

Invited Symposium – 90 minutes

Title : *Establishing Regional Professional Associations: Benefits and Challenges*

Rationale for the symposium:

EALTA was founded in 2004 with the aim to *promote the understanding of theoretical principles of language testing and assessment, and the improvement and sharing of testing and assessment practices throughout Europe*. Since then, the organization has provided an important forum for raising the standards of the field and boosting professionalism. As EALTA demonstrates, professional associations can provide a strong network to help mentor emerging researchers and practitioners, help to facilitate links with other associations to foster information exchange, and potentially provide a stronger voice for collective position statements on important issues to policy makers. EALTA, for example, has played a significant role in establishing best practice in relation to the use of the CEFR in education and assessment throughout Europe, and has provided an important bridge for dissemination of those principles to researchers outside of Europe.

Very often, the founding of professional associations goes hand-in-hand with the establishment of conferences, seminars and other forums in which not only members of such associations but the wider public can interact and discuss important issues. Professional associations can also provide a higher profile to guidelines and standards for good practice and ethics in language testing, such as the EALTA Guidelines for Good Practice and ILTA Guidelines for Practice. This symposium will provide case studies from a number of organizations in various stages of development, from the early stages of bringing like-minded professionals together to strengthen professional networks, to those that have established themselves as organizations with an explicit structure, constitution, agenda and ongoing mission. While the potential for positive impact of these associations is clear, it is by no means an easy task. A number of issues—practical, logistic, and strategic—need to be faced to ensure these voluntary organizations achieve their goals. The symposium will explore the potential benefits as well as issues and solutions through these case studies, and importantly also through open discussion with the audience to elicit perspectives from as wide a range as possible. Some potential areas of discussion will include, but not be restricted to, the following:

- Practical / logistic—membership fees, raising funds from other means, communication channels, deciding on official status as an organization;
- Social / political: how feasible, or necessary, is it to develop a political stance or remain objective;
- Strategic: how does an organization build links with similar associations while maintaining a distinctive identity and benefits for members; how to build links and improve communication between the language testing field and policy makers and others outside the field; how feasible is it for associations to promote and / or enforce standards.

There can be no one-size-fits-all template as the social and political context in which each arises will have distinctive needs and constraints. Nonetheless, many issues and potential solutions may often be shared, and this symposium aims to offer insights into some of these for participants wishing to engage more directly with existing associations or perhaps considering the benefits of strengthening networks and building an association in their own particular context.

Outline of symposium:

The symposium will consist of five case studies from the organizations listed below. The case studies will be followed by a discussant, the current President of EALTA, to draw together common threads as well as offer insight from EALTA's experience as an organization itself and in funding other group's efforts to organize. The final 30 minutes will be for open discussion with the audience.

1. GIELE, Spain (10 mins) (Neus Figueras & Cristina Rodriguez)
2. LAALTA, Latin American (10 mins) (Salome Villa Larenas)
3. MWALT, (10 mins) (Carole Chapelle)
4. UALTA, Ukraine (10 mins) (Olga Kvasova)
5. UKALTA, UK (10 mins) (Barry O'Sullivan)
6. Discussant (10 mins) (Claudia Harsch)
7. Open discussion (30 minutes)

Overviews of case study organizations (in alphabetical order)

GIELE

The Spanish Interest Group in language testing and assessment was set up in October 2017 in Santiago de Compostela with the main aims of facilitating the collaboration and cooperation of all professionals working in the field in Spain, promoting the exchange of ideas, expertise and research, and contributing to the dissemination of international projects and initiatives. GIELE will convene at least one meeting every year. In 2018, the meeting will take place on 27 October at the Universitat Politecnica de València. Additional information on GIELE and its activities can be found at <https://giele.webs.upv.es> (93)

LAALTA

The Latin American Association for Language Testing and Assessment (LAALTA) was founded last July at the LTRC 2017 in Colombia, which was the first time the conference was held in Latin America. It aims to connect professionals and researchers in language testing and assessment interested in promoting professional language assessment practices among policy makers, educational institutions, and language teachers in the Latin American context. It currently consists of an Organising Team of 10 professionals who have been working on the association's structuring and dissemination, and a mailing list of around 250 members from different countries across Latin America. (99)

MWALT

The Midwest Association of Language Testers (MwALT) is a community of professionals including graduate students that supports theory, research and practice in foreign and second language assessment. Founded at the University of Iowa in 1999 to serve Midwestern states, MwALT has grown beyond its original borders to welcome participants from throughout the United States. Association goals include stimulating professional growth through workshops and conferences, promoting the dissemination of information about language assessment, providing leadership and service in language assessment, increasing public understanding and

support of language assessment, recognizing outstanding achievement in language assessment, and establishing links with other groups interested in language **assessment**.

UALTA (Ukraine)

The idea to establish a professional organisation to promote better language testing and assessment practices has been in the air since the introduction of ECTS in Ukraine (2005). The challenges posed by the increased role of summative assessment were initially tackled nationally through volunteer workshops conducted by teachers with assessment training. Surveys of assessment literacy shaped the bottom-up initiative, which led to the inauguration of UALTA in 2015. Winning financial, and more importantly, intellectual support from EALTA and ILTA has made UALTA a beacon whose mission is to channel expertise from the top professionals to teachers. (100)

UKALTA

At the 2016 Language Testing Forum it was suggested that it was time to consider the creation of a formal national association for language testing in the UK. An important rationale was the need to establish a voice in the government's research funding round, as well as highlighting the discipline's meaningful contribution to applied linguistics. Almost two years have passed and now the organisation is well established; with an agreed constitution, an annual conference (the LTF), and the beginnings of formal recognition (both as a 'learned society' and as a proposer of members of committees in the government's research evaluation). (100)