monika Stawicka:** “On 1 July 2013, you came to Kraków having been invited by Professor Andrzej Mania, Vice-Rector of the Jagiellonian University for Educational Affairs. Could you tell us what the purpose of this visit was?”

■ **Peter Brown:** “EAQUALS was initially invited to come to the Jagiellonian Language Centre (JCJ) to carry out an Advisory Visit in May this year. This is a follow-up overview visit with the purpose of seeing whether an institution might be ready in the reasonably near future – usually two to three years – to meet the strict quality criteria in order to be able to become an accredited member of EAQUALS. In May the Vice-Rector invited Sarah and myself to come this July so that we could give



Peter Brown, EAQUALS Founder Chair and Board Member

JCJ teaching staff a deeper insight into what EAQUALS is, what it does, what its goals are, as well as some of the projects it is involved in, which might be of interest to university language teachers. The other aim was to give teaching staff the opportunity not only to meet and get to know EAQUALS better but also to ask questions and raise issues that they felt were relevant.”

□ **MS:** “So basically the Jagiellonian University wants to go through the accreditation process. More precisely, it is the University's Jagiellonian Language Centre that teaches students foreign languages that has to go through the accreditation process. We teach about 12,000 students each academic year – how is such an immense operation possible? Briefly speaking, what is this process like?”

■ **Peter Brown:** “Well, put simply the accreditation process means being inspected by EAQUALS and passing that inspection in all categories. Then JCJ can become an accredited member of EAQUALS. Of course, it's not really that simple, or that easy. The EAQUALS scheme currently has quality criteria under twelve separate headings all of which need to be met – ranging from different aspects of academic management, to resources, to teaching standards, to students learning effectively, to appropriate use of the European language levels, and final certification. It's necessarily a detailed and complex process that has several stages – the first being the Advisory Visit I mentioned earlier.”

□ **MS:** “So there are standards that teachers need to meet. However, the question arises in what way do my standards as an English teacher, or even the standards of a group of teachers teaching the same foreign language, differ from EAQUALS standards? In what way are EAQUALS standards better? How would you convince us about that?”

■ **Sarah Aitken:** “There are three interconnected answers to this. The first is that the JCJ's teaching standards may already meet the EAQUALS criteria – the Advisory Visit, followed up by self-assessment procedures leading to the EAQUALS Inspection will establish that. The second is you need to define exactly what your standards are, and then ensure that all teachers and academic managers, teaching all languages, adhere to them in a consistent and reliable manner. To do that you need to have transparent processes, academic management systems, and corresponding documentation. That's exactly what EAQUALS looks at. It is an evidence-based inspection scheme. So it asks simple questions like: where's the evidence to show what your standards are and how you apply them, across the languages taught? In a nutshell: say what you do, and do exactly what you say. In a reliable manner. And if it's not reliable, then it can't be valid. The third is that the EAQUALS scheme is based on four public charters and EAQUALS checks for strict compliancy with those public Charters – because they are essentially public guarantees. The four Charters concern Students, Staff, Information, and a Code of

Conduct – a Charter of ethics, if you will. So, if for example, if you say something like ‘students will reach B2+ level by the end of their studies’ then you must be able to demonstrate that.”

□ **MS:** “Who will benefit from the work that will need to be done in order to meet EAQUALS criteria? What exactly might these benefits be? We are talking here about the Jagiellonian University as a whole, then about the Language Centre, and finally about each teacher and every single student...”

■ **Peter Brown:** “Potentially everyone will benefit because, and if managed sensitively and wisely, it is a ‘win-win’ situation. Students will, because they will become the direct beneficiaries of the improved standards and consistency of quality, the corresponding accuracy of the levels attained and certificated, and the international recognition of the validity of their attainments. Teachers will, because they will have access to the latest documentation, innovative teaching ideas, and by becoming part of an international network of language teachers, and – why not? – training to become inspectors themselves. The JCJ will, because it will have access to the EAQUALS academic management documentation, it will be able to participate in joint international projects, so helping to create and lead innovation, and not just reading about it. You need to remember that although reflecting on ‘best practice’ is important, it is nevertheless essentially looking at the past, looking at what has already been done – looking back. It is innovation that looks forward and breaks new ground. And ultimately the University itself will benefit directly because of the enhanced stature of the JCJ, because the JCJ will become a fully accredited Member, and because of the establishment of international learning pathways, thus helping to attract international students. It will be seen by students as a concrete step in giving them ‘added value’ to their CVs. Last but not



Sarah Aitken, EAQUALS Executive Director

least, the EAQUALS ‘brand’ has high visibility and powerful international resonance.”

□ **MS:** “When you look at the EAQUALS website, you notice two things: first, the dominance of English in the downloadable documents and resources that have been designed to ease the management process for teachers of all foreign languages, whereas you claim equality and multilingualism. The second thing is that it is not easy to find public-sector representation on the list of accredited members, not to mention university language centres in Europe. Why is that? Could you please comment on these two issues.”

