

# Cross-border business

Inbound agencies, based in a study destination, have popped up in recent years with increasing frequency, although they remain a minor sector of the language travel agency industry. However, as JANE VERNON SMITH discovers, many link up with traditional outbound agencies to offer a more comprehensive care service for clients.

The fact is that there are a lot of outbound agencies, but only a small number of inbound," observes Peter Kovac of Greatmate (G8M8) in Australia. Kovac is one of a growing number of language travel agents based in the destination country of his clients. He recruits clients from overseas and is based in-country – allowing him to offer additional services that agencies offering outbound travel only cannot provide once students arrive in the country.

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But outbound language travel agencies have little to fear. For inbound operators are not generally in competition with their outbound counterparts; rather, the two are complementary. Indeed, many inbound agencies have outbound offices elsewhere. Greatmate, for example, originally opened for business in Nitra, Slovak Republic. Today, its head office is in Sydney, Australia, where it serves both inbound and outbound students, while branches operate an outbound service in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. By contrast, EduTour Homestay Associates in Canada started out as an inbound operator, and has recently expanded into outbound travel.

For John Paek of Doosan Education International, it was while working for the com-

pany in Korea that he spotted the potential of an inbound presence overseas. "When I was in Korea... I always had difficulty in learning what was happening in overseas countries. I thought we had to develop an international network in order to take care of our students from Korea," he explains. "And I thought that we [might] recruit students [locally] for local institutes and overseas institutes." It was thus that the Auckland office of Doosan Education International was established to offer both inbound and outbound services.

In fact, most inbound agencies, if they do not have their own overseas offices, work in partnership with outbound agents in other countries and, for many, this is their main source of business. The inbound-outbound partnership can be highly beneficial for the agents involved and represents a new development that all agencies can consider. As Heather Smaellie, Manager of Ultimate Studies Australia (incorporating Perth Demi Pair), highlights, "[Outbound agencies] realise it is a good idea to offer a complete service, both pre-departure and follow-up support services for the duration of their client's stay." Paek elaborates, "If [agencies] send students overseas and do not take care of them, they will lose their reputation," he warns. "In order to build their competitive



power, they have to have a partner or their own office in overseas countries."

Smaellie identifies a further advantage of the inbound-outbound partnership. While the outbound partner finds the clients, her own inbound company – with the advantage of its greater local knowledge of the marketplace and personal contacts – can research further opportunities for the agent overseas.

It is not only agents who are attracted by the local knowledge of inbound agencies. With the Internet now a standard research tool, many students make direct contact with inbound agencies in their destination country prior to travelling. This is more commonly the case among those seeking full-time education overseas than those planning short-term programmes. However, because of the level of partnership that exists, some inbound agents do not accept direct bookings from students, preferring to work with overseas agents. Among these is EduTour Homestay Associates in Canada, whose president, Vivian Hart, explains, "We believe it is hugely important to have our partners meet potential students and their families in person in their own country."

## Guardianship

The placement of young overseas students in full-time education represents a thriving niche within inbound agency services. Hand-in-hand with this role goes the provision of guardianship. "In theory, a child could arrive... at age eight, spend the next 10 years at boarding school and then go on to a UK university," explains Jill Shilcock, Managing Director of Shilcock Education Advisory Service in the UK. Many of these children have

no relatives in the country, and need someone to step into the gap.

In the UK, the demand for guardianship is on the increase. According to Sarah Studdert-Kennedy of Studdert-Kennedy & Dowdles (SKD) Educational Consultants, this is partly a result of the growing number of students – mainly from the Far East and former Soviet Union countries – attending the country's independent boarding schools. However, demand for guardianship services is also being fuelled by anticipation of

forthcoming legislation. In the UK, as Shilcock reports, it will soon become legally binding for all boarding school pupils to have a UK-based guardian.

Many schools have already made this a condition of acceptance, and an increasing number of guardianship organisations have been entering the market. Doosan Education International has plans to join them, and, according to Managing Director, John Paek, the company is also planning to develop a guardianship service in Australia, New Zealand

and Canada. Guardianship is already a legal requirement for every school-age overseas student in Canada and Australia. Thus, some agencies – like Canada's EduTour Homestay Associates – offer the service as a regular part of the service to each student, while for others it is an optional extra.

