

The specialists

By all accounts, students value the advice and help given to them by language travel agents, provided the information is up-to-date and the agency fee is not too high. GILLIAN EVANS talks to students around the world about their agency experiences.

Language travel agents are the specialists in language travel. They advise students about the most suitable choice of location and school for their requirements and facilitate the whole booking process. In effect, they are the students' one-stop shop towards realising their study abroad dream. And, even in these days of accessible information through the Internet, agents still have a valuable role to play in the marketplace.

Twenty-seven-year-old Kyung-nam from Korea said she booked her course through an agent because 'I didn't have the information about the city, institute and so on. In addition, I couldn't speak English so I had to receive help from specialists'.

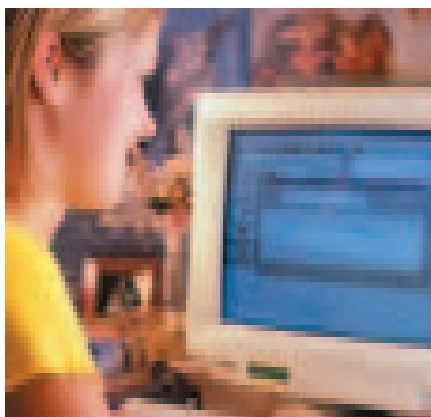
'I think it is easy [to book through an agent],' comments 27-year-old Ekkapong from Thailand. 'The agent can manage everything for you.'

Prior to contacting an agent, most students have an idea of the country in which they want to study and sometimes also the city or town, but there are some who are unsure of even their study destination. 'I went to the agency with absolutely no idea [of where I wanted to study],' commented 22-year-old Mijin from South Korea. 'They gave me several choices and I chose Australia [because of] the weather and the security.'

Even if students have decided upon their preferred study destination, they often rely on an agent's expert advice about the actual school. Ilza, aged 17, from Latvia said, 'At first I didn't know where I wanted to study but the agent advised me to choose [this] school because they had 10 years' experience with [it].'

Websites are extremely important in the recruitment of students, with 27 per cent of students saying they found their agency on the web and 54 per cent saying they had accessed the agency's website. Although an agency's website does not always negate the need for personal contact, if it is well designed, it can provide the prospective client with most of the information they need. 'I used the agency's website,' said 19-year-old Hanne from Germany. 'In my opinion the website was structured very clearly and I was able to find out most of the details I wanted to know.'

Barbara, aged 20, from Switzerland, said she was attracted to the agency's website because they had some 'good offers'. But she added, 'I liked that they explained everything



they offered, [but] to find out how much it cost was too complicated.'

As for the promotional materials used by agencies, these were generally limited to web information and, on occasion, school brochures, but none of the students we talked to had seen a video of the school or location. German student Sophie suggested that 'a meeting in our home country before the programme starts would give more information, encourage us and reduce our fears'.

Although most students were satisfied with the service they received, any complaints were mainly about the agency being too expensive or that some of the information was not accurate. Twenty-two-year-old Sayaka from Japan says that the school trips were more expensive than she expected, while Thai student Matima said, 'I expected the school to have many activities and [the number of] students in the class not to [exceed] 10, but in fact the school has many activities but [they are] very expensive and there are 13-to-14 students in my class.' Similarly, Hanne says, '[Inclusive] trips, which had been promised to us by our agent, weren't offered by the school.'

However, 20-year-old Besim from Turkey found that his school surpassed his expectations. 'The course and the school are much more than I expected,' he exclaimed. 'It's something like going to a five-star hotel when you are supposed to be going to a three-star hotel.' He also advocates going to speak to the agent 'face-to-face' as 'this is the best way to get information about the company and the services it provides'. Having used the agency for a previous language travel trip, Besim now says of his agent, 'We are now like a family.' What higher accolade could an agent want?

Survey of students

Language Travel Magazine conducted a straw poll of 26 students who had booked through agencies and who were studying at seven schools in four different countries.

Among the students who took part, 46 per cent had found out about the agency through a friend or relative, while 27 per cent had found the agency on the Internet. Others had received mail shots or had seen an advertisement in a newspaper or magazine. Of all the language students who took part in our survey, 54 per cent said they had accessed the agency's website.

Only 23 per cent of students had used an agency before while 73 had not, and 58 per cent said they would book their course through a language travel agent again, with a further 19 per cent saying maybe. Of the 23 per cent who said they would not book through an agency another time, some said this was because it was too expensive.

We also asked students if the agent had contacted them since they were overseas to check that everything was in order. Twenty-three per cent said they had, while 61 said they had not. However, half the students had been given a 24-hour contact number by the agent.

Ways to improve service

- *Accurate information - the biggest complaint was inaccurate information provided by the language travel agent*
- *Agency fee - a number of students said they would not use their agency again because it was too expensive*
- *Efficiency - some students complained that the service they had received was not efficient enough and that the documents should have been sent earlier*
- *More details about study abroad - some students felt that the information they received, especially about living in another country, was not in-depth enough*
- *Up-to-date information - agents must have the latest information about the institutions and locations as well as visa and work regulations for each country*

The students who took part in this article were studying at:

AG Mate Academy, Australia; Australian College of English, Australia; Cape Town School of English, South Africa; Harrow House International College, UK; International House Lisbon, Portugal; Manchester Academy of English, UK; Yes Education Centre, UK.