

# South Africa steps up

South African language schools performed well last year by all accounts, welcoming a wide range of student nationalities that were attracted by the country's good range of courses, relative political neutrality and value for money reputation. AMY BAKER reports.

The war in Iraq and the outbreak of the Sars virus, which were real disadvantages for many language schools around the world last year, provided a boost for schools in South Africa. Many school representatives agree that increasing numbers of students from a variety of markets chose South Africa as a study destination last year.

"Our student numbers increased by 18 per cent," reports Gavin Eyre at Cape Communication Centre (CCC) in Cape Town, while Gina Pardenwachter of Shane Global Village (SGV), also in Cape Town, says her school saw numbers doubling year on year. "Sars and the Iraqi war affected us positively, because people would come here instead," she says. Eyre agrees. "The Gulf War and Sars affected our business in a positive way," he relates.

The result has been an increasingly diverse student mix in South Africa, with Western Europeans rubbing shoulders with Africans, Asians and students from the Middle East.

Pardenwachter singles out rising numbers of students from Japan. "The crime factor is no longer such a big issue for [Japanese]," she says. "We have quite a few agents in Japan." And Manya Bredell at Cape Town School of English underlines the growing student population from Korea. She says, "Koreans, I think, have 'discovered' South Africa as a new option for studying English."

South America and the Middle East are also going to grow as key provider regions, says Eyre, and Natanya van der Lingen, Managing Director of International House Durban, underlines that enquiries from Islamic countries have been a feature of the student market since September 11, 2001. "We foresee more stu-



dents from the Middle East, such as Turkey, as well as students from other parts of Africa, such as Gabon and Angola, who are interested in improving their English but who can't afford to travel to the UK or USA," she states.

Western Europe remains the most important student provider region, however, and among Western Europeans, Swiss and Germans are the most populous nationalities. This is in part because of strong marketing links with the region. Many South African schools are run or managed by Western Europeans or are linked to a marketing operation there, such as CCC, part of the LAL group based in Germany, and Good Hope Studies, which has a marketing base in Austria.

Nevertheless, schools are keen to capitalise on student interest from all world regions. Bredell says that a challenge for 2004 is to attract "more students from other areas of Europe – not just the German-speaking countries". And Jens von Wichingen, from Cape Studies in Cape Town, says that he hopes "to continue getting a greater variety of students of different nationalities".

Agencies remain a key part of a school's marketing plans, as Bredell underlines. "Agents still play an important role," she says, adding that the Internet is becoming increasingly important and

word-of-mouth recommendation also has a role. Van der Lingen testifies that they are putting more creative input into the school's website, although agents and agent conferences remain central to the marketing plan.

One of the reasons for South Africa's appeal as a study destination in the past has been its value for money, especially when compared with other language travel destinations. Schools still like to market this fact, although they point out that with the fluctuating value of the rand, low-cost packages are not as easy to ensure.

Van der Lingen mentions "overcoming our volatile currency, which fluctuates quite drastically" as a challenge for 2004, while Pardenwachter states that because of the rate of exchange, "South Africa is no longer the cheapest destination. There has been a drop in income despite the increase in students."

Schools are doing what they can to maintain interest across a diverse range of markets with exam, business or vacation-oriented courses, as well as packages that can offer value for money. Eyre relates, "All the main exam preparation courses can now be studied here at CCC. We have also increased our capacity at our two main residences making available twin rooms, therefore keeping living costs as low as possible."

## High hopes for Eltasa

The English Language Travel Association of South Africa (Eltasa) was formed in late 2002, but its activities are being stepped up in 2004, with an Eltasa website now live and the official launch of the association taking place in March.

There are currently nine members of Eltasa, all of whom are hopeful that the association will bring real benefits to the industry. "I think belonging to an association is good and has many benefits like joint marketing and the maintaining of standards," says Manya Bredell at Cape Town School of English.

Gina Pardenwachter of SGV Cape Town says she has already found that information is more readily available through Eltasa and that there is more cooperation between schools. Gavin Eyre of Cape Communication Centre in Cape Town adds that Eltasa has been compiling statistics from all members. "The positive feedback from other organisations and the compilation of our statistics have proven very good for us since inception," he comments.

Meryl van der Merwe is secretary of the association and explains that Eltasa is launching a marketing campaign to coincide with its official launch in March. "We hope to create a real awareness both internationally and nationally for Eltasa, its members and South Africa as a language travel destination, while continuing to uphold and improve the standards in the industry," she says.

"In order to become a member of Eltasa, there is a very stringent inspection process that ensures high standards."

Eltasa is also currently working with the Department of Home Affairs, providing input on legislation concerning English language students. "Eltasa is starting to work with South Africa Tourism and Cape Town Tourism as well as embassies and consulates," adds van der Merwe.