

# Choosing a distance TESOL/TEFL: A Personal Report

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## Introduction

Due to the higher education budget cutbacks in the Republic of Ireland starting from 2008 and the subsequent dismissal of almost all the part-time staff in our universities, I found myself facing a likely multi-year period of unemployment. I decided that during this time I ideally ought to diversify both my publication list and my skill set with a view to preparing for emigration in the Summer of 2011. To this end, I signed on for a part-time Masters of Research in Educational and Social Research with the University of London<sup>1</sup> in September 2010 as well as a part-time PG Certificate in Developing Professional Practice in Higher Education with the University of Wales. Unfortunately, due to a lack of guaranteed teaching hours I discovered quite late on that I could not progress with the PG Certificate this semester, and it occurred to me that perhaps I ought to fill in the newly freed time before Christmas with a distance TESOL qualification as the next best available form of a teaching qualification. Fortuitously, at almost the same time, a part-time opportunity to teach Business to undergraduates on their semester abroad from the University of Lyon, France became available but my prospective employer made it clear that they strongly preferred me to have a TESOL qualification before I started in January. This precluded me taking a part-time qualification.

Oh what a can of worms was awaiting me! I vaguely knew that the standard thing to do when seeking a TESOL qualification is to find a local provider of the four week intensive full-time course which is roughly 100 hours of contact time and are usually accredited by either Cambridge (the CELTA<sup>2</sup>) or Trinity College London (the CertTESOL<sup>3</sup>) as being NQF Level 4/5 on the UK's framework,

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<sup>1</sup>[http://www.londoninternational.ac.uk/prospective\\_students/postgraduate/inst\\_education/mres/index.shtml](http://www.londoninternational.ac.uk/prospective_students/postgraduate/inst_education/mres/index.shtml)

<sup>2</sup><http://www.cambridgeesol.org/exams/teaching-awards/celta.html>

<sup>3</sup><http://www.trinitycollege.co.uk/site/?id=201>

though here in Ireland it is the Irish National Qualifications Authority body ACELS<sup>4</sup> who accredits our locally awarded TESOL certificates. However, this is only really suitable for those who can spare a full four weeks of their lives<sup>5</sup>, and my Masters absolutely requires a minimum of 10-15 hours per week as well as the problem that unemployment benefits would be suspended for the duration of the course. Unlike in Britain, unemployment benefits in Ireland are generous and one would be foregoing not just the €1,680 in fees for the CELTA<sup>6</sup> but also some €800 in lost unemployment benefits as well as the considerable bureaucracy involved in signing off and then back on again. €2,480 seemed rather a lot of money to me for what one was getting, never mind the additional opportunity cost of my time. Put another way, I could pick up a two year part time distance PG Diploma from Britain for the same money and that is a far more valuable qualification than a CELTA.

## Choosing a distance TESOL

This therefore brought me into the murky world of distance TESOL, where due to an utter lack of regulation, the situation rather reminds me of the fee charging upper working class schools depicted by Orwell in his *A Clergyman's Daughter* (Chapter 4). There are a multitude of providers, courses, accreditors and all sorts of claims about what is recognised and accepted by whom, not helped by the sands of time ensuring that what might have once been the case becomes no longer the case and so forth. I also spotted many uses of marketing weasel words such as “we follow the code of practice of XXX” and so on, none of which inspired confidence.

Needing some method of narrowing all this down, fairly early on I shortlisted my TESOL/TEFL selection criteria to the following:

### 1. The provider ought to be spoken well of in various online forums.

**Rationale:** When faced with a lot of potential snake-oil peddlers it helps to assess their reputation. This mechanism is used by eBay and plenty of others to cast out those who seek to defraud.

**Effectiveness:** It turns out that in the world of TESOL that few bother to write online about the utility of their distance TESOL courses. Worse still there are quite a few posts which looked to me to be written by providers trying to create a favourable online impression – though maybe I am just cynical. Either way, this criterion did not help at all and I had to put my thinking cap back on.

