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South Africa shines

With its low cost of living and focus on innovative activity programmes, South Africa continues to go from strength to strength as a study destination. Demand from the business sector is also driving demand, as BETHAN NORRIS reports.

Marketing efforts

When it comes to marketing themselves overseas, many language schools in South Africa recognise the need to develop this area of their business. The two LAL schools in Durban and Cape Town are fortunate in benefiting from the combined marketing efforts of the whole LAL group. Gavin Eyre reports that this has had the greatest impact on student enrolments over the past year.

Other schools however, have to rely on more modest marketing efforts and Trish Cooper from Wits Language School in Johannesburg says that 90 per cent of their current development has come from word-of-mouth recommendations. "We are focusing at the moment on Internet marketing which we believe should contribute significantly to the expansion of our international market," she says.

Increased interest from agents for language programmes in South Africa is also a positive development. Taise Sampson from Jeffreys Bay Language School says, "We have secured more partners who are very attracted to our offerings."

Manya Bredell from Cape Town School of English has also noticed increasing interest from agents. "There seems to be more positive response from international contacts regarding the crime/political situation seeming to normalise here," she says.

The fact that IalC is holding its annual agents' workshop in Cape Town this year is also likely to help shine the spotlight on an emerging study destination with a competitive edge.

The South African English language teaching industry is largely based around the holiday market, with many students attracted by short-term stays in the country's mild climate and the chance to participate in such activities as surfing, safari and scuba diving. Language schools in the country report that increasing enrolments have largely been due to a growing demand for activity and adventure language programmes from several key markets.

Taise Sampson from Jeffreys Bay Language School in the Eastern Cape attributes their school's location and the wealth of activities on offer to the 15 per cent increase in student numbers experienced in the past year. "[Significant nationalities are] German, Swiss and Brazilian students [as they are] very interested in surfing, sport and beach activities," she relates.

At the Cape Town School of English in Claremont, Manya Bredell also reports that student numbers have been good over the past year. The school offers a number of different courses but Bredell confirms, "Young learners coming to do English in their holidays have worked well."

With South Africa becoming well known for its holiday activity programmes, other sectors of the language travel industry, such as academic or business language programmes, are less well developed. However, this looks set to change as schools, particularly those located off the traditional tourist track, look at ways to develop their business in these areas. "We are re-introducing a Tefl course this year since it was fairly successful in the past and we constantly receive requests for teacher training," says Trish Cooper from Wits Language Centre in Johannesburg. "In addition to this, we run a course in medical English – developed in response to demand from an international medical company that is currently using South African hospitals to train doctors from other countries."

In Durban, Joan Cihan from International House Durban also notes an increase in business clients from Angola "who are sent here by their American oil employers", although she adds that an increase in Spanish, Brazilian, Swiss and German students can be attributed to "the marketing of our new fun [language and activity] packages".

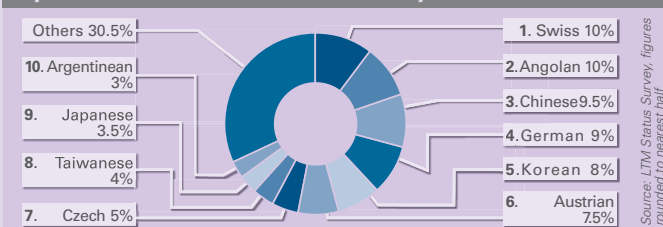
Diversifying into new business areas is the key to staying successful and Cihan believes that this is a factor explaining their increased student numbers over the past year. "We feel that the diversification [offered across] our three companies, which include a tour company, a traveller's lodge and the language school, has increased the variety of activities we have to offer and therefore reaches a broader spectrum of clients," she says.

When it comes to staying ahead of the game and improving facilities, LAL Cape Town is on the ball. "LAL Cape Town moved to a new location in March, [where] we have all our 30 classrooms and accommodation – 60 rooms – under the same roof," reports Gavin Eyre, Marketing Manager for LAL Group South Africa. "This makes LAL Cape Town the only language centre with such facilities. This will, in itself, attract increased numbers from all over the world."



PHOTOGRAPH: SOUTH AFRICAN TOURISM

Top 10 nationalities in South Africa by student weeks, 2005



Source: LTM Status Survey, figures rounded to nearest half

At the same time, other global language school chains – namely EC and EF – have opened up schools in South Africa in the last year. Despite the increased competition, many schools expect student numbers to increase further in the future. Jane Diesel from Inlingua in Cape Town points to the surrounding "hype and marketing" regarding the 2010 World Cup in South Africa as beneficial for enrolments.

A national push to promote South Africa as a tourist destination is likely to have a positive effect on the country's language teaching industry as a whole but Sampson also points to a more strategic approach between tourism and language teaching bodies. "The English Language Teaching Association South Africa (Eltasa) is working closely with the South African Tourism Services Association (Satsa) and developing new strategies to develop the EFL market," she says. "More tourism bodies are [now] aware of the existence of the market."

Increased promotion can only be a good thing for an industry that already has many advantages over other English language destinations. Cooper lists these as, "the competitive costs of South African schools in relation to the international market, the rising profile of South Africa, the friendliness of the local people and the fact that study visas are available to all nationalities." It seems likely that language schools in South Africa can look forward to a good few years to come. ●