■ **Sarah Aitken:** “You’re right, and EAQUALS currently has a programme underway to convert key documents into languages other than English. EAQUALS is aware that the website

needs to be available in many more languages. The challenge is not only to cover the costs of translation but, above all, the cost of maintenance, as EAQUALS produces many documents each year. By the way, EAQUALS is committed to equality of all languages and this is clearly reflected in the Inspection Scheme. Taking the second part of your question regarding the non-private sector (by that I mean NGOs, charities and not-for-profit institutions, as well as the public sector), EAQUALS has many such members and partners. Perhaps they’re not so easy to see because EAQUALS doesn’t classify membership in terms of public – private, but for ease of access by the general public, by membership status, location, languages taught, and so on. Don’t forget we have about 140 members in 35 countries teaching and testing 25 languages.”

■ **Peter Brown:** “So we have in our large network of members and partners, all of which are listed on our website, cultural agencies such as the British Council HQ [GB], the Goethe Institut HQ [DE], Instituto Cervantes HQ [ES], and so on; research and testing

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agencies such as the Centre international d'études pédagogiques (CIEP) [FR], Gesellschaft für Akademische Studienvorbereitung und Testentwicklung e. V. (GAST) [DE], universities such as the Centro di Ricerca – Siena [IT], Università per Stranieri – Perugia [IT]; examination boards such as the University of Cambridge, Trinity, City & Guilds; and specialist organisations such as the state-run teaching standards organisation ACELS – Quality and Qualifications Ireland [IE], or the Centro Formazione Insegnanti – Rovereto [IT], and the British Foreign Office – Foreign and Commonwealth Office Language Policy and Standards (FCO) [GB].”

□ **MS:** “Well, it would be nice to join the Association. Naturally there must be some pitfalls along the way. Both of you know the process from both ends, namely as experienced inspectors and as academic managers who were subject to inspection; could you please tell us where the pitfalls generally occur, so that we can act proactively?”

■ **Sarah Aitken:** “That’s a very good question! Obviously it’s not easy to generalise with such a linguistically and culturally diverse organisation as EAQUALS, but in my experience three key areas need particular attention – syllabus design and application, academic management, and – if I can put it this way – getting rid of ‘the lumps and bumps,’ and thus ensuring coherence and consistency (for example, across CEFR levels and languages, certification, accuracy and completeness of information given to students, compliancy with regulations, recognising intellectual property such as copyright, and so on).”

■ **Peter Brown:** “Then, as you rightly say, being proactive is also crucial and this includes carrying out the self-assessment exercises, ensuring the whole team – teaching and administrative – understands what the vision is, what you are trying to achieve and why, how you’re trying to achieve it, and – in my view the most important feature – that EAQUALS looks at an institution as a whole, monitors the teaching performance as a whole (no individual teacher is ever mentioned in an EAQUALS report), checks and verifies everything. This holistic approach to the Quality Cycle is a hallmark of EAQUALS’ accreditation of excellence and quality in language teaching and learning.”

□ **MS:** “In what way can EAQUALS help us and other institutions working towards becoming centres of excellence in language services?”

■ **Peter Brown:** “I really do think that the inspection scheme is just a relatively small part of a much greater process. Being a centre of excellence is firstly a culture – a state of mind. And

[www.jcj.uj.edu.pl](http://www.jcj.uj.edu.pl)

that takes vision, determination, and institutional ambition. This in turn takes time to grow and be disseminated, and time to produce tangible results. It’s certainly not a one-off, or overnight event.”

■ **Sarah Aitken:** “To create such a culture in the first place, however, takes much more than just willpower. It requires appropriate academic tools and processes, training, networks of experts to help and advise, upgrading syllabuses and certification. Then this holistic approach needs careful monitoring and tracking, and when necessary revisiting, reviewing, and revising. Becoming a centre of excellence in the first place is difficult enough, but maintaining such excellence once acquired is the real challenge! This means constantly improving the Quality Cycle.”

□ **MS:** “Maybe one more question about looking at foreign language learning from a potential student’s / client’s perspective? What qualities or values should the certificate of excellence guarantee, if anything? Why should they choose a language centre with EAQUALS accreditation?”

■ **Peter Brown:** “Because, as a prospective student, you know that the information that you have been given before joining the course is accurate and truthful, because you know exactly what your course plan is and the level you will attain is accurately described, the teaching you will receive is properly planned and executed, the final certification you will receive is accurate, and you know all this because you have an EAQUALS Student Charter prominently displayed in your classroom.”

■ **Sarah Aitken:** “You also know when you look at the EAQUALS website and see the range and quality of the membership, and the international educational pathways that such a membership can provide. In other words, they become part of an international community that has recognised and shared standards of excellence backed up by innovative projects and partnerships. And it is this rigorous approach to quality that ultimately helps enhance a student’s CV.”

□ **MS:** “Thank you for this informative conversation.”

■ **Peter Brown:** “And thank you very much for having invited us to the Jagiellonian University in Kraków and for giving us this opportunity to talk a little more about EAQUALS.”

### *Interview and introduction by Monika Stawicka*

*Rector’s Attorney for Accreditation and Certification in JCJ UJ*

Conference participants, 1<sup>st</sup> June, 2013



Photo: Jerzy Sowicz