### 2. The provider had to offer the full-time CELTA or CertTESOL or equivalent as well as a distance TESOL.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.acels.ie/>

<sup>5</sup> There is a part-time option taking sixteen weeks as well, however as mentioned earlier I needed it quicker than that.

<sup>6</sup> University College Cork's CELTA course for 2010 costs €1,680 (<http://www.ucc.ie/en/esol/teach-train/>).

**Rationale:** The hybrid “online” CELTA will be launched by Cambridge in 2011 due to a long sustained period of overwhelming demand<sup>7</sup>, so it occurred to me that providers who truly sought customer satisfaction ought to have created their own solution by now. Also, if a provider passes muster with Cambridge’s accreditation procedures then they surely can’t be too bad in their distance TESOL.

**Effectiveness:** This criterion removes almost all the TESOL providers online. Very few do both full time and distance, so this criterion turned out to be very effective indeed reducing the total number of providers to less than twenty.

**3. The distance TESOL had to be accredited by something which maps onto the EHEA’s Bologna framework.**

**Rationale:** The Bologna process<sup>8</sup> – for all its failings – is drawing such international interest because it offers a means by which the meaning of qualifications can be standardised internationally. I knew that most Latin American countries intend to voluntarily adopt parts or all of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)’s qualifications framework, and there is substantial interest from much of Asia and Oceania as well, so it seemed to me that for a TESOL to be portable into the long-term it ought to map into Bologna right now.

**Effectiveness:** This requirement effectively reduced the list of possible providers down to those accredited by organisations in Denmark, Ireland or the United Kingdom as these are the only three countries in the Bologna process to be rated all green in the 2007 Bologna Process Stocktaking Report<sup>9</sup>. In fact I found just three providers of distance TESOL who matched this and the previous criterion, and they were either accredited by the College of Teachers or Ascentis – both of whom map onto England’s National Qualification Framework at Level 5 and Level 4<sup>10</sup> respectively.

**4. The provider needed to respond to emails in a timely fashion and with competent replies. They also needed plenty of detail about exactly what their course contains and how much each part costs publicly available on their website.**

**Rationale:** It doesn’t bode well when a provider doesn’t bother replying to emails at a pre-sales stage. It also doesn’t bode well if staff at the pre-sales stage can’t answer reasonably difficult questions about the products they sell.

**Effectiveness:** Before this stage the list had been narrowed by the previous two criteria to just three providers. All three responded excellently and competently to emails, so I went

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.cambridgeesol.org/what-we-do/newsroom/2010/new-online-celta-training.html>

<sup>8</sup> There is a good blow by blow history given at <http://www.ehea.info/article-details.aspx?ArticleId=3>.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/QF/Stocktaking%20London%202007.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> It looks likely from preliminary documents I found on Ascentis’ website that they will shortly be updated to a Level 5 qualification as well.

with the provider who also offered a Business English and Young Learners add-on at a reasonable price. This provider is accredited by the College of Teachers.

## So far so good?

At this stage I thought I was ready to sign up, so I contacted my prospective employer to inform them of my choice. They told me that if the qualification was not accepted by the British Council then they wouldn't accept it (which is fair enough seeing as the British Council is by far the world's largest teacher of English to foreigners), so I went to the British Council website clicking on the most obvious links which led me to the following description of what TESOL qualifications they accept<sup>11</sup>:

*"The most commonly accepted qualifications are the Certificate of English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA) awarded by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) and the Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (Cert. TESOL) awarded by Trinity College London. These certificates are generally seen as a minimum qualification to teach English as a Foreign Language.*

*Distance learning courses can also be a good introduction, but feedback on your teaching practice is essential and most distance courses will not include this, and therefore will not be acceptable to many teaching institutes.*

*The CELTA and the Cert. TESOL can be taken full-time or part-time at centres worldwide. The centres undergo a strict external inspection to guarantee standards both of the course and of assessment, and the courses include a substantial proportion of observed teaching practice on real students."*

That doesn't really tell you much, and searching the British Council website doesn't tell you much more.

