

UK high schools

The 2002/2003 academic year provided mixed results for high schools in the UK, as some overseas student markets increased at the expense of others.

High schools in the UK have been facing a whole range of challenges to their international recruitment efforts in recent years, with worldwide economic problems, the effects of September 11, 2001, the recent war in Iraq and the outbreak of Sars all affecting markets in different ways. However, overall, the number of international students at UK high schools continued to rise this year, with a few key markets leading the way.

"Southeast Asia, Russia and Africa are our biggest markets," says Lee Kirby from Ashbourne College in London. "Southeast Asia has grown rapidly over the last five years, while the number of African students has decreased. We have found that since our introduction of a high deposit, the number of African students has fallen."

Andrew Gillespie from d'Overbroeck's College in Oxford notes, "In recent years, there has been major growth in interest from China and, even more recently, greater interest from the USA. Apart from this, interest is very broad but notably from Germany, Thailand, Russia or the ex-Soviet states."

In last year's Destination Analysis feature on UK high schools, the effects of the attacks on September 11, 2001 was the principle concern for many schools as student numbers from North America dropped significantly (see *Education Travel Magazine*, October 2002, page 5). However, this year, according to statistics from the Independent School's Council (ISC), North American numbers are almost back to pre-2002 levels and schools note that the UK may be benefitting in other markets from the USA's tighter security restrictions.

"Our international student numbers have increased steadily over the past few years," says Janine Faulkner from St Michael's College

in Worcestershire. "This is probably due to the fact that American visas are more difficult to obtain now."

The high school education travel sector is one that is particularly sensitive to issues of safety and the events of September 11 and recent war in Iraq have brought this home to students and their parents. Faulkner explains, "We also think that we have become popular due to our location – in the west of England. At one time, this used to be a disadvantage, but now many parents prefer students to be outside of the larger cities."

The outbreak of Sars in March this year had a significant effect on all industries involved with worldwide travel, particularly in Asia, as fear of catching or spreading the disease curtailed travel plans and led to flights being cancelled. Many language schools and other educational institutions in the UK introduced a 10-day quarantine period for students arriving from affected areas, but, according to Faulkner, this seemed to have little effect on existing students and those enrolling on long-term programmes at the school.

"Enrolments for the academic year haven't been affected but Sars certainly hit our summer school numbers," she said. "Students wishing to come for the academic year seem to be far more willing to go into the 10-day quarantine."

Christopher Hirst, Headmaster of Sedburgh School in Cumbria, also reports that Sars has had little effect on international enrolments, despite the school's largest markets being China and Hong Kong. And for those schools that have detected a drop in enrolments from students in Sars-affected areas, most remain optimistic about the future. "The number of Chinese students is down for September but will probably be restored to a normal level for January

Number of new international enrolments by year in ISC member schools in the UK

	2001	2002	% change	2003	% change
Hong Kong	2,028	2,197	8.3	2,266	3.1
China	548	772	40.8	965	25
Germany	1,026	985	-3.9	910	-7.6
North America	609	490	-19.5	571	16.5
Africa	483	455	-5.7	451	-0.9
South Korea	279	320	14.6	418	30.6
Spain	285	313	9.8	332	6
Russia	313	335	7	317	-5.4
Japan	400	354	-11.5	312	-11.9
Total	7,872	8,094	2.8	8,344	3

Source: Independent Schools Council (ISC)

Selection of high schools in the UK

Name	Location	Pay agency commission	No. of students	% int. students
Ashbourne College	London	✓	135	50
D'Overbroecks College	Oxford	✓	60	30
Newlands School	E Sussex	✓	471	11
Roedean	Brighton	✓	400	45
Sedburgh College	Cumbria	✓	405	7
St Leonards - Mayfield School	E Sussex	-	400	15
St Michael's College	Worcestershire	✓	120	100

2004," says Kirby, while Gillespie adds, "[There is] no sign of interest dwindling from these regions, although [Sars] may delay [students'] start date."

While the practical difficulties associated with the Sars outbreak have certainly affected students of all ages travelling between countries, Karen Bowles from St Leonards – Mayfield School in East Sussex also points out other consequences. "Between April and June the very real economic impact of Sars – on Hong Kong particularly – has affected one or two of our current pupils and possibly two prospective students," she says. However, she also reports that applications from mainland China are up and adds, "The uncertain economic climate in Asia is more significant than Sars."

China has been the fastest growing market for UK high schools in recent years, with new enrolments up 40 per cent in 2002. However, the statistics show that the increase slowed to 25 per cent this year,

possibly hinting at a future levelling off of numbers from this market, especially as the ISC census was conducted before the Sars outbreak.

This year, the fastest growing student market for UK high schools was Korea, which increased by over 30 per cent. Gillespie says that, along with Russia, Korea is a market that the school will be particularly targeting in the future. "We offer pre-A-level English courses and believe this [product] is strong in these regions," he says, adding, "Long-term, Vietnam has a good feel."

At Ashbourne College, where 50 per cent of its student body is made up of international students, Kirby is keen to diversify the school's international student base, despite the fact that "the terrorist threat to London has not helped" international enrolments at the school. "We will try and recruit more from Turkey and the Middle East, and South America may get another look. These are markets that we have not really explored yet," he explains. ○