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GAELA encourages the South African government to recognise the value of language travel

GAELA (the Global Alliance of Education and Language Associations) would like to express its concern at the damage being done to the language travel sector in South Africa due to a lack of effective communication and collaboration between key government and sector stakeholders.

GAELA supports the call from Education South Africa (the peak organisation representing English language schools) for the South African Department of Home Affairs and the Department of Higher Education to sit down with them and develop a coherent approach to ensuring the sector is globally competitive in being able to attract international students for language learning.

GAELA is a strong advocate for the importance and value of study abroad for the purposes of language learning and cultural understanding. The language teaching sector of education is frequently neglected in the development of quality assurance and visa policy because language schools do not teach domestic students and do not issue formal qualifications. This does not mean that the sector is any less important or credible than the traditional sectors of school education, vocational education or higher education.

GAELA is also a strong advocate for visa regimes that are effective in ensuring border integrity, however would argue that current South African visa policy is unnecessarily damaging a valuable sector. GAELA urges the South African Department of Home Affairs and the Department of Higher Education to open up a dialogue with Education South Africa on the critical areas of industry regulation and access to study visas.

About GAELA

GAELA (the Global Alliance of Education and Language Associations) was formed in 2000. GAELA Associations represent quality language providers in Australia, Canada, France, Ireland, Italy, Malta, New Zealand, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, United Kingdom and the United States of America as well as other countries represented by associations with international membership.

Key stakeholders including accreditation and quality assurance bodies also attend GAELA meetings to discuss matters of common interest across the language teaching industry.

For more information: www.gaela.org

About the language travel industry

Approximately 1,557,000 people travelled to an English speaking country to learn English in 2013 – globally the English language travel industry is worth over US\$11.7 billion. In addition, many other students travel for the purpose of learning other languages eg. Spanish in Spain, French in France, Italian in Italy, Portuguese in Portugal etc.

National Associations



AEPL
(Portuguese in Portugal)



ASILS
(Italian in Italy)



Education South Africa
(English in South Africa)



English Australia
(English in Australia)



English New Zealand
(English in New Zealand)



English UK
(English in the UK)



English USA
(English in the USA)



FEDELE
(Spanish in Spain)



FELTOM
(English in Malta)



Groupement FLE
(French in France)



Italian in Italy
(Italian in Italy)



Languages Canada
(English & French in Canada)



MEI
(English in Ireland)



Souffle
(French in France)

International Associations



Accreditation / Quality Assurance Bodies



ABLS Accreditation
(UK)

ACCET
(USA)

Accreditation UK
(UK)

CEA
(USA)

FELTOM
(Malta)

NEAS
(International)

The article below was published online on 17 June 2015

<http://www.moneyweb.co.za/news/south-africa/killing-an-industry-softly/>

Killing an industry softly

'I can't understand how government can stand by and watch an industry die,' Stevin Smith, co-founder – SA College of Education and Languages.

Sasha Planting | 17 June 2015 00:10

Veronica Tima is a 40-year-old single mother who lives in Khayelitsha with her daughters and their dog Zack. She's been working for the English Language School in Cape Town since 2009 and is now the office administrator.

Within the next three months it is likely that Veronica will be out of a job. This will come as a direct result of government policies and two departments that do not communicate, which will ultimately force the language school out of business.

South Africa has a small, but growing language school industry. It competes with the likes of Canada, the UK, Australia and Malta and at one point had 1% of the global market for English language tuition. But the industry has been caught between a rock and a hard place – and it's being stifled.

On the one side is the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) whose new and onerous visa requirements mean that virtually no study visas have been granted to English language students since October.

On the other side of the rock – the hard place – is the Department of Higher Education (DHE). And neither is budging.

When a foreign student applies for a student visa, they must satisfy a host of conditions that include proof of full payment of the course, proof of accommodation in SA, proof of funds for living expenses, a return flight ticket or proof of funds to purchase it and proof of insurance for health cover.

"Once these conditions were met, our clients would be granted a visa which lasts for the duration of the study course," says Stevin Smith, co-founder of the South African College of Education and Languages. "So there's a minimal risk that the subject might pose an illegal immigration threat."

However, recent policy changes at Home Affairs mean this is not sufficient.

South African language schools do not fall under the control of the DHE. Students who complete a language course don't earn a recognisable degree, diploma or technical qualification – instead they emerge with a skill. This means that they do not fall under the DHE's three accreditation bodies – Umalusi, the Council for Higher Education, or the SA Qualifications Authority (SAQA).

The Services Seta falls under the ambit of SAQA and this seta provides accreditation for the English language schools. The DHE says this accreditation is sufficient for a study visa.

However, Home Affairs will not recognise this accreditation and will only issue study visas to students studying at DHE accredited bodies.

“Home Affairs demanded a letter directly from DHE to prove our accreditation,” says Sunil Shah, director of the English Language School and employer of Veronica. “So we [and others] have obtained a letter from DHE stating that Services Seta was our accreditation body, and that we are legal and compliant. This message has not been communicated to the embassies and they continue to reject the language schools visa applications.”

This is costing the industry dearly. Shaun Fitzhenry, the director of the Bay Language Institute in Port Elizabeth, estimates he has lost R1 million this year already. “Without a study visa you cannot enter the country, and you can’t study on a tourist visa.” An audibly emotional Smith added: “I built this school from nothing into a business with a turnover of R6 million/year and 18 employees,” he says. “I can survive, but what about my people? What will they do?”

The language school industry is not like the clothing sector, which in its heyday employed tens of thousands of workers and which has received R3.5 billion in government support; it is not the mining industry which earns a large portion of SA’s foreign exchange. It is to some extent invisible.

This should not make it irrelevant. There are 40 to 50 accredited language schools in the country. These are small businesses employing three to 20 people. “We have two kinds of students,” says Fitzhenry. “The first group are travellers who want to improve their English and go site-seeing. They spend a lot of money here. Others are more serious, they come from Libya, Gabon, Angola, the DRC, Mozambique or further afield because they want to learn English as a stepping stone to further study,” he says. “This could be to write an entrance exam for a local or foreign university or to enroll at one of our flying schools, which are well respected.”

In 2013 language schools brought in \$40 million in fees, according to information held by umbrella body EduSA. “A six month language course costs in the region of R70 000, and that is before the accommodation, tourism and other expenses are added in. The secondary spin-offs are big,” says Fitzhenry “Host families can earn R1 200/week – half of the Bo-Kaap is hosting foreign language students.”

While Home Affairs’ new visa regulations have exacerbated the situation, the problems have been some time coming. In 2006 changes to the Education Act meant that language schools were not formally recognised by the DHE. In 2012 representatives from EduSA made a presentation to the Home Affairs parliamentary portfolio committee – to no avail.

“Then I flew to Pretoria to talk to Jackie McKay, deputy DG responsible for Immigration at Home Affairs to present our case. They told me it’s not a Home Affairs issue. It’s a DHE issue,” says Smith.

Neither McKay nor Mayihlome Tshwete, DDG for Communications responded to questions sent to them last week.

Alan Winde, Western Cape minister for Economic Opportunities, has attempted to mediate a solution. “These schools are important, they bring people to South Africa from fast growing economies around Africa. These links are important, it bodes well for future economic growth.”

The first round of talks did not resolve the situation and the province’s Red Tape Reduction Unit is preparing a second submission on the issue.

Veronica Tima and many others in her industry are praying that someone listens.