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MEI-RELSA  
1 Lower Pembroke St.  
Dublin 2  
Ireland

Tel: + 353 1 618 0910  
Fax: + 353 1 618 0909  
Email: [info@mei.ie](mailto:info@mei.ie)  
Website: [www.mei.ie](http://www.mei.ie)

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# Tight belts in Ireland

Continued high costs in Ireland signal a difficult time ahead, with Irish schools competing hard against other European destinations offering English language training. AMY BAKER reports.

## Education Ireland on the horizon

Education Ireland, a new body to promote and solidify the international education industry, is on the drawing board, but schools working at the coal face are sceptical about the benefits. "This has been on the cards for so long, it still might not happen till 2010 so is not featuring in any of our plans," says Justin Quinn at CES.

Richard McMullen at EFL Ireland in Waterford attests that "a single unifying voice will help Ireland improve its international image for quality", but it seems that many schools are resigned to lots of talk and little action thus far from the government. "We have been hearing about [this and] IEBI [International Education Board of Ireland] for the last five years and I have no faith at all in it," says Muireann Neylon of Clare Language Centre in Ennis. "Actually, I am very fed up with how the Irish government treats our sector. It is all lip service on the surface, but quite destructive policies in practice."

Some years ago, the industry was angry when work-rights for non-EU students were revoked, without proper consultation. A quick backtrack was subsequently undertaken to allow all students studying for 25 weeks or more to work part-time (see LTM, May 2005, page 6).

Language school association, MEI~Relsa, welcomes the advent of Education Ireland, but Adrian Cummins, Chief Executive, says, "We are disappointed that the decision has taken so long."

Ireland's star has been in the ascendency in the last few years, but high operating costs and a less-than-helpful approach by immigration services means tougher times ahead. Justin Quinn at CES in Dublin, for example, says that "trying to keep rates as competitive as possible" will be the main strategy in boosting enrolments next year.

Quinn reports a good first six months in 2008, but with an expected decline for the last quarter of the year, he predicts that final numbers will be much the same as in 2007. Meanwhile, at the Slaney Language Centre in Wexford, numbers were up by a modest five per cent, while elsewhere there is worse news, with Keith Murdoff from Eden School of English in Dublin reporting numbers were 40 per cent down on 2007, to the end of August.

"In the next 12 months, I believe that due to Ireland's difficult economic climate, the Department of Justice will move to curb immigration, just as the UK is doing at the moment," he says, referring to the new UK visa system due in 2009 [not expected necessarily to curb migration but ensure only genuine applicants enter]. Murdoff is not alone in signalling an unhelpful attitude from the government, with the Department of Education and the Department for Justice (responsible for visas) clashing over policy direction, he says.

The Minister for Education and Science announced in July that a new body called Education Ireland was to be set up to promote Irish educational services abroad, regulate English language schools and award a quality mark to qualifying institutions. Murdoff is not expectant that this news will make any real difference to the operating environment. "I can't see Education Ireland doing anything except being another talking head in an already confusing and disorganised environment," he says. He acknowledges that Acels, offering voluntary accreditation, is a valuable organisation, but notes, "There is a lack of transparency, accountability and integrity when it comes to legal regulations [across the board]. Perhaps a tougher economic climate will lead to higher standards in our sector – I hope so."

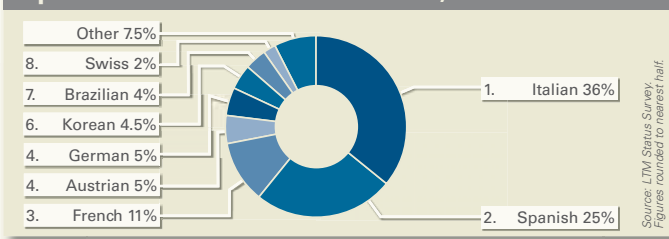
Other schools point to visa problems as a major obstacle as well as a high cost of living. Muireann Neylon from Clare Language Centre in Ennis refers to, "the lack of a clear, transparent and reasonably speedy visa system" and the "appalling cost of living" as deterrents for students. "It is really difficult for us to compete with other destinations now," she says. Indeed, in our latest global market report, Ireland was ranked as the most expensive ELT destination, above the UK (see LTM, November 2008, pages 40-46).

Speed of visa issuance is one problem as well as visa refusals for no reason. "Why would anyone from, for example, Turkey, Colombia or Peru, wait two to three months to get a short-stay visa when they can get one for the UK in 48 hours?" Neylon complains.



PHOTOGRAPH: TOURISM IRELAND

## Top student nationalities in Ireland, 2007



As a result of such problems, Western European nationalities seem to be most numerous at schools throughout Ireland, with our latest survey indicating high numbers of Italians and Spanish students in 2007. "We marketed in Japan and Korea and nothing came of it," relates Richard McMullen of EFL Ireland in Waterford, a summer school. "I think the euro is still too high and the distance too far when compared with Canada, the USA, Australia and new emerging destinations [in Asia]," he notes.

Next year will be a testing time, but at language school association, MEI~Relsa, Chief Executive, Adrian Cummins, is expectant that lobbying for visa streamlining in various markets by MEI~Relsa will eventually pay off for the industry.

"I see the market growing over the next number of years. MEI has placed the opening of new markets such as Turkey, Taiwan, the Middle East, Vietnam and Latin America as a priority for the next five to 10 years," he says. In the meantime, his members may have to weather the storm of high costs in a financially depressed climate. "The challenges ahead for the Irish market will be the credit crunch, exchange rate fluctuations, airline fuel charges and the competition from other markets," notes Cummins.