

Spain expands

Thanks, in part, to their wide-ranging marketing strategies, Spanish language schools in Spain have experienced good growth in recent years. However, uncertainty in the US student market means many have revised their forecasts for 2002, as GILLIAN POOLE reports.

The year 2001 was a busy one for Spanish language schools in Spain. Español Recurso Económico (E/RE) estimates that total student numbers increased by five per cent in 2001 and the average length of stay has generally increased, with some schools reporting average stays of eight weeks.

Schools have also been launching new products to attract a wider audience. For example, Linguae Mundi in Cadiz, which opened in 1999, offers Spanish language lessons with flamenco, Spanish guitar, horse riding or golf, and intends to start junior courses from this March, while Estudio Internacional Sampere, which has schools in Cadiz, Madrid and Salamanca, plans to expand its junior programmes after having catered for over 150 juniors last July. Both established and new schools are united by one overriding trend: the constant reappraisal of their marketing strategies and the desire to target new student provider countries.

In light of the September 11 attacks on the USA, this is perhaps a wise move, as Spain relied on the USA for close to a quarter of its international students in 2000, according to E/RE statistics. With safety concerns over air travel severely affecting outbound tourism from the USA, it is likely that US student numbers will contract this year. "During the first three weeks after the events of September 11, there was a strong [downward] effect on the registration of students coming from the USA," confirms Óscar Berdugo, Director of E/RE.

But it is not only North American student numbers in Spain that have suffered. At Estudio Internacional Sampere, where the top student nationality is American, Juan Manuel Sampere says that the attacks in



the USA affected European enrolments too. "Most of the cancellations we have received have been from European countries," he says. He forecasts that the after-effects of September 11 will continue to hamper business until at least March this year.

Other schools, particularly those that do not rely on the USA for their students, were less affected. Margret Fortmann at Escuela Montalban in Granada, which generates 70 per cent of its enrolments from Germany, Switzerland and Austria, says, "We noticed a little decrease [in students after the US attacks], but November is the low season here so I don't know if it was [linked to that]."

Midori Ishizaka of Escuela Internacional, which has schools in Madrid, Salamanca and Malaga, reports that their student numbers from the USA bucked the trend. "We had very few cancellations after this incident, [and] we are receiving many enquiries from the USA for the coming season," she says.

Although the USA certainly is – and will remain – an important student provider country for language schools in Spain, other student nationalities are also becoming prominent. Schools are spreading their marketing reach ever wider, while at the same time

ensuring they maintain their traditional markets. "We want to consolidate in the European market and expand in the USA, Russia and Japan," says Gracia Rodriguez at Esade Business and Language School in Barcelona.

As is the case in most of the major English-speaking destinations, language schools in Spain are also beginning to break into the Chinese student market. "Spanish schools have started to go into the Chinese market with an excellent response, but [there are] problems with visa issuance," comments Berdugo.

In all, despite the indications of the Spanish language teaching market being in good health, the effects of September 11 have left schools – some of which saw slower growth rates in 2001 compared with 2000 – rather cautious in their expectations.

Sampere has downgraded his forecast for this year. "Before September 11, I was thinking about [introducing] more class space, more chairs, more videos, more of everything," he says. "Now my goal is to repeat the numbers and figures [of] 1999."

"My predictions for 2002 aren't great at the moment," adds Carmen Pastor of Inter-Malaga school in Malaga. "I [hope] the year 2002 will be average in spite of the international crisis."

Focusing on marketing

Many language schools in Spain have been looking at the whole gamut of marketing media to ensure their business grows. Spanish business and language school, Esade, puts its 30 per cent growth in student numbers in 2001 down to the fact that they have employed a new marketing strategy, which includes attendance at education fairs and workshops to meet agents, publishing a new brochure, putting together their first agent manual and organising farm trips to the school. According to Esade's Gracia Rodriguez, the school has also revised its prices.

"We adapted our prices to the market to be more competitive," she says. "Now we have seen the results of offering the same high quality at a better price."

For some schools, the Internet has become the focus of their marketing activities. At Escuela Montalban, student numbers have increased by over 40 per cent since 1999. "The increase is due to more Internet marketing," says Margret Fortmann. "We have invested much more money in the Internet, and [as a consequence] we receive more direct enrolments." She adds, "We hope that in the future, we will not need so many agents."

However, many other schools in Spain see their future success resting largely in the hands of their current agent-partners and in building up relationships with new agents. "We rely on agents and we do not market directly in any countries where we have agents," asserts Juan Manuel Sampere of Estudio Internacional Sampere. "Without a lot of good agents, [we] would not have reached the size and prestige we enjoy now."

Indeed, Midori Ishizaka from Spanish school chain, Escuela Internacional, is counting on success in 2002 because of the "good new agents" contacted at the end of last year, and Esade, which has been working with agents for only three years, reports good results from Europe, while bookings from Asian agents are just starting to come through "with very little investment on our part", comments Rodriguez.