The rise and rise (and rise) of ELC York

In just twelve years ELC York has grown from a three-student language school to scoring a whopping seven points of excellence from British Council inspectors. Melanie Butler quizzes them on their secret…

O n that first night, Judy MacDermot, Secondary School teacher turned Tefler, questioned her decision to leave her home in Yorkshire for Brunei. Her husband Hugh slept on, oblivious to the sound of the nearby jungle and unperurbed by the bats on the ceiling. The son of a British Ambassado, this experienced university administrator was not going to let anything get in the way of his dream job, helping to set up the country’s royal language school, English Language Centre York, twelve years ago.

They started in Brunei, where Judy taught English to various members of the country’s royal family, including the Queen. (The lack of appropriate teaching materials was overcome by using copies of Hello magazine, delivered in the diplomatic bag.) Hugh then spent six years advising the minister of education in Oman, while Judy taught at Sultan Qaboos University. “We were so lucky to have the chance to live in the Gulf – I’ll never forget the kindness and hospitality of the people there,” says Judy. In 1996 they came back to Britain where Judy took a master’s in Applied Linguistics.

“I had this dream of creating a model language school,” says Judy. For her this meant one that focused on student needs with sound teaching principles, taught by excellent teachers and based in a very English location.

The perfect choice was York – Britain’s third most popular tourist destination, yet not satu-rated with language schools. They launched the school using their savings, and started with just three students. Between them the MacDermots played all the roles – teacher, director of studies, administrator, finance director, chief bottle washer…

Within twelve years the school had risen to the top, scoring an astonishing seven points of excellence on their British Council publishable statements following last year’s inspection. Only one other UK private language school got more. The school shares a number of the characteristics common to most of the centres of excellence listed by the Gazette in recent months: it is family owned, committed to high standards, employs excellent teachers on permanent contracts and has a low teacher turnover rate. “The very first teacher we employed is still with us,” says Judy.

The secret of the school’s rise? “If you want excellence you have to invest in it,” says Judy. ELC York produces an individual learning plan for every student and has a teacher tasked with running the system. The school also finds membership of Eaqjuls, with its requirement for a CEFR-based syllabus and curriculum, an enormous help in giving clear definitions of teaching, learning and testing.

Of course, you also have to commit money to areas such as IT. ‘Our students expect the latest technology,’ says Judy. It isn’t just a case of interactive whiteboards, Wi-Fi and Skype, either: students receive an e-learning package before they even arrive at the school, and can continue to use it after leaving.

Equally importantly, Judy believes you need to invest in teachers. With their backgrounds in mainstream education, Judy and Hugh are shocked by ‘the shabby way in which some EFL schools treat their teachers’. They believe that getting great educational results means getting great teachers, which means providing a great working environment. They have twelve permanent teachers and proper investment in training. Excellence is not about putting profits ahead of professionalism: ‘I am a teacher at heart,’ says Judy.

The focus on excellence in management means that the administrative team is a valued part of ELC York. ‘We knew there were key roles to fill – registrar, welfare, marketing… As the school grew we were able to build up a strong team,’ says Judy. Nowadays, she says, the management committee (made up of staff members) meets regularly. Their baby is growing up. From three classrooms the school has grown to eighteen, and this summer will overflow into the medieval Kings Manor.

ELC York is not only an integral part of the city, it is an integral part of the famous education system of North Yorkshire – the best in England, according to a recent Financial Times article, and a system in which both Mac-Dermots began their careers.

No chance though, of the Mac-Dermots sitting on their laurels. For them, you feel, seven points of excellence is just the start.

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English Language Centre, York

Established in 1998 with the aim of offering top quality courses in a welcoming and professional atmosphere

- Awarded 7 points of excellence by British Council – only one other private language school in UK achieved more
- Beautiful city-centre location
- Safe, student-friendly city
- Established team of experienced teachers
- Friendly, helpful staff
- Accommodation Service
- Multimedia Centre with excellent IT facilities
- Guided e-learning
- Interactive whiteboards
- Academic Support and Counselling services
- Library with over 1000 books
- Lively, year-round social programme
- General English (15 and 24 contact teaching hours)
- IELTS Preparation classes all year round
- FCE Preparation
- CPE, CAE and PET
- Pre-sessional Academic course for University entry
- Foundation Programme with York St John University
- Cambridge CELTA and DELTA
- English Business Banking and Finance
- One-to-One tuition
- Adult Summer Programme
- Young Learners’ Summer Programme
- Teachers’ Refresher course
- Specialist courses such as Historic Homes and Gardens