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learn-ing - To acquire knowledge of or skill in by study, instruction, or experience.

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# Ireland's challenges

## Countries of origin

Western Europe has always contributed the largest group of international students to Ireland, with Spain, Italy and France generally dominating the line up. This has not changed much in recent years, although there has been some jostling for position among the top three.

In our Status Ireland 2006 survey (see *Language Travel Magazine*, May 2007, page 45), Spain took number-one position in the table of top nationalities from the previous year's number one, Italy, which was in joint second position with France. Many language schools throughout Ireland confirm this trend. For example, Niamh O'Mahony at Dublin City University Language Services in Dublin reports, "We have received more Spanish this year than any other nationality."

Many believe this is a direct result of the Spanish Ministry of Education's scholarship fund for students to learn English, French and German in the European Union (EU). For summer 2007, there were reported to be 3,350 grants of €1,600 (US\$2,247) available. While most Spanish language students tend to favour Dublin as a language learning destination, schools in other locations are welcoming more Spanish students too.

Meanwhile, Eugene Murphy at Language Learning International, which concentrates on the junior market, reports a rise in French students over the last three years. "Some of the larger agencies in France have seen a growth of around 20 per cent in that period," he relates. In addition, he notes a growing number of students from new EU countries such as Croatia.

Despite rising costs in Ireland straitjacketing some English language schools, the overall performance of the market in 2006 and 2007 was robust, as GILLIAN EVANS report.

On the face of it, 2006 was a positive year for English language schools in Ireland. Many individual schools report increases in student enrolments of between 10 and 30 per cent, and Ciara Scully, Product Marketing Officer at the Irish tourist authority, Fáilte Ireland, states, "2006 was a good year in comparison to 2004/2005 [with] over 130,000 students taking EFL courses in Ireland during this period."

However, for others, the escalating cost of living in Ireland curbed business growth. The Galway Language Centre in Galway experienced a two per cent decline in student numbers in 2006 over 2005. Although numbers have rallied in 2007 to pre-2006 levels, the school's Director, Beverly Bazler, asserts, "There is no doubt that the dramatic rise in the cost of living in Ireland has had some effect on our enrolments and will continue to do so."

According to the Mercer 2006 Cost of Living Survey, Dublin was ranked the 16th most expensive city in which to live in the world, up from 24th place in 2003. Eugene Murphy, Managing Director of Language Learning International in Dublin, whose core business is juniors, reports that Italy in particular has been affected by the rising costs in Ireland. "Some agencies are reporting to me that Ireland is becoming more difficult to sell [to Italians]. Parents are finding the cost of programmes in Ireland more challenging due to the current economic climate in Italy and the strength of the economy in Ireland."

Compounding the issue still further in Dublin especially, is the influx of immigrants coupled with the concentration of language students, that has contributed to a hike in accommodation rental prices. This has brought difficulties for many schools. Murphy reports, "The bed capacity in Dublin is a challenge in terms of the numbers of students coming to Dublin versus the numbers of host families on the market to take students. 2007 will be remembered for the challenges facing language schools in allocating students to host families."

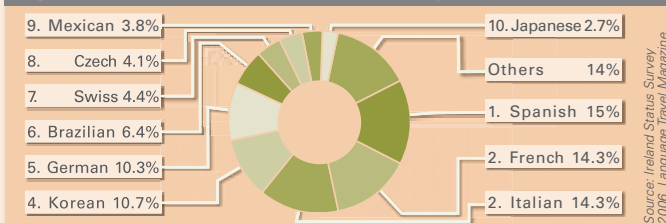
Barbara Connelly at the Atlantic School of English and Active Leisure (Seal) in Cork also sites the "lack of affordable accommodation and host family demands for higher fees" as factors hampering the market.

Another effect of the rising cost of Ireland as a study destination is a trend toward shorter stays. "Cost is the predominant factor; where previously courses from Spain were four weeks in length, there is a growing market for three-week programmes, and the Italian market is now governed by two-week programmes," relates Murphy. Declan Millar, Managing Director at High Schools International in Dublin, also testifies to a trend towards "shorter courses from mainland Europe", and Tish Kirkland, Director of Studies at Geos in Dublin, reports a



PHOTOGRAPH: TOURISM IRELAND

## Top student nationalities in Ireland by student weeks, 06



Source: Ireland Status Survey, 2006, *Language Travel Magazine*

similar trend among Brazilian students. "We have had Brazilians enrol for four and 12 weeks. This is the first instance I have known of a Brazilian attending a course for fewer than 25 weeks."

The high cost of living, especially accommodation costs, means that schools have had to keep course fees low. "The increase [in the cost of living] has not been – and probably cannot be – matched in an increase in course fees," states Bazler. "We now offer shorter, more intensive courses to counter this tendency. The Irish schools are certainly experiencing a major increase in their overheads."

Looking for ways to improve their profit margins, many schools have developed premium-priced courses. Murphy for one notes a trend towards one-to-one programmes, while Atlantic Seal recently launched a Mind, Body and Spirit programme for executives, which combines language learning with a holistic health programme. But even though Ireland's cost may have risen steeply in recent years, it still has the competitive edge over its nearest English language rival, the UK. The Mercer 2006 Cost of Living Survey ranked London as the second-most expensive city in the world. ●