Personal recommendation by existing and past clients and referral by schools both represent important sources of clients for many guardianship companies. Danice Iles at Clarendon International Education



## Guardianship services checklist\*

- Help with selecting the right school
- Arrangement of [English] language teaching if necessary
- Making travel arrangements, ie flights and transfers
- Organising visits/interviews at schools and advising on selection
- Undertaking all negotiations and administration with the chosen school
- Sorting out joining documentation, school uniform, etc
- Finding, checking and administering of guardian family
- Payment of all bills on behalf of parents (optional)
- Continuing responsibility for child in all areas
- Continuing relationship with parents.

\* checklist supplied by Shilcock Education Advisory Service

Some students bypass this stage by travelling overseas before booking their language course, although, as Paek points out, this is only possible for those who do not need to obtain a visa before travelling – for example, Korean and Japanese students going to New Zealand. According to Paek, New Zealand language schools often quote lower prices for bookings made locally than those made overseas. Hence, clients sometimes seek out a local agency that can offer a lower price. “Usually,” he claims, “inbound agencies provide more detailed information on local small institutes and a cheaper price than [that] published in the schools’ brochures.” Doosan itself is opposed to this practice, which it believes does not promote healthy

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competition, and earlier this year, with other Korea-linked agencies operating in New Zealand, it established an association, Nosa, to work to discourage differential pricing.

Certainly, inbound agencies have a lot more to offer students than the chance of

lower prices. While there is no substitute for the services of an agent that they can meet face-to-face in their home country, inbound agencies have their own particular areas of expertise that they believe cannot be matched by the “home” agent.

To begin with, they are better placed to handle any problems that arise once the student has begun studying. As Kovac explains, “Inbound agencies can make phone calls to find out even the smallest detail, because they are onshore and meet with school representatives, have personal connections with people working at educational institutions. If there is anything to be fixed... the inbound agency can assist its clients in doing so much more easily.” Many inbound agencies offer round-the-clock assistance.

“We offer, of course, a special telephone service over Easter and during the summer time, which means we are available around the clock,” explains Roger Ruiz of Astur agency in Germany. “The agencies we work with mainly require this kind of service,” he adds.

As their outbound partners are well aware, care of students is a major selling point for inbound agencies. At a basic level, most inbound agencies will provide airport pick-up and assistance in dealing with any problems that might arise in terms of the course, accommodation or visa. Doosan also offers a “landing service”, which includes help opening a bank account and arranging such matters as supply of a telephone service and car. Meanwhile, at Perth Demi Pair (where part-time housework and childminding are provided in exchange for full-board accommodation by students with permission to work), Smaellie reveals that, “We keep a close relationship with these girls, occasionally having a barbecue or get together with them. Our policy is to ensure a good relationship between the family and the demi au-pair and that the girls enjoy their stay in Perth.”

A significant minority of inbound agencies specialise in placing children from overseas into full-time, long-term education. The care needs of such clients are significantly greater than average, and many agencies offer formal guardianship services (see box).

In providing such a level of service and care, inbound agents are responding to clear demand from the market. The experience of Ruiz is typical: “Germany is only a small market compared to English-speaking countries,” he says, “but it is definitely growing. We think that service is getting more and more important for clients.” This can only mean greater opportunity for responsible agents, both inward and outward-bound. □

in the UK adds that they work with some agencies. Meanwhile, in the UK, there are two professional bodies – Aegis currently with 10 accredited members and Tags with six – that exist to promote, as Studdert-Kennedy puts it, “best and legal practice” in the field.

According to Wendy Fidler at UK-based Gabbitas Educational Consultants, parents may select different levels of guardianship, with optional extra services including payment of pocket money on behalf of parents,

assistance with uniform purchase, arrangement of health insurance and renewal of passports and visas.

Typically the agency takes responsibility for travel arrangements, airport meeting, transfer and school liaison, as well as being a point of contact in case of emergency. In appointing a guardian family for its client, the guardianship agency will interview families and visit them in their own home, and will normally also carry out checks on the whole family. At Intense Educational in the UK,

Director Anna Karsay Shackleford reports that regular visits are paid to the host families on its register, all of whom are checked with the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) before any child is partnered with them. In addition, “We visit all our partner schools in the course of the academic year,” she says, “and are in constant contact with students, house parents and other school staff.”

Once appointed, the family takes on some of the duty of care for the student. As Shilcock explains, “[The]

family has the student to stay at half-terms and other breaks from school. They are also expected to play a full role in supporting the student at school events, [and] they provide somewhere to relax and catch up on sleep, or to study in peace and quiet.” Fidler adds, “Many students develop firm friendships with their ‘English mum and dad’ and stay in touch with them even after they have left school... or returned home.”

“In every way,” Karsay Shackleford sums up, “we are in loco parentis.”