On the websites of the three providers shortlisted earlier there were the usual statements about their qualifications being accepted by the British Council – however one of these providers whose distance TESOL is accredited by Ascentis was unique in linking into the specific web pages on the British Council website which proved that this is true (a practice I would suggest that ALL providers including Ascentis and the College of Teachers ought to adopt). The link they provided is <http://www.britishcouncil.org/learning-exam-boards-english.htm> and it contains at the time of writing the following exam boards:

- Cambridge ESOL
- City and Guilds
- English Speaking Board International Ltd (ESB)
- Institute of Linguists
- The International English Language Testing System (IELTS)
- London Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LCCI) International Qualifications
- London Examinations - Edexcel International
- Password English language tests

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.britishcouncil.org/teacherrecruitment-tefl-qualifications-certificates-2.htm>

- Pearson Language Tests
- Trinity College London
- ASCENTIS

At the top of this page is a statement saying “We work in partnership with the following UK exam boards to help them promote their qualifications overseas” which sort of suggests that these exam boards participate more fully with the British Council than others, but it does not claim that this list is a definitive list – perhaps it is meant more as an indicative list. So why is the College of Teachers, one of the oldest professional teaching bodies in the world, missing from this list?

I asked my most preferred provider who knew well of the problem and suggested that I contact the College of Teachers about the matter. I therefore contacted Nick Ferris of the College of Teachers concerning the lack of presence of the College of Teachers on the British Council website, and he replied as follows:

*“Since 1849 we have shaped the face of education from the establishment of teacher training, to creating the first chair of education in England, to developing certification for school children, to supporting the professional work of others who work in education.*

*The College of Teachers is a professional awarding body by Royal Charter and its qualifications stand in their own right; it offers flexibility and quality. A Royal Charter is issued to an organisation that the State feels contains the premier expertise in a field.*

*Our qualifications range from attendance certificates through to Master's level and are professional rather than academic in nature, allowing everyone involved in education to have their professional achievement and expertise recognised and rewarded. As these qualifications are awarded under our Royal Charter they benefit from international recognition allowing their holders to move schools, local authorities, and even countries safe in the knowledge that their qualifications will be recognised.*

*Please see our website for further information – <http://www.collegeofteachers.ac.uk/courses/tesol-or-tefl-courses>”*

My instant thoughts were as follows:

1. How would anyone outside the UK know what a Royal Charter is?
2. Would anyone outside the UK care what a Royal Charter is?
3. Even if they did know what a Royal Charter was, how would they validate that it is a true claim and isn't being made up like so much stuff on TESOL course provider websites? Is the College of Teachers listed on the Queen's website or a British Government website as holding a Royal Charter? [The answer is no, it isn't<sup>12</sup>]
4. Therefore how could they possibly have “international recognition allowing their holders to move schools, local authorities, and even countries safe in the knowledge that their qualifications will be recognised”?

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<sup>12</sup> The best I could find anywhere on the internet for a list of organisations holding a Royal Charter is on Wikipedia ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_organisations\\_with\\_a\\_British\\_royal\\_charter](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_organisations_with_a_British_royal_charter)). However, as anyone knows, Wikipedia lets anyone add anything to a page.

So I go to the suggested link and it says:

*“When applying for a course with any course provider keep in mind that you are investing a large sum of your money to participate on that course whether it is Distance Learning (including online) or face-to-face.*

*Do not be taken in by flashy promises of immediate work, worldwide recognition or outrageous promises that sound too good to be true. Exotic locations and fabulous cities are not going to make you a better learner or teacher.*

*Task the course providers to supply you with facts about the course, their course accreditation, course content and tutor qualifications. Below are some questions which should help you decide which course provider will give you the best value for money, a recognised qualification and the right tools to teach.*

***Make sure your course is accredited by a reputable accreditation body, examinations body or UK university. [their emphasis]***

*The following links will help you navigate your way through to finding a course that is suitable for you.*

- 1. How to choose a TESOL/TEFL course suitable for you.*
- 2. Basic definitions in English language teaching.*
- 3. What should I know about course providers?*
- 4. Centres with courses accredited by The College of Teachers.*

*For further information on TESOL and TEFL qualifications offered by The College see TESOL Qualifications.”*

In other words, pretty much what every distance TESOL provider on the internet says – they all have a page about their accreditation and why theirs is worth loads while others are not. The problem is that most of them are straight out **lying** to you about the worth of their accreditation: any half wit can get someone to “accredit” them and that someone will say all the pleasant things the College of Teachers’ website does, so the real question is **whether that accreditation means something** to well known employers such as the British Council or not. And surely, I thought to myself, the Gold Standard for the employment of teachers of English internationally has to be the British Council, not least because almost every single TESOL provider whether distance or otherwise will make a claim about the high employability of their students by the British Council.

