

State sector benefits

English language teaching institutions in the UK's state teaching sector all seem to be enjoying increases in international student numbers, as they benefit from the trend for further academic study overseas. AMY BAKER reports.

With more and more students interested in continuing their academic career overseas, English language teaching institutions based in colleges and universities in the UK are seeing increasing student numbers, as many students favour taking an academic preparation language programme at the same institution at which they intend to continue their studies.

'We were full last year,' reports Lynne Lucas at Barnet College, while Sarah Schechter at Anglia Polytechnic University's Centre for English Language Studies reports a 50 per cent increase in enrolment figures. Judy Robinson, at New College Nottingham, is more typical when she relates that their overseas student intake increased by 17 per cent in 2001. '[We saw] a nationality increase of 21 per cent, to over 80 nationalities,' she adds.

In line with many other language teaching markets around the world, institutions in the UK's state teaching sector have seen a marked rise in Chinese enrolments - and most Chinese students are keen to continue on to degree programmes. 'The best performing nationality [in 2001] was Chinese, with numbers up by nearly 90 per cent,' says David Palmer, Language Centre Director at the University of Portsmouth. 'China is an enormous market, where there is an increasing need and desire for an international education, and virtually all [our Chinese] students were intending to continue on to degree courses at the university.'

Other institutions point to Spain, Taiwan and Japan as key student provider countries, although Palmer reports a decline in numbers from Japan. 'Japanese student weeks fell by 21 per cent,' he says. 'I attribute this to a continuing weak economy in Japan



aggravated by the aftermath of September 11, when institutional groups or study tours became very cautious about travelling.'

As a result of the high increase of students from China, care has to be taken to maintain a balance of nationalities on language learning and foundation programmes. To this end, says Palmer, 'We are now targeting Western European and Central American markets to redress the balance of nationalities away from Asiatic countries where we previously focused.'

Martin Jones at Bath Spa University College is recruiting in China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Western Europe and says the biggest challenge for next year is 'improving nationality mix' in the classrooms. At New College Nottingham, there have been significant student increases from the Gulf States and Libya. 'We feel that our... sustained contacts and frequent visits to these countries... ensured continuity [in enrolment levels] through a year which was fraught with uncertainties,' says Robinson.

Underlining the attraction of further academic study as a reason to choose state sector schools, Robinson estimates that over 75 per cent of full-time students are interested in further academic study following their initial pro-

gramme. 'For some nationalities, specialisms and career choices such as music technology, performing arts, multimedia and beauty therapy are either not available in their own country, or very expensive,' she says.

Many of the international students at these institutions are recruited by agents. Jones at Bath Spa University College says that agents account for 50 per cent of their enrolments, followed by the Internet, word-of-mouth recommendation and fairs & exhibitions in fairly equal proportions. Palmer adds, 'Agents are the biggest single source of enrolments [at the University of Portsmouth Language Centre] representing 42 per cent of our student weeks.'

Helping get the word out to agents about the opportunities that state sector schools offer is the British Association of State English Language Teaching (Baselt), which has recently overhauled its image and branding. '[Baselt's] new strengthened marketing role and re-vitalised logo are key components of a new strategy to work more closely with agents,' says Robinson. Palmer adds, 'Baselt has considerably raised its international profile in the last few years and has helped publicise the particular advantages [that member centres offer].'

Further education options

College and university English language training departments in the UK offer a range of programmes for international students, such as vacation courses, year-round and term-time programmes offering English language and English language plus, academic preparation programmes, IELTS exam courses and pre-Masters programmes.

Judy Robinson at New College Nottingham points out that Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) are also a good option for international students, although she says, 'some students and agents are still not aware that state colleges of further education can offer these diplomas, which cover the first two years of degree-level study.'

The entrance criteria required for students to gain access to an HND course is lower than for an undergraduate degree, and upon completion of an HND, students can enrol on an undergraduate degree programme in the second or sometimes third year. 'The [diplomas] are very cost-effective and practically based,' says Robinson. 'New government rules now allow us [state colleges of further education] to offer 26 new courses for university progression and these have proved immediately attractive [to international students], as a follow-on from language courses and in their own right.'

Previously, colleges of further education (FE) in the UK had not been able to offer these courses to students and they were only available at colleges and institutions of higher education (HE). Currently at New College Nottingham, there are 700 British and international students enrolled on HND courses. These courses offer students an excellent opportunity for vocationally-oriented study in preparation for future work or entry on to further university-level education.