

Steadfast USA

International student numbers in the USA are increasing despite the conflict in the Middle East and continued difficulties for many in obtaining student visas. Bethan Norris looks at the challenges facing institutions in the USA.

Despite fears that the events of September 11, 2001 would have a dampening effect on international enrolments in the USA, overall numbers were up by 6.4 per cent to 582,996 during the 2001/2002 academic year, according to the *Open Doors 2002* report produced by the Institute of International Education. Many institutions in the USA also report that growth continued into the 2002/2003 academic year.

'Our international student registrations increased [by] 25 per cent in 2001/2002 and 10 per cent in 2002/2003,' says Martin Phillips from Tompkins Cortland Community College in Dryden, NY, who lists the institution's most important student markets as Korea, China, Japan and Spain. 'In our case, [the increase in international numbers is due to] our increased recruitment efforts,' he adds.

At the Naropa Institute in Boulder, CO, Beth Shaw confirms that international student numbers increased by more than 10 per cent in the last year. 'Canada and Europe are our biggest markets,' she says, and highlights the institute's 'improved online exposure' as a possible explanatory factor.

However, for some institutions, an overall increase in international enrolments masks the difficulties experienced in a number of individual markets. 'Our international student numbers are up much more [than the IIE figures],' says Lance Masters from Thiel College in Greenville, PA. '[However], it is more difficult than ever to get visas for students from certain places such as China.' Masters adds that while economic prosperity in India and Sri Lanka is helping to increase student numbers from these countries, the opposite is true for Thailand and Indonesia, which have both been experiencing an economic slowdown

recently. Meanwhile, Phillips reports falling enrolments from the Middle East and other Muslim countries, such as Malaysia and Indonesia, 'for obvious reasons'.

Although the Middle East has not been a particularly important student market for the USA in the past, the events of September 11, 2001 and resultant introduction of more stringent visa regulations, which seem to target a small number of nationalities (see *Education Travel Magazine*, issue 2, 2003, page 2), have sent numbers on a downward spiral. 'I do not think students feel as welcome as before,' says Scott Martin from Anderson University in Anderson, IN. 'The goodwill from other countries no longer exists and parents are much more concerned about safety.'

Shaw, however, believes that, overall, international perceptions of the USA as a safe place to study have not been greatly influenced by September 11. 'A lot of international students - influenced by violent US TV shows - have always thought of this as a violent, fairly dangerous country,' she asserts.

Visa issuance has been the most pressing problem for many US institutions since regulations for students were tightened at the end of 2001, and Brad Mylett from Maharishi International University in Fairfield, IA, claims that this has been their 'biggest challenge' over the last year. 'There has been a dramatic increase in visa rejections that has hurt our institution,' he says. 'We have been meeting with different consulates and hopefully this will change. China is one example where we receive lots of applications [but have difficulty obtaining] visas.'

Students wanting to study on intensive English programmes in universities in the USA have been particularly badly affected by visa regulations, according to Stephen

Overseas students by country of origin in colleges and universities in the USA

	1999/2000	2000/2001	% change 99/00 'v'	2001/2002	% change 00/01 'v'
India	42,337	54,664	29.1	66,836	22.3
China	54,466	59,939	10	63,211	5.5
South Korea	41,191	45,685	10.9	49,046	7.4
Japan	46,872	46,497	-0.8	46,810	0.7
Taiwan	29,234	28,566	-2.3	28,930	1.3
Canada	23,544	25,279	7.4	26,514	4.9
Mexico	10,607	10,670	10	12,518	17.3
Turkey	10,100	10,983	7.7	12,091	10.1
Others	218,999	215,659	-1.5	277,040	28.4
Total	514,723	547,867	6.4	582,996	6.4

Source: Institute of International Education

Selection of higher education institutions in the USA

Name	Location	Use agents?	No. of students	% int. students
Anderson University	Anderson, IN		2,500	4
Eastern Washington University	Cheney, WA	✓	9,000	2.5
Florida Southern College	Lakeland, FL		1,800	5
Golden Gate University	San Francisco, CA	✓	7,000	15
Maharishi International University	Fairfield, IA	✓	484	50
The Naropa Institute	Boulder, CO		1,000	6
Thiel College	Greenville, PA	✓	1,300	7
Tompkins Cortland Community College	Dryden, NY	✓	2,300	6

Thewlis from Golden Gate University in San Francisco, CA. 'In whole countries, visas are systematically denied for prospective students who only have English language programme I-20s,' he reports. 'I do not expect this trend to improve, at least in the short term.'

For university students, however, the Sevis student tracking system, which became operational at the beginning of this year (see *Education Travel Magazine*, issue 1, 2002, page 2), 'will facilitate visas for deserving students', according to Mylett. While it is too early to tell what effect Sevis will have on international enrolments, many institutions are hopeful that it will not deter genuine students in the long term. 'The system has been flawed and frustrating, but we are managing,' says Sara Schmelzer from Eastern Washington University in Cheney, WA. 'We anticipate that

enrolments will stay the same or continue to increase.'

When looking to the future, Thewlis acknowledges that a lot may depend on future US action in the Middle East. 'The registration of students from certain countries and the general fallout from the war on terrorism - to say nothing of the war in Iraq - will continue to have a negative impact on enrolments,' he says. However, many institutions remain positive. 'We are aiming for continued steady growth,' says Phillips, citing 'continued targeting of Asia and possible new recruiting initiatives in Europe and Brazil'.

Mylett too is confident for the future. 'We promote world peace and already have one of the highest percentages of international students on our campus. We are actually investing more resources to international marketing now, in spite of visa challenges.'