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# Malta forges ahead

The Maltese English language teaching industry has experienced massive growth over the past year, mainly due to an increase in students from Spain. Access to visa centres has also expanded for students. BETHAN NORRIS reports.

## Industry development

With student numbers burgeoning, a number of language schools in Malta have been extending their facilities and developing new programmes. Andrew Mangion at Feltom points out that with the number of licensed schools in the country having doubled in 10 years, competition has meant investment in diversity and quality.

Maureen Gauci Maistre from Alpha School of English in St Paul's Bay, says that student numbers increased at the school last year due to "new [larger] premises for the summer season."

Isabella Conti from LAL Malta in Sliema says that they have recently been extending their accommodation provision. "We have recently acquired the 200-bed Days Inn hotel, which has been converted into a student residence offering stylishly furnished studios, comprising two single beds, a small kitchenette and a fully equipped bathroom," she says. "We are convinced that this will be very appealing to agents and it will boost our bookings."

In terms of programme development, Paul Fenech from Magister Academy in St Julians says that he has noticed an increasing demand for IELTS courses among students, pointing to a trend towards language learning for more serious purposes. Louiseanne Mercieca from English Language Academy in Sliema, notes a similar trend. "ELA is currently the first and only centre in Malta to offer the Toefl iBT," she says. "The preparatory course for this test is very popular with students."

Maltese language schools reported a good year in 2007, with official statistics showing that international language students increased by an impressive 28 per cent on 2006. The increase can partly be explained by the large influx of Spanish students in Malta last summer after the Spanish government started offering grants for English study overseas (see LTM, February, 2008, page 6).

The statistics reveal that Spanish students increased from five per cent of the student body in 2006 to 14 per cent in 2007 and the observations of individual schools support this growth. Louiseanne Mercieca from English Language Academy in Sliema says that Spanish student numbers increased from four per cent to 17 per cent at their school, while Isabella Conti from LAL Malta, also in Sliema, says, "The number of students [at our school] increased by 20 per cent over the previous year and undoubtedly this was mainly due to the high influx of Spanish students we had last summer."

Aside from growth in the Spanish market, however, schools also report solid and increasing student numbers from a variety of countries. Maureen Gauci Maistre from Alpha School of English in St Paul's Bay, says, "In 2007, we welcomed students from 27 different countries to our school. We currently receive the greatest number of students from Switzerland, Germany, France, Italy, Spain and Russia, while bookings from eastern European countries such as Poland, Hungary and Slovakia are also on the rise."

Louise Osmond from EC English in Ta X'biex agrees that demand for language programmes in Malta is extending beyond the traditional European student markets. "A nationality that has shown substantial increase is Korea – Korea appears to have discovered Malta as a destination. [And] the Brazilians are also slowly discovering Malta," she says, adding, "There has been continued interest from Colombia, but unfortunately these students are facing problems when it comes to obtaining visas and therefore what could be a large nationality is more or less nonexistent."

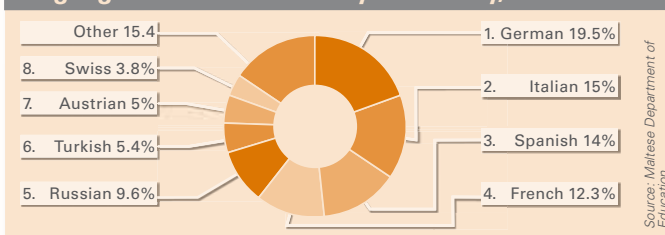
Visa issues have hampered growth from some markets, according to schools. The country's entry into the Schengen zone in December last year meant visa procedures were tightened up for students from outside the EU (see LTM, December 2007, page 7). Caroline Castillo from Clubclass Residential Language School in St Andrews, says, "There has been a decrease [in numbers] from countries where students require a visa to enter Malta since we entered the Schengen zone – the [visa] system is still not running that efficiently."

However, other schools report that a new visa rules have had a positive effect on business. Gauci Maistre says that they are receiving more students on long-term courses as "it is now significantly easier



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## Language students in Malta by nationality, 2007



Source: Maltese Department of Education

for students to apply for long-term student visas", and she also points out a positive side of belonging to the Schengen zone. "Before, students could only apply for their visas in a handful of embassies of Malta," she says. "Now they can also apply at any embassy or consulate of Italy and Austria if no embassy of Malta is available in their home town. As such, students can now apply for visas in over 80 embassies throughout the world, which is a great improvement!"

Business is certainly booming among Maltese language schools and many are extending and adapting their core business in order to cater for demand (see box). Andrew Mangion, President of schools' association, Feltom, confirms that members are offering a wider choice of programmes, including academic year programmes, business English and English for Special Purposes. He also acknowledges new source markets in Asia.

However, schools are cognisant of the power of effective marketing and show no signs of letting their guard down in this area. Gauci Maistre and Castillo both say that their marketing efforts have increased over the past year. Meanwhile, Mercieca attributes "intensified marketing and the building of a good team of staff" as having the biggest impact on growing enrolments.