

Malta holds firm

Language schools in Malta are stepping up their marketing activities in order to develop new student markets and stay ahead of the game. BETHAN NORRIS reports on how schools in the Maltese English language teaching industry fared in 2004 and their plans for the coming year.

While figures for 2003 show that the number of international students going to study in Malta decreased by 1.4 per cent on the previous year, schools in Malta report mixed, though largely positive, fortunes for 2004.

John Dimech, General Manager at the Institute of English Language Studies (IELS) in Sliema, is expecting that year-end enrolments for 2004 will be up on 2003, after recording a four per cent increase in bookings to the end of August.

Corinne Xuereb from IH Malta in Gozo has experienced fluctuating enrolments throughout the year. “[We saw an] increase of 100 per cent in summer [bookings and] a decrease of 25 per cent in the shoulder months [March to June and October],” she says. Gaby Privitera from Global Village English Centre in St Paul’s Bay reports that 2004 numbers were up overall, while Joseph Bonnici from Universal Language Services in Iklin reports a decrease in numbers.

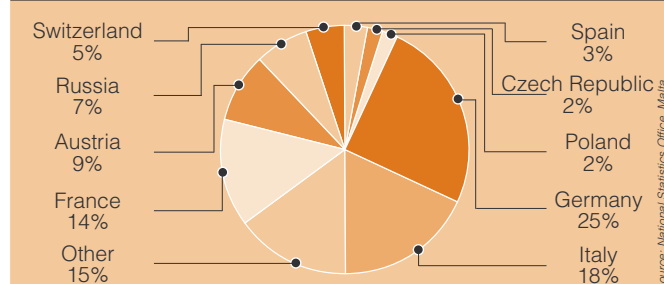
As growth in the market remains rather patchy, schools are broadening their outreach so that they are less reliant on Western European countries. At IH Malta, the German market has shown the most significant decline recently and other schools echo this view.

“In general, [we have seen] an increase in enrolments from Switzerland – up 12 per cent, Canada and France – up three per cent, and Japan and Spain – up one per cent,” says Privitera. “Germany has remained the same.” Dimech adds that German numbers at IELS are down by two per cent.

Other student markets currently performing well in Malta are Spain – which, according to Xuereb is due to the tourism



English language students in Malta by country of origin 2003



authority’s marketing campaign – Italy, Turkey, Russia and China, and many schools are now concentrating their marketing efforts on these countries. Louiseanne Mercieca from English Language Academy in Sliema, which has experienced rapidly increasing enrolments during 2003 and 2004, puts their success in the Russian, Italian and Spanish markets down to “intensified marketing, especially with regard to the Russian market where we have been attending fairs and workshops”.

At Geos Language Centre Malta in Sliema, there is also evidence of a continued diversification in student markets. “The majority of our bookings came as usual from the Chinese and Russian markets, however, we have felt an increase in almost all sectors, particularly the Spanish and Colombian markets,” reveals Andrew Grech at the school.

An increasing focus away from European markets can

bring its own problems. According to Grech, visas have become problematic for some nationalities since Malta joined the European Union (EU) this year. “Visas were given out more freely before we joined the EU,” he asserts. “I suppose the authorities are worried that Malta may become an entry point for people wishing to illegally enter other European countries whose visa granting procedures are tighter.”

Nevertheless, many schools in Malta are looking forward to the challenges of increasing their student base in 2005. Marika Fenech from Inlingua School of Languages in Sliema says, “China [is a] massive market that shows a lot of interest in Malta and EU countries – [there will be] big developments here”.

Privitera also has her eye on the new EU accession countries. She says this market realises that English is necessary to find work within the EU countries “and later on for work promotions”.

Seasonality issue

A strong level of seasonality has always been a key characteristic of the Maltese language teaching industry. According to statistics for 2003 produced by the National Statistics Office in Malta, 61.2 per cent of English language students came to Malta in the months of July, August and September; 29.7 per cent of students came during the months of March, April, May, June and October; and just 9.1 per cent came to study during the winter season.

In order to try and reduce this imbalance throughout the year, many schools in Malta have been targeting new student markets and developing their longer term courses. John Dimech of the Institute of English Language Studies says that while the school continues to focus on Europe, and in particular Central Europe, “with the introduction of the academic year and semester programmes at our school a few years ago, we will also become more popular in the Chinese market”.

Attracting a wide range of nationalities, particularly those from both hemispheres where school holidays, seasons and opportunities to travel throughout the year are different, is often the key to ensuring full classrooms year round. Adrian Dalton of English Plus Language Centre in Kappara, which opened in June this year, believes this is achieved by ensuring diversity in the courses offered. He hopes to attract a wide range of different nationalities to his school by offering “the widest range of English courses and packages on the Maltese islands”.

Louiseanne Mercieca from English Language Academy in Sliema adds that increased diversity can also be achieved by cementing agent relationships in a range of countries. “We have increased our numbers by beginning cooperation with agents in different countries,” she says. “This is because our main aim is to keep our classes as international as possible.”