The big problem from my perspective was that my prospective employer wanted to see a TESOL/TEFL qualification on a list of officially approved qualifications on the British Council website. They *don’t* want to deal with a set of fuzzy and vague qualification assessment criteria such as those in subsection 2.2 of their 2006 Handbook *Inspection criteria*<sup>13</sup> assuming that they even know that such a document exists (I, by the way, had to do quite some searching on Google to find reference to

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.britishcouncil.org/accreditation-qualifications.pdf>

this document. It certainly isn't obviously present near the front of the British Council website). What my prospective employer – and surely all English language teaching schools internationally including the various sub-offices of the British Council itself – would greatly prefer is a black & white choice which can be performed as quickly as possible. To that end an “approved” list of TEFL qualification authorities is invaluable to all English language schools internationally, just as definitive list of members is to bouncers on the VIP door of a nightclub.

## Establishing a TEFL qualification benchmark

The British Council is a Quango<sup>14</sup> granted Royal Charter in 1940 with an income of £645m in 2008/2009, two thirds of which is derived from providing English language services internationally<sup>15</sup>. It is – without doubt – *by far* the largest teacher of English as a foreign language in the world, and such is its international distribution that one would have imagined that there ought to be a substantial *internal* problem in deciding whether job applicants have the appropriate skills or not.

In my opinion the only organisation with sufficient international presence and esteem to bring order to the TESOL/TEFL world is the British Council. Unlike the Bologna process, or the UK's National Qualifications Framework, or British Royal Charters or anything like these the British Council is well known and respected by every English Language School in the world. An approved accreditors list with scans of example certificates so they can be used to exclude fakes on their website would do much to help thousands of people worldwide to not waste their money on TESOL courses which aren't worth much. It would also surely help the British Council internally too.

However, there appears to be significant reticence on the part of the British Council to do just this. I am afraid that I do not have sufficient university library access to read what little there is in the published literature about TESOL, so I am at a loss to explain from where this reticence stems. I do know that ACTDEC (The Accreditation Council for TESOL Distance Education Courses)<sup>16</sup> was set up some fourteen years ago by one of the reputable distance TESOL providers out of frustration that no one else was doing much about the problem, but despite their usual claims about British Council acceptance of their awards I can find no mention of ACTDEC by the British Council and their awards are not recognised as part of a National Qualifications Framework and therefore are not part of the Bologna Process. This means that despite their apparent good intentions they are hitting their heads against the proverbial wall.

What they are definitely on to is a good presentation and structure of the kind of information people seek. They have a page showing scans of the certificates they issue so one can check for fakes. They have a clearly defined list of accredited providers which they promise is always kept current. They

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<sup>14</sup> For those not familiar with British and European political structure, a Quango is a Quasi-Non-Governmental Organisation. Typically these are organisations created by government as a devolved “arm's length” implementer of some well defined subset of what would be typically viewed in other countries as the role of government to implement. They tend to be employed in countries which were once part of the British Empire as a method of distancing politics from implementation on the ground, and they can be highly effective at achieving this. This technique of devolving organisation from political control is also frequently employed by the UN and the EU Commission.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmfaff/333/33307.htm>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.actdec.org.uk/history.shtml>

have a clearly defined list of the awards they accredit and what each one means and is worth. They also have a list of other accreditors that they would recognise as being equal.

All this is a fine example which ought to be followed more widely in my opinion.

