

France stays steady

Student enrolment levels across language schools in France have not, in general, improved this year compared with 2003, and schools are focusing on cultural interest courses or value for money programmes in an attempt to stimulate the market. JANE VERNON SMITH reports.

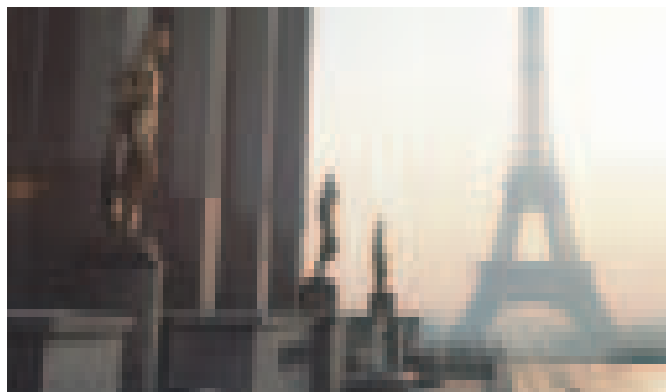
Following a difficult year in 2003, the French language travel market appears set to fare no better in 2004, with schools reporting registration levels on a par with last year. Global economic pressures, visa problems and the political climate associated with the Iraq situation all take a share in the blame.

At the Alliance Française in Paris, Development Director Christiane Imbert says that figures for the first four months of this year have remained similar to last year. At the University of Provence in Aix-en-Provence, Director of Service Commun d'Enseignement du Français aux Etudiants Etrangers (SCEFEE), Michel Santacroce, notes that although the department is witnessing an increase in Eastern European students, this has been counterbalanced by a decrease in numbers from traditional European source countries. As a result, bookings overall have held steady.

It had been hoped that European Union (EU) enlargement would have a positive impact on bookings in 2004. For the time being, at least, those hopes have not been fulfilled. Imbert reports that EU enlargement has had little impact so far – just a slight increase in the number of Czechs and Slovaks.

At Insted, in Chamonix Mont-Blanc, which recruits many of its students from Sweden, Adam Jorién has suffered a 20 per cent drop in bookings this year. "New rules [linked to student subsidies] are forcing the Swedes to study at more 'conventional' schools less expensive than [ours]," he explains.

Another trend he notes is a fall in the average length of stay, a situation that is also reported by Paris-based school Langue Onze, where Sandrine Thomassian reports a halving of the average



study period, from four weeks to two weeks.

However, while the general French language teaching market seems to remain lacklustre, there is still significant interest in "language plus" courses, combining French tuition with cultural interest classes, according to various schools. Courses such as French plus culture, French plus Bordeaux wines and French plus surf have all performed very well this year at Bordeaux Language Studies, according to Damien Renaux. Meanwhile, Alliance Française Paris has invested resources into two new programmes: a two-week French and nautical sports in Brittany programme in July as well as a two-week French and cultural activities programme during August.

As well as aiming programmes towards students looking for something extra, in addition to French language tuition, schools have also had to take note of another typical market tendency: a desire among customers for value for money. Joëlle Sbrana of the Centre International d'Antibes in Antibes highlights the school's new summer camp in Nice. Designed to attract a young adult market with limited funds, the programme is priced at a weekly rate of €347 (US\$424), including on-campus accommodation in Nice during July and

August. In another move to make its programmes more affordable, earlier this year the school promoted a special "three weeks for the price of two" offer on some of its programmes.

French language schools continue to gain much of their business from the UK and other European countries, such as Spain and Germany, but their US business – which, according to our most recent Status survey, was the most significant nationality across schools (see *Language Travel Magazine*, June 2003, page 40) – has failed to stage a recovery since enrolment levels were affected by the political situation surrounding the Iraq war and a decline in outbound US travel.

However, a number of other markets are reported to be improving. Since the signing of agreements between France and China in 2002, the number of Chinese students has risen significantly. Whereas previously the best performing countries for SCEFEE were Europe and the USA, now, says Santacroce, Asians – predominantly Japanese and Chinese – are the leaders.

Imbert at Alliance Française Paris also notes an increase in the number of Chinese enrolments, together with growing numbers of Vietnamese and Indian students, "due to certain openings for visas" for these countries.

Marketing methods

In times when language schools are struggling to increase or even maintain student numbers, it is more important than ever that recruitment and marketing methods should be cost-effective and well targeted.

As well as working with agents around the world, for many language schools in France, the Internet is proving to be invaluable in this respect. Costing little to set up, a website can be useful in attracting increasing numbers of direct bookings, report some school representatives. "[Bookings come] more and more via the Internet [and] less via agents," relates Adam Jorién of Insted in Chamonix Mont-Blanc.

And at the University of Provence's French language teaching department, Director Michel Santacroce adds, "We use emailing more and more and network possibilities (websites) [to recruit students]."

For a large organisation like Alliance Française, "marketing rests on our worldwide network, our website and some advertising," reports Christiane Imbert. For many schools, advertising currently tends to play a very subsidiary role in the overall marketing strategy. However, one publication frequently mentioned by language schools is Fusac, which is distributed free to English speakers around Paris. "We advertise in Fusac and, apart from that, we have an Internet site and we rely on word of mouth," says Sandrine Thomassian at Langue Onze in Paris.

For many schools, their own marketing efforts go hand-in-hand with those carried out on behalf of members by national associations. "Through [trade bodies], we are able to be represented on their websites, workshops, brochures. We also get a better knowledge of the market and an international overview," explains Imbert. For smaller language schools with small budgets to match, these services can be invaluable, as Jorién appreciates. Insted does not currently work with Souffle or L'Office, for example, "but we will next year," he affirms.