

Ireland's challenges

The past couple of years have not been easy for English language schools in Ireland, as GILLIAN EVANS reports.

Government (in)action

A report commissioned by the Irish government outlining a number of strategies to double international student numbers by 2010 suggested the development of an enforced quality system for English language teaching with visas only issued to quality-certified schools (see *Language Travel Magazine*, January 2005, page 6).

Language schools in Ireland broadly welcome the move, with Ann Marie Carroll at Eden School of English in Dublin saying it would increase standards "to ensure only accredited schools can survive".

However, many feel that, although compulsory quality certification may help in the long run, the government must address visa issuance problems now. Declan Millar at High Schools International in Dublin claims, "The Irish government's record on visas is abysmal and, while this is a welcome move in theory, I doubt it will have any immediate and positive impact on the visa nightmare we now experience."

Currently, China and Russia are dogged by visa problems, but there are difficulties elsewhere. "We deal mainly with juniors but we lost some business last year because of serious delays in issuing visas – mainly [from] Vietnam, Russia and Kazakhstan," relates Millar.

Carroll reports that students from Romania and Moldova were turned down due to insufficient funds, while Justin Quinn at Centre of English Studies Ireland bluntly says, "Any student who needs a visa has encountered problems."

Ireland's "golden goose" days are over for the time being, with minimal growth recorded by many English language providers over the past couple of years. The reasons behind this slowdown of the Irish market are manifold, but are generally being put down to restrictive visa acceptance, the high cost of living in Ireland and the confusion over the government's amendments to work rights for non-European Union (EU) students (see *Language Travel Magazine*, May 2005, page 6).

While growth rates in 2003 were generally down on previous years, student numbers were nevertheless up for many language schools. In contrast, in 2004, most of the schools interviewed for this article reported either a static performance or a decrease in student numbers, and, for many, this trend continued into 2005. Declan Millar, Managing Director of High Schools International in Dublin, reports that their numbers bucked this trend by growing 20 per cent in 2004 thanks mainly to their marketing activities. However, he estimates that, as 2005 got off to a slow start for the school, year-end results will reveal similar figures to 2004.

Justin Quinn at the Centre of English Studies Ireland in Dublin experienced a slowdown of student numbers towards the end of 2004, "mainly due to the lack of visas being issued and an ending of the long-term student programmes", and his prognosis for 2005 is relatively bleak. "I estimate that overall student numbers will be down 15 to 18 per cent this year," he states. "The agents lose confidence in a market if there are problems in good quality students getting visas. These students are being pushed into going to the UK."

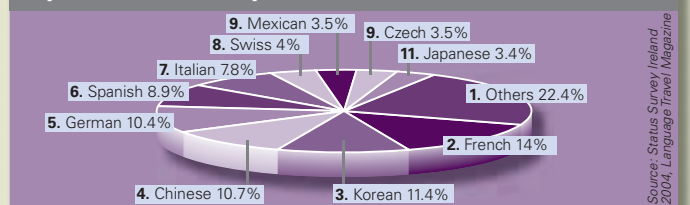
Owing to the visa issuance hurdles for many non-EU nationalities, it is no surprise to learn that the main countries of origin for English language students in Ireland remain the same as in previous years, with France, Spain, Italy and Germany important to many Irish schools, as well as Korea and China (notwithstanding problems with visas). Brian Burns at language school association, MEI~Relsa, says that China is still a good market for Ireland, although there is careful vetting of applications at the Embassy because there is a perception in the Department of Justice that many students overstay. "We are supportive of this as we too want to see better quality students from China, who either return to China or enter university here," he says.

The expansion of the EU in 2003 has had a muted effect on enrolment trends to date. At Aspect College Dublin, Gary Neale says they have experienced little change because the "main demand appears to be for evening classes or junior programmes, which we do not run". Many students from these countries also favour work experience programmes, evidenced in the trends experienced by a work placement agency, Living English, in Dun Laoghaire. "From May 2004, we received many Polish students," recounts Anne Stewart,



PHOTOGRAPH: DUBLIN TOURISM

Top nationalities by student weeks in Ireland, 2004



Source: Status Survey Ireland 2004, *Language Travel Magazine*

the agency's Manager. "To date in 2005, we are receiving more Slovak students." Millar adds that despite "marginal impact" on their enrolment patterns since May 2004, "we expect that numbers from some new EU states will grow significantly in the next two years."

There is hope that following MEI~Relsa's regular meetings with the Department of Justice, problems with visa issuance in Russia will be resolved (see page 21). Burns adds that MEI~Relsa plans to work in Turkey and Libya too, "a huge market", to restore agents' confidence in the Irish visa system and encourage high quality visa applications.

Like everyone in the industry, English language schools in Ireland are rather circumspect in their forecasts for 2006. Quinn believes that student numbers in 2006 are likely to remain at 2005 levels. He also forecasts changes in the business landscape. "I can see a number of consolidations in the market and some year-round schools just opening for the summer. There are more and more schools looking to the same number of students," he says.

However, Burns is more upbeat. "We are making plans to increase awareness of our brand and of Ireland in general," he says, "and as a result, we think there will be a noticeable increase in business."