## Conclusion

I hope that during this personal report I have communicated my voyage of TESOL selection successfully and that others seeking a reputable TESOL qualification will find this report useful. To those who accredit, provide and recognise TESOL qualifications I additionally make these points:

1. In my opinion the TESOL section of the College of Teachers' website could do well with cloning the much clearer organisation and structure of ACTDEC's website. As it stands at present it mixes the information for students up with the information for providers and it isn't entirely clear what is what due to too much information being present on each page and a lack of structure overall. The College of Teachers also needs to make much better use of hyperlinking into those parts of the internet which prove their statements about themselves: as a minimum there ought to be links into (a) the relevant sections of the British Council listing the College of Teachers (b) those pages on the UK's Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency listing the College of Teachers (c) those pages on the UK's Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) listing the College of Teachers and so on.

While they are at it, the contents of their *Education Today* peer reviewed journal ought to be indexed by Google and Google Scholar preferably in unrestricted access form. It is in my opinion unacceptable in the modern age that any academic journal is not available to internet search engines, and it makes it much more likely that their journal will fall into irrelevance with younger researchers. It certainly frustrated me writing this report.

2. Much of what I have said about the TESOL section of the College of Teachers' website can also be said about the Ascentis website, however the Ascentis website also suffers from many non-functioning internal links or missing documents which does not aid the quick discovery of whether a particular course from a provider is accredited by Ascentis or not. In the end I had more success by using a "restrict to specific site" Google search to find the syllabi and other information which I needed – if Ascentis do not wish to maintain the links on their website, replacing it with a customised Google search of a dumb repository of documents is a very low maintenance alternative.
3. If an unfunded organisation of well intentioned people can set up an international accrediting body such as ACTDEC which has successfully paid for itself for fourteen years then why can't the British Council? I appreciate that the British Council does not wish to enter the quagmire of non-UK accreditation and validation, so why can't the British Council subcontract these guys to provide the accreditation of non-UK distance (and perhaps non-distance) TESOLs for them? Failing that, seeing as ACTDEC's single qualification criterion is to match the British Council's requirements, then simply listing ACTDEC on the British Council's approved list of accrediting bodies ought to be sufficient – any requests by anyone else to



have themselves added to the British Council lists can be simply forwarded to ACTDEC who I am sure would be delighted to receive them.

## Postscript

During the writing of this report I emailed the British Council on the 25<sup>th</sup> October 2010 to ask why the College of Teachers was missing from the list of recognised exam boards on their website as follows:

*"Dear Sir/Madam,*

*CC: Nick Ferris, College of Teachers*

*I note from your list of recognised exam boards (<http://www.britishcouncil.org/learning-exam-boards-english.htm> and <http://www.britishcouncil.org/learning-exams-boards-professional.htm>) that the College of Teachers (<http://www.collegeofteachers.ac.uk/>), an examining body with Royal Charter granted in 1849 and patroned by His Royal Highness, The Duke of Edinburgh (<http://www.collegeofteachers.ac.uk/about/patrons>), is \*not\* present on your list. This is despite the College of Teachers being a longstanding accreditor of TESOL qualifications, the "Level One" of which (<http://www.collegeofteachers.ac.uk/tesol/level-one>) clearly exceeds British Council requirements (<http://www.britishcouncil.org/accreditation-qualifications.pdf>) and which results in a NQF Level 4 or higher award.*

*Can you explain this omission from your website's list of explicitly recognised exam boards? Is there a particular reason for its exclusion, or is it simply a case of accidental omission which will be rectified shortly?*

*Thank you in advance for your time.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Niall Douglas"*

On the 9<sup>th</sup> November 2010 I received this reply:

*"Dear Niall*

*I have consulted with colleagues in English & Exams and have been advised that you should indeed be added to the list of English Language awarding bodies and the list of professional awarding bodies on our website.*

*I have asked our intranet team to add you to both lists and this should be done within the next week or so.*

*I'm sorry that you weren't included on the lists previously.*

*Please get back to me with any further concerns.*

*<Name redacted>"*

I replied to correct their implied assumption that I was from the College of Teachers, explaining a much condensed form of this report.

Niall Douglas

11<sup>th</sup> November 2010