

Germany's appeal

As students around the world realise the cost-effectiveness of university study in Germany, bookings at language schools are increasing accordingly. At the same time, more traditional European summer student markets remain buoyant. AMY BAKER reports.

In a year that was characterised by difficult times for many operators in the language teaching industry, German language schools fared quite well in 2002, with a number experiencing modest increases in student numbers.

'In 2002, we had an increase of students of about 15 per cent,' relates Joachim Graff of Sprachinstitut Treffpunkt in Bamberg. At Sprachinstitut Tübingen in Tübingen, Sami Nassif experienced a similar increase. 'We had 15 per cent more students than in 2001,' he says. 'Bookings from school classes - especially from Italy - and university student groups were the reason for this increase.'

Other schools reported a different, although not difficult, year. 'We had more students in the off-peak season, about 80 per cent more, and less students in the peak season,' says Florian Meierhofer from BWS Germanlingua in Munich.

The characteristics of the market have changed slightly. Anka Guter, at Sprachen & Wirtschaft Training in Meersburg am Bodensee, which recruits professionals, revealed a drop in enrolments of five per cent and forecast fewer American enrolments this year.

Higher education in Germany is one of the key factors behind the expansion in student numbers and longer-term enrolments (see right). Michael Aulbach, Director of Did Deutsch Institut in Munich, explains, 'An increasing number of young people desire to study in Munich or Germany. [And] there is a certain group that needs German for their... foreign language skills in general or bilingualism in Switzerland and Italy.'

Swiss students are an important market for German language schools, accounting for the largest group of students at Did



Munich, followed by Italy and France. Nassif also points to long-term students from Switzerland enrolling on exam preparation programmes and students from Italy and the USA as growing student groups. Meierhofer, at BWS Germanlingua, reports significant numbers of students from 'Switzerland, China, Italy, the UK and the USA'.

Dirk Heiland, at Die Neue Schule in Berlin, also earmarks Poland as a growing market. 'Poland is planning to become a European Union (EU) member soon,' he says. 'Many Polish people realise that Germany will be the most important economic partner for Poland then.'

Many countries are showing rising interest in Germany as a study destination because of its affordable higher education system, not least China, where demand for a university education overseas is phenomenal. Aulbach confirms, 'We [are seeing] an increasing interest from East Europe, the Far East and South America, even if the participation is not comparable to [Swiss, Italian and French students].'

One problem experienced with the Chinese market by some institutions has been the visa issuing process. Heiland reports that Chinese numbers are decreasing

because of problems with visas, while Graff and Nassif both report visa problems and delays for Chinese and Russian students.

In terms of recruitment methods, agents remain a central part of the recruitment process for many schools. Meierhofer is planning more personal visits to agencies to attract more client bookings for BWS Germanlingua in Munich and its new school in Berlin, which opens this year.

'I heard from many agencies that students are very keen to come to Berlin as they think that Berlin is the most happening city in Germany,' says Meierhofer. 'Especially for students from Spain and Sweden, Berlin is the number-one [destination] now. Also, many of our students in Munich were asking for another German course, but in Berlin.'

It is likely that Berlin, Germany's capital city, attracts a different, more independent type of language traveller. Heiland in Berlin says that agents are becoming less important for recruitment at his school, as more students want to book directly.

Nevertheless, there is plenty of potential in the German language teaching market and agencies and language schools look likely to see bookings grow again this year.

Germany's selling point - higher education

The trend towards studying German in preparation for further academic studies in Germany has been growing recently, and Dirk Heiland of Die Neue Schule in Berlin explains why. 'University studies are still completely free of charge for foreign students in Germany,' he says.

This is a major appeal for students, especially since price considerations have become more pressing for many in the last few years, and it gives Germany a huge competitive advantage in the field of international education. Ibrahim Ileri, Director of Ideal Educational Counselling Service in Turkey, testifies to Germany's appeal for his clients.

'There is a big demand for higher education in Germany among Turkish students,' he says. 'I noticed this trend right after the economic crisis broke out in Turkey [in February 2001]. The purchasing power of the Turkish lira declined. Students started looking for more economic options and destinations, and the fact that there are no expensive tuition fees in Germany attracted them.'

Ileri estimates that 30 per cent of his clients ask for information about studying in Germany, adding that there are no difficulties in finding language schools that offer progression on to university.

Many German language schools are keen to attract the university-bound market and a number are introducing language programmes and examination facilities for university-oriented students. 'In 2002, we [became] a language test (TestDaF) centre for university exams,' says Sami Nassif of Sprachinstitut Tübingen. Ümran Müller vom Berge, from Sprachcafe in Düsseldorf, adds that one of the challenges for Sprachcafe this year is 'preparation courses for KDS and GDS exams'.