

Pivotal role

While the terrorist attacks on September 11, which destroyed the World Trade Center and part of the Pentagon in the USA, shocked the world, the longer-term effects of these actions have been a new, cautious attitude to international relations, national security and air travel.

For the language travel industry, it is important to take stock of these circumstances and find greater reason than ever to continue in furthering international exchange and improving inter-cultural relations. As one agent comments, "Now more than ever we must focus on this purpose" (page 30).

In the USA, these are challenging times indeed, not least because a heightened fear about the threat of terrorism manifested itself in the form of harassment of students studying there who are of Middle Eastern origin. Nafsa, and individual universities, called for consideration and tolerance (page 6).

While it is likely that the student tracking system, SEVP, will now be implemented, as the US education industry sees the need for greater security, institutions are mindful too that a balance is needed between security and access for legitimate students. "I would plead that we take a balanced approach," said the director of one university international office. "I believe that international exchange... is what's likely [to] succeed in bringing understanding among the world's communities."

Agents, in the meantime, should seize the opportunity to turn an uncertain scenario for US schools to their advantage in the year to come. As one agent points out, institutions may welcome an agent as a stable source of bookings, if direct bookings dry up (pages 26-27).

Working together for the growth of the industry will, as ever, be crucial as we move forward into a new year. Any changes in visa requirements will need to be transmitted to agents as soon as possible, so that students can be kept informed of the latest visa criteria. One agent identifies a lack of clear information from schools as a challenge to be tackled in the future, as poor information leads to unsatisfied students (pages 26-27). When students were canvassed about what they thought of the agency service they had received, many agreed that insufficient information about study options was a failing of some agencies (page 35).

New Zealand exemplifies how a collaborative approach can aid all parties. Agents are being incorporated into its new media campaign, and while agents receive display posters and videos of its new brand, the country succeeds in furthering the reach of its image around the world (page 7).

Working together for maximum effect can mean schools and agents joining an association in order to achieve results on a national or global scale. The Association of Language Travel Organisations (Alto) joins schools and agents under one umbrella, and significant industry issues were discussed and agreed upon at its annual general meeting in Mexico at the end of September (pages 12-13).

Language teaching institutions in Canada are well aware that they lack a national government export body that could work to further the international education community's interests. In some cases, schools in the country have been turning their attention to improving relations with agents instead (page 21).

While the travel agency industry has changed radically this year, and commission payments have dropped further (page 11), education consultants and language travel agents remain as important as ever in ensuring the future growth of our industry.

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